

LIVING OFF THE LAND

FARMERS ARE GETTING SMARTER ABOUT BUSINESS AND SO ARE THEIR OFFSPRING, AS THE CONCEPT OF 'LIVING OFF THE LAND' IN ORDER TO PRESERVE THE FAMILY ASSET REACHES NEW HEIGHTS.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH

WHILE GEORDIE SIMSON soars high above the Great Australian Bight spotting whales, his older brother, Dougal, is counting sheep at the family property, Roseneath, just north of Casterton in Victoria's south-west. Eldest brother Charles drives tugboats, and even though all three siblings are living the dream, Geordie, 35, feels like he's the lucky one.

"It's the best paddock on the farm, the old flying," he grins. Geordie runs his own sheep and cattle at Roseneath with wife, Sophie, but also flies helicopters for a company based at Naracoorte, just across the South Australian border. His passion for flying was fuelled 15 years ago during a working stint at Ammaroo Station, north-east of Alice Springs.

"I was doing the mustering on the ground and you would see the helicopter pilots coming in and having a heap of fun while we were still processing the cattle, so I decided that I had better get into the helicopters," he says. In addition to spraying local pine forests and spreading superphosphate, his company has contracts to cull feral animals in the Simpson Desert, around Innamincka, the Coorong and the Nullarbor Plain. Other weeks, Geordie could be tagging sea lions in the Nuyts Archipelago, off Ceduna, conducting environmental surveys for mining companies or spotting bushfires.

"The places that we are lucky enough to see are just incredible," he says. "I still love the land, but I didn't just want to be a farmer and have to rely on that income – I wanted to be able to achieve something else and have a fantastic time doing it."

Once upon a time, it was almost a given that sons would stay on the farm, while daughters would leave upon marriage – ideally to the bloke from the property next door. But the family tree is branching out like never before.

"Over the past two decades, Australian farming families have become increasingly dependent on off-farm income to maintain their standard of living or meet costs associated ►



Boorowa's Sam Burton Taylor opened his own butcher shop to sell meat from his family's farm before branching out and focussing on the lucrative export market.



CLOCKWISE: Georgie Simson's helicopters near Lake Eyre, SA; Georgie tagging sea lions on Olive Island, off Streaky Bay, SA; Scott Jenkin relishes the strategic side of agriculture in his role as a senior rural manager in regional SA.



with the farming enterprise,” says rural resilience officer Sarah Goulden, who works for the Department of Primary Industries in western New South Wales. “Some farms simply couldn’t be viable without supplementary income – and those households with diversified means of generating additional income are often in a more robust financial position. This, in itself, is changing what the future of Australian farming looks like.”

Economies of scale and the globalisation of commodity markets are among the complex issues influencing the strength of a farming enterprise, but sometimes it’s a simple case of wanderlust that is luring the next generation beyond the farm gate – and their entrepreneurial streak will ensure that it won’t swing shut in a hurry.

Scott Jenkin bucks the white-collar stereotype of a bank manager when he rolls up his sleeves during a client visit and pitches in to help push sheep around the yards. “A few farmers have done a double-take, but you know it’s a busy time and they just want to get the job done quickly,” he says.

Scott was raised at Nayook South, a sheep and cattle property at Kongorong, south-west of Mount Gambier, SA. Boarding school in Adelaide gave him a taste of life off the land, and he then went on to study farm business management at Geelong’s Marcus Oldham College, followed by several years living in the United Kingdom and Sydney. While his younger brother, Legh, works on the farm alongside their father, Wally, Scott, 39, has pursued a career in agribusiness and works as a senior rural manager at Rabobank.

“I’ve always loved the numbers and the strategic side of farming, so this is the perfect marriage of the two careers – and I

think it’s easier to teach farmers to be bankers than bankers to be farmers; for starters, they know where to stand and where not to stand,” he says.

Scott initially worked out of Adelaide, but two years ago he and his wife, Jo, relocated their young family to Kongorong and are now living in Scott’s childhood home. “I loved the work in Adelaide, which involved a lot of travel, but it’s also rewarding being immersed in a rural community,” he says. “There is so much more to banking than simply giving out the money and waiting for it to come back in again – the complicated part is knowing the customer and their business, and if you already have that wired into you it becomes second nature.”

