

OLD AGGIES

President: Frank Doughty, (02) 9481 8787, fdoughty@tpg.com.au
 Secretary: Graham Linnegar, (02) 9527 1830, helgra@linnegarplumbing.com.au
 Treasurer/Membership: Colin Short, (02) 9876 1018, cbshort@bigpond.com

Alstonville luncheon

21st September 2026, Cherry Street Sports Club. Contact Geoff Jacobs 0412 107 727 or gajacobs@bigpond.com

Armidale/Tamworth luncheon

11th March 2026, Bendemeer Hotel – contact Dr Barbara Vanselow 0434 344992 or bvanselo@gmail.com

Gosford luncheon

5th November 2026. Central Coast Leagues Club, Gosford. Contact Geoff Warr (02) 4342 3226 or 0411128 936 or warries509@gmail.com

Orange luncheon

14th October 2026, Best Western Ambassador Motel Orange. Contact Len Banks 0428459117 or banks@lmbanks.com.au

Wagga Wagga luncheon

21st May 2026, contact James Hamilton 0447 225 875 or jnch1950_1@bigpond.com

Sydney luncheon

11th August 2026. **New venue** – Baulkham Hills Sports Club. Contact Col Short 9876 1018 or cbshort@bigpond.com

From The Presidents Desk

This year we celebrate the 46th Year of Old Aggies.

The Association has generated great camaraderie and regional luncheons held throughout the State have allowed former work colleagues to enjoy each other's company and talk about the 'good old days' Many thanks to the regional coordinators for their efforts. My special thanks to Graham Linnegar (Secretary), Col Short (Treasurer/Membership) and John Bowler (Newsletter Editor) for their support.

It has been my pleasure to be your President and I encourage your continued support of the Association.

Sydney Old Aggies Luncheon is back this year on Tuesday 11th August at Baulkham Hills Sports Club.

Dr Frank Doughty

President

Keeping in Contact

There has been a number of initiatives to enable old workmates to get together to renew friendships share our stories about our work in the Department and shake our heads at the changes to what many of us regarded as a valuable workplace committed to the improvement of the agricultural industries across the state.

Sydney Luncheon

Since Covid, coupled with the major changes to the public transport in George Street in the Sydney CBD, attendance at the Sydney luncheon has fallen. The main reason appears to be the difficulty in transport and access.

Col Short has been busy finding a suitable venue and has arranged with the Baulkham Hills Sports Club for our next Luncheon on Tuesday 11 August. The Club has a big car park and easy access for less than mobile visitors with no set menu, you will pay for your own meal from the lunch Specials around \$20, or from the main Menu.

Sydney Luncheon Tuesday 11 August, 11.30 for Lunch at 12.30 Baulkham Hills Sports Club Renown Road Baulkham Hills

Please email or advise Col expressing your interest as soon as possible to gauge likely attendance and Col will follow up closer the time to confirm arrangements cbshort@bigpond.com

Yanco Get Together

Andrew Watson has organised Get Togethers at Leeton for ex Yanco staff, the first been in September last year and had organised another for the 25 February which is too late for notice in this Newsletter. They are planning future get togethers at the Leeton Soldiers club, the details will be available on the Old Aggies DPI Yanco Facebook or Andrew can be contacted on andrewwatson2095@gmail.com

Subscriptions \$10 per annum now due

Subs can be paid by direct deposit into the Commonwealth Bank BSB 06-2263, Account No 00903542, Account Name Agricultural Retired Officers Association (please add your surname) or by cheque to Colin Short, 27 Chesterfield Road, Epping NSW 2121 or pay at your local luncheon.

Gunnedah Office Staff Reunion

It's back to Gunnedah for all former Gunnedah office staff members and their partners on Saturday 21 March.

