



## David & Nell Brook

David & Nell live in the town of Birdsville. They own and operate pastoral properties in the Channel Country area of the Lake Eyre Basin.

David has always lived in Birdsville apart from his senior schooling completed in Adelaide at Rostrevor College. His maternal great-grandparents were married in Birdsville in the late 1880's. His father Bill Brook, originally from Adelaide, purchased his first property, Adria Downs Station, west of Birdsville, in 1939.

David has been active in local government for the last 30 years including 13 years as Mayor of the Diamantina Shire.

In 2002 David received the Order of Australia Medal for his contribution to the community, local government and the establishment of Organic Beef production in the region.

He is a board member of the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame.

Nell was born and educated in Pretoria, South Africa. After completing a degree in Economics she spent 3 years travelling the world as a flight attendant for South African Airways before being lured to the outback by David and settling in the middle of Australia!

They have raised six children, own a half share in the Birdsville Pub and are presently executive committee members of the Birdsville Race Club.

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## THE OUTBACK EXPERIENCE CATTLE, PUBS & TOURISTS

### **Nell:**

When you picture the Australian Outback in your mind – many differing images form a slide show. Some of you will see it as wide-open spaces, deep blue skies, amazing sunsets, floodwaters slowly meandering in dry earth creeks and cracks, birds and animals. Others think of hot dry summers, dust storms, flies, isolation, and loneliness. It is a land of contrasts. Many people have come to the 'outback' to find their place. Others were there already. Only a few have remained to build a life for themselves and future generations.

David & I live in the famous but small town of Birdsville in the far south-western corner of Queensland, very close to the border of South Australia. It is in the middle of the Australian Outback and close to nowhere. It has been home to David's family since the 1880s. It has been my home for the last 30 years and will hopefully be home for some of our children in the future. I arrived in Birdsville in 1973 – a newly married, starry-eyed bride from South Africa. For 3 years I had been travelling the world working as a flight attendant for an international airline. To say the least it was a big change in life style.

The town of Birdsville today has 120 residents – not much has changed in the last 100 years except surprisingly a drop in the population from 300 pre Federation when Birdsville was first known by the name Diamantina Crossing.

Birdsville is situated in the Diamantina Shire, which covers an area of 93000 sq. km and is one of 3 towns in the shire; the others being Bedourie (pop 120) and Betoota (pop. 0). The Shire has 1600 kilometres of roads of which only 80 kilometres are bitumen sealed; the balance being dirt or gravel. At the turn of the last century, early 1900's when the town was a customs post for droving cattle, it supported 3 hotels, a cordial factory, general store, post office, market gardens and a police station with one policeman - sometimes also a doctor!!!

But times and drought brought changing fortunes and when I arrived 30 years ago, I started married life with no telephone – communication was by letter or telegram courtesy of the RFDS HF radio network. We had an unreliable power supply and no regular freight service. But we did have a strip of bitumen down the main street and 4 streetlights powered by a small hydroelectric scheme connected to our artesian water supply. Our water supply was a 1200m deep artesian bore with a pressure of 280 psi coming to the surface one degree off boiling point.

Today we push a few buttons and we are instantly connected to the rest of the world via satellite internet connection. We can make phone calls at will. This has been one of the most significant changes to our lifestyle. It has given us the ability to communicate with family and friends and most importantly manage our business in an efficient, effective and modern way even though we remain geographically isolated. We now have access to a geothermal power plant that is a model for pollution free power generation. Our water is a little cooler now!

Birdsville is a major destination for travellers. We welcome up to 50000 visitors each year and the number is growing.

It is a still long distance from anywhere - 1200 km from Adelaide and 1600 km from Brisbane – so getting there is a challenge in itself.

Birdsville offers the traveller a unique physical and spiritual experience of the Australian Outback by way of access to pristine desert country and its beauty and solitude for the soul.

The highlight is of course a drink in the Birdsville Pub – iconic in its own right and the only one of the original three still serving beer.

During school holidays we can expect up to 600 visitors a day with the hotel serving up to 250 meals per night. Our season begins at Easter and concludes about the end of October. To drive the Birdsville Track was once the major goal for travellers but now they also enjoy the challenge of four-wheel driving the 1000 sand hills across the Simpson Desert.

