



# Destined to stay aloft



Winged freeloaders, droughts and a cement mixer to batch up orders of birdseed. Oamaru's Topflite operation at Weston in the 1980's, selling mail order packets to bird clubs from their sunflower crop, did not appear to be a rising star of North Otago's agri-industry.

BY TIM BREWSTER

Back then they were heavily reliant on rainfall on their Rosedale property and hand-mixing 10 tonnes annually. Farming partners Jock Webster, his son Nick and nephew Peter Mitchell admit they had no idea how large the scale of the operation would get.

"We did a study in the early 90's and the marketing consultant told us the supermarket sales figures he had accessed couldn't be right. The figures were right," Jock said.

Now Topflite produces over 1,600 tonnes of bird and small animal feed a year, with 250 product options from fifteen different mixes, including more than 150 tonnes of budgie mix alone.

Demand for birdseed is still climbing, and not only for caged pets, but feed to attract wild birds and poultry products to cater for an increase in backyard poultry numbers, Jock said.

"Poultry are the new pet. Wild birds are the new pet. There's more interest in nature."

The winged freeloaders are still a problem, "we grow enough to feed them as well," but thanks to the North Otago Irrigation Company (NOIC) scheme which came online in 2006 and some substantial plant upgrades, Topflite and the other aspects of the Rosedale operation seem destined to stay aloft for some time.

As last year's Supreme Award winner of the Ballance Farm Environment Awards for Otago, the Mitchell Webster Group as they are known was cited as "an extraordinary and inspirational family business that has stood the test of time."

Judges also commended them on the "long term sustainability focus through research and



crop trials; wise rotations and agricultural use and comprehensive monitoring."

Diversification over the years has also involved food supplements from flax seed for larger pets and horses, dog and cat food and even aquatic gravel with the Topflite production tidily dovetailing with the more traditional farm animal feed.

The Mitchell family started producing animal feed when they started farming in the area in 1871, introduced continuous cropping in 1968, with sunflowers first being grown in 1974.

Along with the Topflite operation overseen by Jock, the 700ha farm with an additional 674ha of leased land also produces a substantial amount of crops and animal feed.

ABOVE: The Topflight product range

MAIN IMAGE: Peter Mitchell and Jock Webster

BELOW: Wayne McMaster, Dispatch Department

An estimated 40% of the farm's production is for dairy support with fodder beet for grazing and lucerne, grass and maize for silage. Feed wheat, barley, ryegrass, hybrid rape, radish and potatoes are also grown.

The farming side of the operation is managed by Peter and Nick, the result of a partnership between the Mitchell and Webster families formed by Peter's father Ross Mitchell and his brother Bruce after they approached Jock in 1972. As a farming scientist who had "a very brief career" with DSIR, Jock had chosen to return to the land and had previously worked on Rosedale. There was already a strong family connection, with Jock's sister, Ainslie, married to Ross.

In 1992, Bruce retired with Peter coming on board as a partner in 1996 with Nick joining in 2008. Ross retired four years ago.

Farming partnerships between families have a chequered history, but in this case the past forty years at Rosedale seems to be an example of one that has functioned well.

Peter and Jock said there was little doubt the partnership was meant to work.

"Decide that's what you want to do, set up the framework and get on with it. You decide what you want to have with your agreements written up and keep them in the bottom drawer. Use







them if you have to, otherwise you get on with it and do what you have to do," Peter said.

As an A-grade mechanic, he is strongly involved in the agronomy of the operation and the practical side of things such as maintaining and fixing farm machinery especially during crucial harvesting periods. Jock with his agricultural science experience is responsible for Topflite and

The collaboration was recognised by judges of the Farm Environment Awards describing the arrangement as "Remarkable in-business practice, clear lines of communication and demarcation of roles through the development of a formal business structure, maintaining a strong business partnership between the two families."

The birdseed business was seen as an additional

entire Mitchell and Webster Group operation now employing 18 staff year round, with up to 40 employees during busy periods.

Along with mechanisation, seed development and systems to ensure consistency and quality on a large scale have been developed, such as substantially reducing dust irritants from one of their main products, canary seed.

