

Historic 'Tocal': look ahead

Rich in pastoral history, "Tocal" has grown from a pioneering past to become widely recognised as a centre of agricultural learning. Few estates can match its timeless blend of magnificent colonial buildings and modern, state-of-the-art agricultural college facilities, as NEIL LYON discovers.



Tocal College principal, Cameron Archer.

RENOWNED FOR ITS pioneering links with the pastoral industry and the Hereford breed in Australia, the historic Lower Hunter Valley property, "Tocal", remains at the forefront of Australian agriculture in its capacity as a pre-eminent agricultural learning centre.

Since being taken up as a land grant in 1822, the "Tocal" estate near Paterson had been owned by a succession of pastoral families until 1965 when, from the bequest of its last private owner, Charles Boyd Alexander, the C.B. Alexander Presbyterian Agricultural College was established on the property.

The college was run by the Presbyterian Church until 1970, when it was taken over by the NSW Department of Agriculture.

Today, "Tocal" is home to the Department of Primary Industries' (DPI) Tocal Agricultural Centre, which incorporates the C.B. Alexander Campus of Tocal College and DPI advisory services.

The 2200-hectare "Tocal" farm, which operates as a commercial venture running beef and dairy cattle, chickens, horses and sheep, is an integral part of the education and training programs run by the college.

Principal, Cameron Archer, said students participated in husbandry activities on the farm as part of their practical training.

"We pride ourselves on the practical skills the students get," he said.

"About half their time is spent on this farm or other farms.

"The ongoing commercial farm is the cornerstone of our training."

Mr Archer said one of the challenges of managing the property was its combination of upland, ridge country and low-lying alluvial flats subject to inundation from the Paterson River and Webbers Creek.

"You have to work within the constraints of climate and floods," he said.

"A drier year in this sort of country is better than a really wet year because of the floods.

"The real crunch happens in the Paterson Valley in the La Nina years.

"If you use the flats and low country to complement the animal production it is fine, but if you try to use the small amount of flats for other purposes you tend to suffer."

The 1500ha beef cattle section, which stretches 10 kilometres from the Paterson River to the back boundary of the property, ran a Poll Hereford herd in the early years of the college, but nowadays hosts a self-replacing herd of 500 Brahman/Angus and Brahman cows.

The breeding program uses Brahman, Brangus and Angus bulls in a crossbreeding program, with Charolais bulls as terminal sires.

The production focus is on turning off weaners or store weaners or, if seasonal conditions permit, steers are retained and finished for the European Union market.

The 300ha dairy section at "Tocal" runs a herd of 190 mainly Holstein milkers producing 1.68 million litres of milk a year at an average of 25 litres/cow/day.

The cows are milked in a 10-a-side, herringbone dairy.

Three pump sites on the Paterson River support a 79ha irrigation area serviced by travelling irrigators, hand shift spray lines and bike shift sprays.

The irrigation system has underpinned a long-running program of sowing improved varieties of winter and summer pastures and applying chicken litter to build up the fertility of the shallow ridge country that makes up much of the dairy farm.

In 1981, the neighbouring "Numeralla"



Historic "Tocal" homestead.

We pride ourselves on the practical skills our students get.

chicken farm was purchased and incorporated into the "Tocal" portfolio.

It continues to be run as a commercial venture turning off six batches of chickens a year, totalling more than one million birds.

Horses are part of the history of "Tocal" – racehorses in the early years and stock horses in more recent times.

There are more than 100 horses on the property, including foals, yearlings, breakers, work plant horses and broodmares.

Each year more than 20 broodmares are joined to Australian Stock Horse sires to produce young horses for students in the horse husbandry certificate course to break in and train for use on the farm or for the sale and show rings.

While the humid climate at "Tocal" is not ideal for sheep production, a flock of 250 crossbred ewes is run on the property as a resource for the shearing and woolclassing components of the college course.

Mr Archer said as "Tocal" aimed to be a role model for sustainable land management, an extensive revegetation program had been implemented across the property.