The town airstrip is ideally placed so that arriving aircraft can park directly across the road from the Pub and passengers can wander over for a bed and a beer.

As visitors seek more challenges and excitement in their travels, continued requests for access to travel over our properties is becoming a management issue.

Our social highlight for the year is of course the Birdsville Races

Each year, in September, up to 6000 visitors gather for the famous horseracing event, internationally recognised as the ultimate outback experience. For this two-day event patrons arrive by road or air. After finding a Coolabah tree or the wing of an aeroplane to sleep under, they enjoy a beer at the pub, place a bet on a horse, kick up their heels .....and return home with tall stories to tell!!!!

The first race meeting was held in 1882 with David's great grandfather an early secretary of the race club. Today, over 100 years later, the link continues with David having filled the same voluntary role for all of our married life.

The Diamantina River separates the town from the racecourse and during race week every tree between the course and town is claimed by an enthusiastic camper and up to 200 aircraft vie for a parking spot on the airport.

The weather can be unpredictable and sorts out the stayers from the sprinters. Any hint of a dust storm or rain the sprinters are gone.

You can appreciate the pressure on a small community to provide the infra- structure for a crowd of 6000 for a weekend.

We do our best with the help of many volunteers. It is an exciting week but more importantly a major fundraising event for our local Royal Flying Doctor Service and the Birdsville Health Clinic. Prize money of \$120000.00 entices horses to a dirt and dusty track where the only grandstand is a tin shed on a sand hill.

The days of racing grass or corn fed stock horses are gone. The programme now caters only for registered thoroughbred horses. After race entertainment includes dancing in the local Hall at night and if you want to get rid a bit of energy you can watch or participate in the famous Fred Brophy Boxing Troupe Show in a tent opposite the Pub. If you are still looking for excitement finish the evening in the Pub Beer Garden – kicking up dust to the sound of music. By Sunday lunchtime most aircraft have departed and there is a steady dust haze as road travellers head home again – some a bit slower than others.....we take a deep breath and start planning the next race meeting.

So in between all of this we still have to make a living.....

**David:**

My maternal great grandparents were married in Birdsville in the 1880's. In the early 1900's my grandparents managed Annandale Station for Sir Sydney Kidman. This is now part of our property Adria Downs Station. When Annandale Station was closed down due to drought they returned to Birdsville to take up ownership of the Royal Hotel and later the Birdsville Hotel. After a few changes in ownership Nell & I now own half share.

My father Bill Brook, originally from Adelaide, began work as a young ringer on Cordillo Downs Station in February 1918 at 30 shillings a week . During this time he made a living breaking in and selling horses to local stations and droving teams. He later worked on other cattle stations and regularly rode at the Birdsville and Betoota races. In 1942 he married a local lass Dorothy Gaffney and began to put together the nucleus of a cattle herd . By this time he had acquired a 200 square miles block of waterless desert country west of Birdsville known as Adria Downs . Today after buying out a few neighbours the Adria Downs block has grown to 3500 square miles (875000 hectares) and comfortably runs 12000 cattle.

My mother died when I was 9 years old . I was an only child so after my senior schooling in Adelaide I was quite happy to return home and work with my father. In 1975 we purchased a neighbouring property Kamaran Downs Station. Later my father (at 81 years of age) achieved great personal satisfaction with the purchase of Cordillo Downs Station at auction for AU\$1.2m. This is where he had started work in 1918 for thirty shillings a week.

In 1998 we purchased Murnpeowie Station on the Strzelecki Track to complete the family holdings we speak about today.

It has been this gift of hard work of building a future by my grandparents and parents and their love and commitment to the outback that has spurred Nell and myself to continue and improve our community and properties.

We have raised 6 children and today own and operate pastoral properties - comprising a total area of 30000 square kilometres in the Channel Country area of the Lake Eyre Basin. This unique inland drainage basin carries the water of the Georgina/Eyre Creek, Diamantina River and Cooper Creek over vast floodplains into Lake Eyre. High quality native pastures make the region eminently suitable for cattle grazing. Growth rates for cattle are excellent without using artificial hormonal growth promotants.