The re-union is to be held at the Gunnedah Services Club BBQ Area beginning at 5:30 pm. Many keen locals and former staff members who have moved to other parts of the state are expected to attend. The Services Club was, for many years, the district office when such outstanding officers as Steve Sutherland, Paul Hassab, Allan Luff, Tony Dale, Col Foster, Andrew von Mengerson and others enjoyed a productive partnership with local farmers, graziers and horticulturists. Former admin officer Ruth Riley can be contacted for further information at ruth.riley8@gmail.com

Col Begg

Wagga Morning Coffee

James Hamilton has reminded us the Monthly Coffee at the Rules Club Wagga on the first Thursday of each month

Trangie Agricultural Research Centre History

Recently I had the pleasure of spending some time with Sally Anderson at the Narromine Local Studies Centre who is collating records from the Trangie ARC. She is following some good work done by Don Saville, a former Director of the Station, who compiled a list of all staff employed over time, including Research Officers, Extension Officers in Training, Technical and Laboratory staff, Domestic staff and Clerical Support staff. In the 1980's Trangie had a staff of over 90 personnel so pulling the staff lists together since 1914 was a great achievement and a valuable record.

Sally was Librarian at Trangie before assuming the role of Library Services Manager until 2014. Libraries were an important resource in all Research Stations and major offices until about the 2000's when the internet provided cheaper and more timely access to scientific publications. Sally has been concerned that, not only as libraries disappeared, but as staff numbers and research activities have decreased on many stations, valuable records will be forgotten or thrown out. Sally is working to ensure that these valuable records are collated and information retained.

Talking to other retired officers this is a major concern across the Department. The official records of the various farms and stations may be preserved in the State Archives but the importance of the contributions to industry and the local communities cannot be underestimated and are in danger of

being lost. These Departmental facilities made a significant contribution to many local communities with staff numbers, the involvement of staff in community activities and recognition of improvements to the rural industries.

Sally is still seeking for information, anecdotes and relevant stories to complete the Trangie records and would really appreciate further contact with ex staff. She can be contacted on narromine.localstudies@mrl.nsw.gov.au

Broad Brush of History of Agricultural Research at Wagga

James Hamilton at Wagga has been working in a similar vein and has written a great summary of the key events at Wagga, from the establishment of the 'Experiment Farm in 1891, the impetus for the wheat breeding program, and the development of the wider research activities. Wagga has been the venue of many corporate and political changes over the years with training of farm boys in the early days to the establishment of the Agricultural College in 1949, the upgrading to a College of Advanced Education and the establishment of Charles Sturt University on the campus. This naturally caused some problems in the division of land and assets. Changes to research activities also resulted in changes in status to Research Station. Agricultural Institute, Regional Veterinary Laboratory, CRC for the Wine and Grape Industry and the Graham Centre to name some.

James has been able to accurately document these changes and highlight many of the successful research advances over time. James is happy to send an electronic copy to any good environment.

John Bowler

Retirement Activities, Boredom, Fitness, Mental Health??

When we meet our retired workmates some of the early questions are: What are you doing to keep yourself busy? Are you keeping fit? Are you enjoying retirement?

For myself I have been involved in a history group, a Mens Shed, and up until recently been keeping relatively fit by running a small beef property. Now I have moved into town keeping fit is a major concern. Most of the larger towns have the usual run of organisations such as Rotary, Lions, Probus, View, Zonta etc as well as sporting clubs like Golf, Bowls and Tennis to name a few but these activities seem to get more demanding and harder as we age. Looking around the Orange area there are, shall we say, more sedate physical activities that are available.

Croquet

Len Banks has provided some background.

Traditionally, upcoming retirees would say “Soon I will have time to improve my golf handicap”. Then after a few years there is a progression from golf to lawn bowls.

Well, there are other options.

In Orange, there has been a growth in seniors’ participation in croquet and pickleball. I haven’t got into pickleball, but I know some who have so I will leave it to them to espouse the benefits.