Working through the farming and production process and developing systems for efficiency has been matched by focussing on customer requirements and trends in the marketplace. "Working and listening to what the consumer wants. We work hard making sure the quality of the seed going into the mixes is top quality," Peter said.

"We've been very incremental but irrigation was a huge investment. The North Otago Irrigation Company scheme got up and going and we went from having 60ha irrigated up to 450ha and now 617ha.

Last year the property produced 2,000 tonnes of fodder beet, just less than 3,000 tonnes of silage from maize, grass and lucerne, and 1,400 tonnes of baled straw.

Wheat production over four years has averaged 10.51 tonnes a hectare on irrigated soil, a yield that could drop to 6.5 tonnes under dryland conditions.

"If we didn't have irrigation we would not be able to get contracts for higher value crops such as hybrid rape, radish and ryegrass and we wouldn't be growing maize silage under dryland conditions.



ABOVE: The Topflite manufacturing site

MAIN IMAGE: A crop of sunflowers in the North Otago landscape

Nick with a degree in agricultural commerce takes care of day to day management of operations on the farm and marketing of feed to dairy clients. The three have "a splendid set of skills," Peter said.

revenue earner in the harsh farming climate of the 1980's with high interest rates and drought, with the Mitchell and Webster Group having only 60ha of its land irrigated prior to the establishment of the NOIC scheme.

The original cement- mixer which was loaded by hand with sacks of seed is still on the premises "and still gets used from time to time" with the





it was pretty mean. Farmers being forced to exit the industry. It was boom–bust country down here,” Peter said.

“Irrigation has smoothed a lot of the peaks and troughs out, so there’s more surety there and it’s bought a lot of young people back into the community.”

“When I was entering the workforce people were leaving town in droves really, anyone young.”

Now with the ever-growing dairying industry, the electricity sector, new houses being built, growth of associated trades and a busier

That’s something we’ve supported, within reason, standing in business shoes.”

They say their biggest challenge for farming in the area over the decades has been surety of water and the income fluctuation due to its uncertainty.

Now with irrigation and the boom in dairying, the next step for the future of the Mitchell Webster Group is a logical, but fairly substantial investment.

“We’re doing a dairy conversion at the moment. Just started in the last couple of months with



“There was a lot of on-farm investment, up-skilling and management and it continues. We did spend quite a bit,” Jock said.

With water such a crucial part of the farming venture, Jock had become heavily involved with the NOIC as chairman from 1992 till 2007, with the scheme coming to fruition in 2006. “That was a very major commitment. Not just for me but for everyone here.”

Prior to the scheme, farming fortunes in the area would change drastically from year to year.

“It could be paradise or it could be hell,” Jock said. Certainty of water for farmers in the area meant a big turn-around in fortunes over the past decade.

“It’s changed North Otago. From a return to the viability of the community the irrigation scheme has been very beneficial. In the late 1980’s, 90’s

harbour area, Oamaru has a bustle it has not seen for decades.

Along with traditional processing and manufacturing industries, businesses with a national presence such as Whitestone Cheese have established themselves and the revitalised Victoriana themed mercantile area, tourists coming to see little blue penguins and galleries such as Steampunk HQ have also added diversity to the town.

Witnessing the resurgence of optimism and industry in the area has been gratifying for those with a history in the area and who have been through the hard times.

Like many farming families, community involvement is strongly imbedded as a part of their daily lives within the M&W Group. Sport clubs, local endeavours, school fundraisers and involvement and also understanding that their employees have those commitments is an integral part of the operation, Peter said.

“With community support probably it’s more our nature. Both the Webster and Mitchell families are community minded, from Nick and my point of view growing up, our parents did that. As your kids are growing up that’s what you do, just grow up with it really. The philosophy is you always want to give a bit back. That’s perhaps who we are and that’s what we do, or that’s what we like to do. And as a business had the structure to allow the choice, because ultimately it means time away from the workplace.

a milking unit and a shed on 200 hectares. So that’s a fairly major change. It’s in some degree a shift in focus, but it’s complementary as well. There’s a lot of crossover between cropping and dairying. We’re selling a lot of product so we might make some profit out of it ourselves. Might as well have two bites of the cherry.”

ABOVE: Topflight silos

LEFT: Topflight storage

BELOW: Joanne Parker (left) and Trish Murphy, Manufacturing Department