Furthermore the region has always and still remains today very distant from intensive agriculture and chemical usage. Some of you may recall in recent years the staunch community opposition to the proposed World Heritage Listing of the Lake Eyre basin and then the proposal to grow cotton on the Cooper Creek. The region today, preserved in an almost original condition is therefore an ideal foundation to launch an organic industry

Our herd today comprises 40000 Poll Hereford cattle focussed on the certified organic production of beef for both domestic and export markets. Three of our four properties have deserts, the Simpson and Strzelecki, as neighbours. Annual rainfall is between 150 and 200 mm and when this does not occur we hope for flooding from the higher rainfall regions to our north. In an average year our 12000 cows, left to mate year round with 400 Poll Hereford bulls, will drop in excess of 10000 calves. We replace about 60 bulls each year; either purchased privately or at sales mostly in Queensland or northern New South Wales. The sheer size of our holdings means that most cattle are mustered only twice a year. At this time we will brand and electronically identify calves, possibly carry out some weaning where suitable paddocks are available and select fats or cull animals for sale. We market a full range of cattle from heavy bullocks suitable for Japanese markets to EU weight and age steers down to Domestic trade.

Developing and maintaining infrastructure is our major cost. Each property has 10 or more steel trucking/drafting yards capable of handling at least 1000 cattle, hundreds of kilometres of internal roads constructed to link yards and carry up to 6 deck road trains. We have numerous water points; being either wells, bores (artesian or sub artesian) pipelines or dams. On Cordillo Downs Station, 740000 hectares, the boundary fence alone stretches 340 kilometres. In total, over all our properties, we have about 4000kms of existing fences. New fences today cost \$2000 per km to construct. We operate each property with a staff of 5-7 people under the direction of a management couple. Nell & I both fly and in our C210 we can reach any of our properties in less than one and a half hours flying time from Birdsville. Staff are employed from February to December in full time positions with all food and accommodation provided.

We try to avoid working livestock in mid summer when, as occurred in January this year, maximum shade temperatures reached 49C on two consecutive days. The provision of modern air-conditioned housing and power generation on our remote area properties is a must to retain good staff.

We are involved with a group of 20 like-minded producers in the production and marketing of certified organic beef under the OBE Beef label. All producers are shareholders in the company OBE Beef with three of us acting as directors.

Our chilled product sells well in Japan and North America and recently we have begun exports into the EU. These outlets maintain the OBE brand name through to the end customer. We employ one of our producer members as Business Manager and company secretary. Another is undergoing training to fill a role in Export Development. We use the services of the Brisbane based exporter Stockyard P/L in marketing our product which is processed on a service kill basis at the Valley Beef Abattoir at Grantham in Queensland. It is exported by OBE as a licensed Non Packer Exporter. Where possible OBE producers take part in marketing initiatives on a voluntary basis with fares paid by OBE. We regularly exhibit our product at natural food expo's such as Biofach in Japan and earlier this month at Anaheim, Los Angeles. Austrade is an important partner in assisting us in foreign markets. The reality of the difficulties in accessing markets or the quality of competing product is best learnt first hand by producers. This message then translates more quickly into improved production, delivery reliability and product quality. We make a point of encouraging our customers to visit us in the channel country to see the quality of our natural production system and share a beer or a good red afterwards. The producer owned MLA and Australian Government through its Export Market Development Grant scheme help us in sharing some of the travel costs of our visitors. Next month we will be bringing a group of thirteen Japanese supermarket chain customers by bus down the Cooper from Longreach to overnight at an OBE property near Windorah. They will see at first hand the magnificent flood plains, which make the Channel Country Beef so special. Hopefully they will leave prepared to put OBE organic on their shelves.

We believe our fully certified production chain through to marketing approach gives new meaning for producers to primary production

It presents Australia's livestock industry in a favourable light with a flow on benefit to tourism from the healthy environment and organic production system accredited to the highest international standards

Organic Production of beef gives new hope to our children and young farming families that there are greater career opportunities in what was previously just 'primary production' conducted in a remote dusty paddock.