Maria and I took the lead from John Read and joined the Orange Croquet Club in 2017. There are now 10 Old Aggies and spouses playing croquet in Orange – quite a force amongst the 75 members of the Orange Club. The beauty of croquet for us oldies is that it is very social, outdoors, plenty of easy exercise, and cheap compared to other sports. We play 2 or 3 times a week, but it is flexible and casual depending on other commitments.

The aim of the sport is to hit a ball with a mallet through a series of hoops on a grass court much like a bowling green. The challenge is that your opponent can hit their ball onto yours, moving yours away from a hoop-running position. Of course, you can then retaliate when it is your turn. So, the skill is in being able to hit the ball in the direction you want it to go, judging the distance so that it stops where you want it to stop and then scoring a hoop when you are in position to do so.

We offer 6 free lessons with no obligation to join, but I am sure, once you have tried it you will be hooked.

Len Banks



Simon Kempson at Orange Croquet

Pickle Ball

One of the current ‘new sports’ is Pickle Ball which has generated a lot of interest and getting a very strong following. I must confess I was not aware of

what is involved and did not know any of the details so Ian Roth who is a keen player has provided the following information.

I’ve been playing pickleball for about 6 months and really enjoy the game. I play at the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) in Orange which is open for pickleball on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday mornings. It’s a case of show up if you want a game with no pressure at all to be there. Between 15 to 30 people turn up and with 6 courts available it’s easy to have lots of games.

We always play doubles however singles can also be played. It mixes tennis, badminton and table tennis and anyone who has played any of those sports generally starts with an advantage. It uses a solid paddle and a plastic ball with holes. It’s played on a court about a quarter the size of a tennis court. It has a low net.

Pickleball is a fast-growing sport in Australia and other countries and it’s easy to see why. It’s easy to learn, less strain on the joints than tennis, very social and all ages can play. At PCYC Orange most players would be over 60 years and retired from work. There are people in their late 70’s who play a great game.

It’s certainly good exercise and provides good cardio, agility, and reflex training.

Serving is **underarm** and diagonally across the court. Only the serving side can score a point and games usually go to 11 points however to win it must be by 2 points.

Opinions vary as to how it got the name pickleball however the one I like is that the person who developed the game had a dog called Pickle. If you are thinking of giving it go, then I’d encourage you to do so. It’s great exercise and a good way to meet people.

Ian Roth



Mens Shed

The Mens Shed is a great place where men of all ages and backgrounds can meet in an independent location. The group looks after the mental wellbeing of its members by providing excellent workshop facilities for woodworking and metal work activities, making and restoring various items for both personal use and the community and general interaction with each other. There is a sense of achievement, contributing to the community, and sharing skills in a positive feel-good environment. Mens Sheds in other locations provide computer skills, social outings and even cooking facilities. There is great support from all spheres of Government, recognising particularly mental health issues for isolated and disadvantaged men in the community.

There are three ex Aggies involved in the Borenore/Nashdale Shed where I go where we meet weekly with great woodworking facilities and some metal work. As well we try to have guest speakers on varied subjects from aged care support and finances, vehicle safety development and pest animal and biosecurity to name a few. We also have a vegetable garden where members can get freshly picked vegies and surplus are given to the local FoodCare, supporting the local community.

John Bowler

Australia Day Awards

Gregory Roese OAM Tamworth

Greg was awarded the OAM for his service to veterans and the community of Tamworth. Greg has been active in Tamworth Legacy since 1978 in various positions including President. He has made a major contribution to the Tamworth Bowling Club in various roles including coaching of juniors, district delegate and national umpire. He has been recognised as Tamworth Senior Citizen in 2024 and received various defence force medals. Greg was a Livestock Officer Pigs in his Departmental service.

Graham Peart OAM Valla Beach

Graham commenced duty at Trangie ARC as a research Agronomist in 1965 where he made a significant contribution to the use and management of dryland lucerne.