"We have done a lot of work on protecting the environment; increasing the number of trees across the landscape, fencing off river banks and putting in laneways and treelots.

"Assigning a portion of the property to trees and the natural environment in perpetuity enhances productivity in ways we don't fully understand."

Past, present ties

Custodians of the historic "Tocal" property and its agricultural college have created a legacy for future generations through an astute policy of marrying the future with the past.

The contemporary, award-winning buildings of the agricultural college on "Tocal" lie in harmony with the heritage buildings of the historic "Tocal" homestead complex.

Care has been taken to retain the property's historic links through the preservation of the homestead and its collection of colonial outbuildings.

The Georgian-style homestead, framed by huge fig trees, was built in 1841 from sandstone bricks quarried on the property.

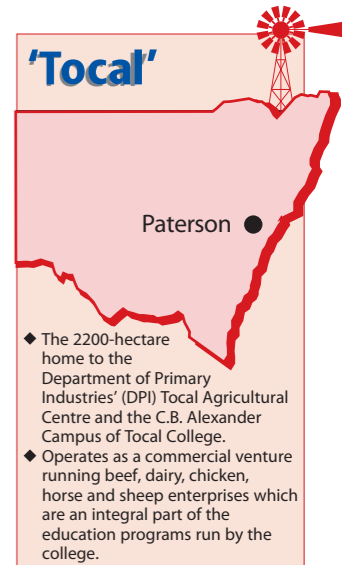
An imposing stone barn constructed by convicts in 1830 was originally used for drying tobacco and making wine, and later became a stable and stock feed store and, in the 1900s, was also used to house Charles Boyd Alexander's Rolls Royces.

In the complex is a set of barracks built in about 1835 to house convicts, ex-convicts and free workers who played an integral role in the early development of the property.

The Blacket barn has the unusual distinction of being designed by a colonial architect, Edmund Blacket.

It was built in 1867 and features detailed roof trussing that inspired features in the main hall of the college.

The "Tocal" homestead complex is open to the public at weekends from March to November and is a popular venue for weddings and receptions.



'Tocal'

Paterson

- ◆ The 2200-hectare home to the Department of Primary Industries' (DPI) Tocal Agricultural Centre and the C.B. Alexander Campus of Tocal College.
- ◆ Operates as a commercial venture running beef, dairy, chicken, horse and sheep enterprises which are an integral part of the education programs run by the college.



Students, Emma Willoughby, Sydney, and Samantha White, Wollongong.



Homestead and agricultural college (back).



Historic Blacket's barn.



Land livestock links

Generations of pastoral families have helped build a tradition of successful livestock production and agricultural endeavour on the historic "Tocal" property near Paterson.

On land formerly inhabited by the Gringai clan of the Wonnarua people, the first to take up a land grant in 1822 was 24-year-old James Webber.

With 34 convicts, Mr Webber set up wheat, grape and tobacco farming enterprises, and experimented with other crops and sheep.

In 1834, he sold the property to Caleb Wilson and his son, Felix, who built the "Tocal" homestead in 1841 and leased the property to a settler from Devon, Charles Reynolds, in 1844.

Tocal agricultural college principal, Cameron Archer, said the Reynolds developed a reputation for breeding prize-winning Hereford and Devon cattle and Thoroughbred horses.

"When the Reynolds family came to 'Tocal' it became very productive because they got the mix right of cattle and horses and were not trying to grow crops and vineyards," he said.

"Because of the proximity to Sydney and the port, in the early days, they imported prize horses and cattle.

"Tocal" became a seed stock place and people still talk about Herefords being purchased from here and walked to the North West and Queensland."

The Reynolds family leased "Tocal" until 1907 when Charles Reynolds' son, Frank, purchased it.

In 1926, the property was sold to the Alexander family, from Scotland.

The last private owner of "Tocal", Charles Boyd Alexander, continued to run the property as a cattle breeding and finishing enterprise.

Through a bequest in his will, C.B. Alexander Presbyterian Agricultural College was established on the property in 1965.

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