



McShanes forge own wool path

By ROWENA McNAUGHTON

AT LOVELY Banks in Tasmania's Midlands the drought has bitten deep. Rolling hills usually blanketed at this time of year with spring perennial rye and clover grasses are a persistent brown, and while not scorched, one wonders what the limp, wispy covering could support.

A gravel road winds its way up from the Midland Highway to a large palatial wool shed, where the sound of barking dogs and the hum of a 12-stand shed cry out.

Here, young roustabouts collect and separate the wake of bright white Merino wool into impeccably kept bins.

Bale 200, of what should become part of a 1500 annual tally is wheeled across the spotless floor.

Brothers Andrew, 29, and Tim McShane, 31, stand away from the team quietly discussing the day's jobs, then set off in different directions.

Although constant expansion has not allowed life to settle into a set routine at the southern Midland property, the past 12 months have forced the McShane brothers and their father Gerard to make management decisions never before contemplated.

At full capacity their Lovely Banks operation, considered one of Tasmania's largest individual woolgrowing and stud Merino businesses, supports about 100,000 sheep.

But in the past 10 months, they have offloaded about 27,000 head – a move that's cut the current shearing back from the originally planned eight weeks to four.

The surrounding country is a mix of hills and flats, punctuated by massive dams, stretches of native bush, and circles of irrigated pasture all crisscrossed by bore drains and water troughs.

In theory, it's a mix of sandy loam soil, but



■ Gerard and Tim McShane and dog, Bonnie, Lovely Banks, Melton Mowbray.

Wool

- ◆ Gerard McShane, and sons, Andrew and Tim, Lovely Banks, Melton Mowbray, Tasmania
- ◆ Run 14,170 hectares supporting 100,000 Merinos at full capacity
- ◆ One of Tasmania's largest individual woolgrowing operations



an old map used to plot out the original water points on the property sums up the place as having wind-blown sand.

Even though much of his property is in the stranglehold of a relentless drought, Gerard McShane oozes optimism.

Aged 60, he is a fit man with hazel eyes that sparkle when he pinpoints the exact reasoning for his actions.

Within minutes of introduction he lays his hands flat on the long wooden kitchen table, palms facing upwards.

He explains that since retirement on his 60th birthday, June 13, 2007, when he handed over to his sons, (a decision made, and stuck to since the age of 26) he for the first time is considering having to cut his own nails.

Although officially "retired", Mr McShane remains the pivotal driving force behind Lovely Banks – a fine Merino operation based on Collinsville bloodlines near Melton Mowbray, an hour north of Hobart.

Since 1982 when Mr McShane and his wife Elizabeth leased the 1582-hectare property from Elizabeth's parents, the Bidees, relentless buying of adjoining land has amassed a land size that today stretches over 14,170ha. Running Merinos is not just about passion for Mr McShane – it's also about making money.

In 1984, with wool prices humming along well, he decided it was time to get down to business.

Tasmania was awash with superfine Merinos, but instead of following the superfine push he took to the telephone and contacted every wool mill in the world to find where demand stood.

While finding somebody who spoke English



Aiming sky high in Midlands

PRODUCING premium wool is the goal of the McShanes' Stockman Merino stud – a goal that's meant selection and breeding programs are continually being upgraded.

The stud was founded in 1984 and has been built up from a base of 2000 elite Collinsville ewes.

Getting them took a balance of persistence, timing, and money, but eventually Gerard McShane (pictured) tracked down enough and was lucky to buy most from Neil Garnett at Collinsville in South Australia.

In 1989 they returned to buy a \$280,000 poll Collinsville ram – which in addition to showing helped gain valuable marketing exposure for the stud.

To ensure it remains top tier, the stud uses mid-side sampling, fleece weight

slowed the process, he learnt 21 micron wool, good, dense and long was their preference – the opposite of what was grown in Tasmania. It was a revelation that sparked a nationwide search with sheep classer Rob Russell to find the rams to suit.

His ideal high comfort factor ram was eventually found at a little stud in South Australia – Oriental Park – a daughter stud of the heavy cutting Collinsville stud.

"Everyone said I was crazy bringing that type of sheep over here, but I didn't care. I knew it was what the client wanted, and now we have wool that has a prickle factor lower than point one and some rams at zero and it

data and more recently started actually testing Stockman rams potential to ensure they are selecting the best possible sires.

For the past five years, driven by Andrew and Tim McShane, all top young rams have been tested against other high ranking rams in Australia by comparing the progeny of these rams.

Through the use of artificial insemination (AI) and DNA sampling, seven young Stockman rams and three proven sires have been mated to a group of randomly selected ewes and their progeny's results recorded.

The McShanes hope that by combining visual classing and objective measurement they can accurately assess the performance of the different sires, and identify the most productive and structurally sound sires.

can be worn next to the skin," Mr McShane said.

Pushing the limits, and admittedly being very lucky along the way, has been the ongoing rule for Mr McShane.

He was the first to introduce pivot irrigation to Tasmanian, and has spent almost half his working life "burying money – or water pipes" – so that today an intricate set-up of 300 troughs has water gravity reticulated from 20, 20,000 gallon tanks.

In a bid to ensure water security, a dam – equivalent in size to an 11.5 storey building – holding 3400 megalitres of rainwater now feeds three pivot irrigators.