He resigned from the Department in 1968 to set up the Gulargambone Rural Advisory Service and the GRASS (Gulargambone Rural Association for Sheep Selection) Merinos. This pulled together the highest performing ewes from the participating members and applied critical objective selection on the major

economic traits to achieve great progress compared to the traditional stud selection in the industry. This progress has been documented in the Merino Select Analysis where Grass Merinos accounted for many of the leading sires in Australia. The Grass Merino story has been well documented in ABC programs and in the book 'GRASS Poll Merinos celebrating 50 years' authored by Angela O'Brien.

Graham has made significant contributions to the wider agricultural industries through his Directorships with NSW Grains Board. Computer Aided Livestock Marketing, Sheep Industry CRC and various consultancies with the wool industry and the Western Division.

Graham has always maintained close contact with the Department, in both the sheep and cropping industries providing valuable resources and cooperation to both advisory and research staff.

Gosford luncheon

Once again Central Coast branch annual lunch was held at Gosford Leagues Club on Thursday November 6th. We had 16 members in attendance with 12 apologies.

We welcomed Joan Slennett after George very sadly passed away.

Members enjoyed catching up with old friends over a meal and drink. Thanks to Graham Linnegar for attending and representing the Executive.

Unfortunately, Frank Doughty and Col Short were unable to attend.

It's always important that our members hear about what is happening to the department, although it has now got to the stage where we and I don't have any contacts in the restructured department. All we know is that redundancies are proceeding and some scientists have already departed from DPI Ourimbah.

Our next lunch for 2026 will be held on Thursday November 5th 2026 starting at 11.30am at Central Coast Leagues Club, Gosford.

Thanks to all who attended.

Geoff Warr



Andrew Jessup, Alistair Grieve, Doug Hocking

Alstonville luncheon

A small get together on 15th September.



Ross Darnell, Owen Simpson, Geoff Jacobs, Bev Brouwer, Marie Ahern, Bob Ahern, Derek Brouwer, Peter Mooney, Robina Browning, Larry Browning, Michael Jeffery

Riverina/Murray luncheon 8th May 2025

We especially welcomed Deb Slinger (former Director of WWAI), Geoff Mort, Tom Nordblom, and Mark Norton to the luncheon held in our normal location at the Thomas Blamey Tavern Lake Albert. There were 18 in attendance including 2 x former Directors of the Wagga Wagga Agricultural Institute and one Former Regional Director. There were 24 apologies.

George Stevens gave a written update on Yanco Agricultural institute citing that about 60 staff are now left at YAI and Joe Valenzisi is still the manager. A Christian school will be making use of a few of the buildings. They will be taking over the Rice CRC offices and the attached lecture rooms. Those rooms have not been used since the closure of the Murrumbidgee College in 2004. There is a big cattle project underway with the arrival of loads of cattle sometime ago.

Helen Allen was recognised in April for her 30 Year commitment to grain judging at Sydney Royal Easter Show. Congratulations Helen.

Hemp farming is attracting curiosity across the Riverina in industrial and medicinal hemp crop production and additional infrastructure. Its multi-purpose usability, short production cycle and low capital demand in cultivation all add to the curiosity in adding hemp to crop rotations.

Crop protection discovery by Senior plant pathologist Dr Andrew Milgate where a new approach to selecting resistance in plants is set to fast-track breeding programs and increase crop protection. The new method combined a number of traditional phenotyping techniques. It allows to make new discoveries about plant pathogens are detected during the infection process. Opens a new

field of possibilities in terms of how plant breeders can select and combine resistance genes in plants to defend against the fungal and comycetes pathogens.

Pastures are being grown to assist bees. Several pasture species have been identified to benefit honeybees with the aim for different agriculture industries to work together to support bees. Research by DPI and Regional Development have evaluated 23 species of pasture legumes, mostly regenerating annuals at various sites in NSW.

James Hamilton

Orange luncheon

40 people attended the Orange Old Aggies Luncheon on Wednesday 8 October 2025 at the Best Western Ambassador Motel in Orange, with attendees coming from across the central west and also from Tasmania (David Hartley) and Sydney (Graham Linnegar). There was a lot of reminiscing about time in the Department and what people are doing now in retirement. Several people caught up with colleagues or bosses they had not seen for some time.