Scott describes the opportunity to visit so many properties and meet with their owners as an “incredible privilege”. “I love analysing their different farming practices; looking at whether that’s the best way to do it and if it could perhaps work on another client’s property,” he says.

Every now and then he may even manage to convince his dad and brother to take some of these new ideas on board. “People often ask me if I will ever join them and go back to working on the farm full-time but, at the moment, the excitement of my job is a lot more appealing; I’m involved in lots of farms instead of just one,” he says.

Sam Burton Taylor recalls how his father Nick, famously once said, “My children can come home when they don’t need to”.

“Not that it’s ever been pushed – he would have us home in a second,” Sam says.

So far, Kenny’s Creek Angus, set in fertile tablelands north of Canberra, has been no match for the bright lights of Sydney for

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PHOTOS: DAVE WHEELER

Wool producer Penny Merriman; Penny’s Lady Kate knitwear range pays homage to her great-grandmother.

siblings Hugh, Harriet and Peita, but Sam, 36, thinks otherwise.

“I studied accounting and finance at university and worked in Sydney for a while, but I always knew that I wanted to come back to the country, and tried to figure out a way to apply what I had learnt to agriculture, sales and marketing,” he says.

There are four properties in the family’s Hillgrove Pastoral portfolio; two near Chillagoe in Far North Queensland spanning 225,000 hectares, with a further 4500ha in southern New South Wales. With managers already in charge, Sam saw an opportunity to move nearby and value-add to the operation. In 2010 he and his wife Nikki bought the Boorowa butcher shop.

“I was really returning to my roots; for 25 years my family has been developing leading genetics in Angus, while on my mother’s side, my grandfather owned and ran a butcher business on Sydney’s northern beaches,” he says.

Sam learned from the ground up and, over the next four years, Sam’s Paddock grew from a traditional country store to an online success story delivering produce to Canberra, Sydney and beyond. The business was sold in November 2014, when the exporting arm of the operation really took flight.

“I had a very emotional attachment to the shop, but in Australia it is extremely challenging to compete in that space,” he says. “When I went overseas, I found a much greater readiness from our customers to accept our product, and buy in volumes that we couldn’t sell in a year at home.”

Premium grass-fed Angus sourced from Kenny’s Creek and the paddocks of regular clients can now be found in high-end restaurants and retail outlets throughout China, branded as KC Natural Beef. “We sell and breed around 400 bulls per year through our stud, and my longer term plan is to buy the progeny back from our bull clients and sell them overseas as well,” Sam

says. “My butchering skills have morphed into processing skills, and it’s really exciting.”

Australian Wool Innovation chairman Wal Merriman and his brother George run another Boorowa property, Merryville. While Wal’s eldest daughter, Penny, 31, now lives further north at Narrabri, the fine wool Merino stud where she was raised is so entwined in her life that she has launched an online business selling woollen jumpers.

“We always had to wear wool as kids regardless of what it looked like or how much it cost, and I want other people to feel how lovely it is to wear natural fibres and see what a wonderful product we are growing,” Penny says.

The Lady Kate label pays homage to Penny’s great-grandmother, Lady Kate Merriman, whose husband, Sir Walter, was knighted for service to the wool industry.

Penny’s target market is the women who don’t have Australian Merino wool in their wardrobes because they deem it uncomfortable or unfashionable. “I have come in at the right time, when all of that research and development and behind-the-scenes work has paved the way for a super-soft, versatile product with timeless appeal,” Penny says, adding that it’s been a fascinating process introducing customers to her first range.

“When I launched at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, I had one lady ask if one of the jumpers was a cotton-silk blend because she thought it was so beautifully soft, and another woman was quite relieved to learn that no sheep were killed in the making of her garment,” Penny says.

But perhaps Penny’s biggest convert to date has been her own dad. “He was against my idea at first and can be a harsh critic, but as soon as I released the first range, he was lining up the customers and asking for a commission,” she says.