Guest Speaker, Dr Fay Haynes (Acting Director of Extensive Livestock with DPIRD in Orange) spoke about the Department's current livestock research projects. Projects focused on the use of digital and remote technology in the assessment of methane emissions from cattle and sheep, the assessment of breeds for production in different environments and the value of goats for meat production. Questions probing the relationships between research and extension, between the Department and the Local Land Services organisation, and between the Department and regional groups in the event of exotic disease outbreaks or natural disasters showed that these links are not strong. Dr Haynes acknowledged that there is a deal of work to be done in rebuilding those relationships.

Len Banks



Dick Kearins, Tim Burfitt, Anne Muir and Dave Harris

Letters

Rod Nash has sent the following

I have been browsing through past editions of Old Aggies and became quite nostalgic of my relatively short time with the Department (through its various name changes) - for me 1988 to 2010. I was always based at Tocal, holding various positions - initially Lecturer in Dairying, Tocal Field Days coordinator, Operational and Regulatory staff coordinator and the staff training and development manager. I moved to Perth at the end of 2010 and then was employed with WA Dept of Agriculture as their training manager. I retired in 2017.

Rod set up and managed the Agriculture Operational and Regulatory award staff progression requirements at that time it was unique and at the industry front. Agricultural staff in both the operational and regulatory awards were able to be acknowledged for a pay rise based on their competencies. Rod also combined that into receiving a national qualification (through Tocal) when they reached their highest level within their pay scale. Some staff at the time had never had a formal qualification although highly skilled, it was a win-win arrangement.



John Betts, Rod Nash, Brad Palmer and Terry Coates

Vale Peter Slater – 15/10/1939 – 7/9/2025

Peter lectured at the Wagga Agricultural College in the 1970's then moved across to RCAE/RMIHE then CSU as lecturer.

Peter David Slater and his wife Carole Louise and their two children, Julian and Tracey, emigrated from the north-eastern coast of England in 1966. After a few years in Launceston where Peter taught agriculture and science in a high school, the family moved to the mainland and settled in Wagga Wagga. Peter became a lecturer in Biology in 1969 and the couple had another two sons, Michael (who later played cricket for Australia) and Mark. Peter was a lecturer in Agricultural Botany/ Entomology in the 1970s.

James Hamilton & Ted Wolfe

Vale Terence (Terry) King 25/4/1935 – 13/4/2025

Went through Sydney University with a cadetship from the Dept of Agriculture. Graduated 1957 with an Agricultural Science Degree. Spent time at Leeton & Trangie in this initial phase of the Dept Ag Career. Recruited by Australian Fertilizers Ltd in the early 1960s. In 1984 he rejoined the Department of Agriculture as Principal Officer Management. Terry managed the Research station program including the amalgamation of Fisheries Research. When the department moved to Orange he continued his work commuting to Orange weekly. He eventually secured a role in the Department of Education in IT support to be closer to his family. Retired age 75 in 2010. Survived by his wife Penny and Sons Ben & Daniel.

Daniel King (son)



Vale Warrick Felton died 26/5/2025

Warwick Felton was a highly respected research agronomist based at Tamworth Agricultural Research Centre for much of his career. He played a major role in the development of zero till farming as a prime factor in conservation farming. Warwick and his team were instrumental in developing weed sensing technology, identifying green weeds in soil or stubble. An electronic eye attached to each spray nozzle when activated by a green plant triggered the spray. This major achievement, recognised worldwide and further developed in the USA, has had a major impact. There was important savings in costs through reduced weedicide costs, but more significantly, reduced the amount of spray chemicals in the environment limiting residues in the soil and plant material.

The Tamworth multi-disciplinary team did valuable work on crop rotations as part of the conservation farming program. These trials showed the positive effect on cereal crops, mainly wheat, by the inclusion of pulse crops such as chick peas in the rotation.

Warwick's work on zero till was a significant contribution to this now widely accepted industry practice.

Warwick died on 26 May, 2025 after a long illness.

Bob Freebairn



Vale Neville Wooden 06/01/29 – 08/01/2026

Nev worked at the Wagga Wagga Agricultural Institute from 17th April 1961 to 5th Jan 1989 when he retired.

Nev was a Field Assistant mainly with Plant Physiology section at the WWAI. Nev was a quiet person who was a team worker striving to meet the mission of the Institute. Nev was liked by a large number of his work colleagues over many years.



Vale Ian Holford 22/11/1933 – 10/01/2026

Ian graduated from University of Sydney in 1954, and completed his Master in Agricultural Science in 1964 whilst working at the Tamworth Agricultural Research Centre. He spent three years in the United Kingdom where he was awarded his PhD.

He conducted research into pasture nutrition, particularly phosphorous and sulphur on the New England area, further studying the use of legumes, especially lucerne, into cereal rotations.

His experience in England with the long term Rothamsted pasture study led him to initiate two long term studies from 1966 to 1992. This work critically looked at long term nitrogen and carbon content in cropping soils.

Ian was recognised internationally, speaking at major conferences even after retirement and was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship for his work in agriculture and public health spheres.

Graham Crocker

Vale Neville Cutts 1927 - 2025

Neville was a lecturer at Hawkesbury Agricultural College from 1953 – 1987.

Neville passed away just prior to his 98th birthday in October.

Neville graduated from Hawkesbury Agricultural College in 1947.

He had a strong desire to join the NSW Department of Agriculture on leaving college but with no vacancies went to work for Frank Armstrong a large Central West beekeeper famous for migrating hives by truck and train to Western Australia and return, still the largest migration of hives in Australia.

In 1949 a vacancy occurred in the Department and Neville was appointed to Wagga Wagga.

Then 1953 Neville was transferred to Hawkesbury Agricultural College as the Apiary lecturer.

In Neville's time at the college beekeeping was a compulsory subject in first year of a three-year course. Many students loved the course, that gave them a career in Apiculture in NSW Agriculture others not so keen. Some of Neville's students have become commercial beekeepers and or queen breeders.

Apiary officers Neville trained when students were Bob Guilford, Bill Smith, Roger Roberts, Warren Jones, Warren Taylor, Debbie Thomas, Peter Stace, Doug Summerville, Bruce Ward Stan Wilson and myself (Bruce White)

The college sold queen bees and Neville pioneered the artificial insemination of queen bees in Australia.

When Neville retired in 1987 on his 60th birthday, having spent four years as a district Apiary Officer and thirty-four years as a lecturer.

Neville had a keen interest in honey marketing and processing and for many years was the honey and wax judge at the Sydney Royal Easter show and many country shows.

Many apiary officers were given extra training I attended all the three-week long summer schools in apiculture a wonderful learning experience because in those times aspiring commercial beekeepers from all states attended, such was the reputation of the training Neville provided.

Neville over his long working career meant so much to so many beekeepers, and never did retire from his love of beekeeping and educating beekeepers Neville was deeply religious and a Baptist lay preacher.

Bruce White



Vale Keith Helyar 2/3/1943 – 11/1/2025

Keith was a brilliant man.

His contributions to agricultural science came in many subjects but primarily in phosphorus cycling and the condition known as 'soil acidity'. He will be best remembered for the latter.

Keith obtained his Dip Agric from Wagga Wagga Agricultural College in 1962

B Sc Agr- Sydney Univ 1966, M Sc Agr-Sydney Univ 1970, PhD- Univ. Calif 1973.

In 1979, NSW Agriculture hosted a workshop at Rydalmere (Sydney) on the emerging problem of 'soil acidity'. This was where Keith met a young post-

graduate in his second week of study. Seven years later we were members of a diverse team led by Keith: the "Acid Soils team". By 1988 Keith was leading the Australian Soil Acidity Program.

Keith rose to the position of Principal Research Scientist in the NSW Department of Agriculture. He spent the last 6.5 years of his career as Director of the Wagga Wagga Agricultural Institute.

Keith wrote or co-authored 60 scientific papers, 13 book chapters and 8 times was an invited keynote speaker at international conferences (USA, New Zealand, China, Brazil, South Africa). This is evidence of Keith's world class standing.

At a personal level, three points stand out for me:

1. Keith was a good mentor, especially for post graduates. He was razor sharp but gentle.
2. He could argue with anyone but not get angry or personal.
3. He inspired us with his "forward thinking"/kite flying of wild brain waves. Where on earth did Keith get his ideas? Were they divine insights or delusions? Only time will tell.

This was no ordinary man. RIP Keith Helyar – scientist and role model.

Mark Conyers



A DPI aggie in China

Beginnings in Hainan (1981–1984)

In 1981, John Ayres and I were chosen to establish a model cattle farm on Hainan Island as part of the NSW–Guangdong Sister State Relationship — the first formal agreement between a Chinese province and an Australian state, brokered by Premier Neville Wran and Xi Zhongxun, father of Xi Jinping. John became Project Director, and I was appointed Project Officer.

Few in the Department knew anything about Hainan — its geography, its history as a place of exile, or its dry tropical pastures. Before departure, we trained with Ray Jones and the CSIRO Lansdown team, Queensland DPI staff at Swan’s Lagoon, and visited cattle properties trialling stylo species such as Cook, Endeavour, Graham, Seca, and Verano. These experiences gave us a foundation for planning development in Dongfang County.

After six weeks of Mandarin training, we set off: John, his wife Roberta and four children, Delene and myself comforted by a heartily farewell with best of luck by the Department.

Arrival and Challenges

We quickly learned that in China everything happened “tomorrow afternoon” (明天下午, míngtiān xiàwǔ). Delays in Guangzhou were followed by a circuitous journey around the island to Basuo, capital of Dongfang County. Tourist stops — coconut plantations, hot springs, coffee houses, pearl farms, and beaches — contrasted sharply with the challenge ahead: developing wasteland with rainfall concentrated in a five-month wet season.

On arrival, houses were unfinished shells, and the 4,000-ha farm — scrub, native grasses, 1,200 cattle, a village, sheds, and 60 workers — looked abandoned. Yet with these resources we began building Gaopoling Model Cattle Farm. We imported equipment, scavenged materials, and improvised solutions. John organized fencing teams with technician Zhu Chin Ming, while technician Fu Nan Ping, myself, and Li minority women established 2,000 experimental plots. Forty hectares of “best-bet” pasture were sown in 1981, and cattle performance was compared in paddocks versus sheds.

A land dispute reduced the farm to 2,500 ha, but it remained large enough to demonstrate commercial viability. Our slogan became 繁殖前喂食 — “Feed before breed.”

Recognition and Expansion

By 1983, when the Ayres family departed and Steve and Julie Dunn arrived, the 40-km boundary fence was complete and 700 ha of improved tropical pastures established. By project’s end, 2,000 ha of commercial pasture grazed year-round demonstrated the value of *Stylosanthes* legumes (Verano and Graham) for livestock growth, meat quality, and land rehabilitation.

Interpreter Dung, a schoolteacher with no prior exposure to native English speakers, helped us navigate frequent misunderstandings. Despite challenges, we succeeded. In November 1983, Premier Zhao Ziyang visited Gaopoling and praised the Sino-Australian collaboration as a model for modernizing China’s red meat industry.

The success established NSW DPI’s reputation in China as “the Department that delivers.” Officers such as Martin Bellett, Ian Gardiner, Peter Mears, and Toby Fianda contributed to this reputation. We returned to Australia in June 1984, settling in Orange, where I joined the Agricultural Institute. Soon, rumours spread of a second NSW–Guangdong project at Lechang in northern Guangdong. I volunteered as director, choosing China over a directorship in Wagga Wagga.

Lechang Project (1986–1989)

In March 1986, with Development Officer Graeme Schuhkraft and George Slennett, we arrived at Lechang to face unfinished houses, unsurveyed boundaries, and hundreds of graves scattered across ridges. Despite delays, we fast-tracked infrastructure with help from Gaopoling technicians Fu and Zhu, new technicians Huang Zhikai and Kuang Shaojun, and interpreter Li.

Tackling Red Soils

The real challenge lay in the red ultisol soils: low cation exchange capacity, high acidity, and poor fertility. We devised a staged development plan:

Stage 1: Apply heavy organic matter inputs to improve nutrient retention.

Stage 2: With moderate phosphorus and potassium inputs, introduce better species such as setaria with lotononis, forage peanut, or fine-stem stylo. Lime applications expanded options for summer grasses and temperate species.

Stage 3: After years of rebuilding fertility under grazing, sustain high-producing subtropical and temperate species without excessive fertilizer. John and Ann Maree Ryan replaced the Schuhkrafts in 1988. By early 1989, the project concluded successfully. Reviews by Bob Colman and Ted Wolf praised both Lechang and Gaopoling. Minister Ian Armstrong and DG Kevin Sheridan visited in December 1989, amazed at the progress as well as enjoying our Christmas feast of roast pork, wine, complemented with product from the Parliamentary cellar.

I even produced a 20-minute film on solving China’s red soil acidity problem — a modest B-grade effort, but well received by Xu Shijian, Director General of Guangdong Bureau of Animal Production.

Legacy and Continuing Connection

By 1989, with two major projects completed, thousands of hectares of pastures established, and fat cattle thriving, I left China with deep satisfaction. With a child on the way, I returned to Orange to become a more sedentary DPI scientist.

Senior colleagues warned that overseas development projects were the “kiss of death” for research careers. Yet contrary to this, the knowledge generated from Gaopoling and Lechang was published in around 30 scientific journals, plus a host of conference papers, and reports, forming a solid foundation for future promotions.

Although my departmental responsibilities in NSW DPI kept me busy, China remained ever-present in my thoughts. After years immersed in the countryside, I could not simply leave it behind — I left China, but China never left me.

International Consultancies & projects (1990s–2013)

While my core work focused on improving livestock management systems for Australian farmers, I was increasingly sought out by international organisations — AusAID, the World Bank, World Vision, and the Swiss Development Corporation — for short-term consultancies and project reviews. In addition, I worked on an ACIAR project developing grazing system for grasslands in Gansu and Inner Mongolia led by David Kemp. These engagements helped small livestock households transition from subsistence to market-connected systems.

Impact and Value

Between the mid-1990s and my retirement in 2013, I devoted the equivalent of two years to more than 50 short-term overseas consultancies, ranging from a few days to nine weeks. In the process, I travelled more than a million air kilometres, generated \$550,000 in consultancy fees for NSW DPI funded by international agencies, and significantly enhanced the Department’s reputation as a provider of international R&D expertise.

Personally, the privilege was immense. I witnessed firsthand the transformation of more than 300,000 impoverished Chinese households, achieved through a blend of sound science, modest but secure loans, and encouragement. The true reward was not financial but human: sitting in a farmer’s home, sharing boiled mutton from a galvanised bucket, drinking raw spirits from a jerry can, and seeing his broad smile as he explained how “new technology” had lifted him from subsistence to profitability.

Recognition and Reflection

In 2008, I was deeply honoured to become the first NSW public servant to receive the China Friendship Award, recognising contributions to agriculture, education, and social and economic development. After receiving the award, I spent two weeks visiting colleagues — professors, students, officials, technicians, and farmers across north-western China — so they too could share in the recognition of what we had achieved together.

In 2015, David Kemp also received the Friendship Award. It was the first time in at least two decades that two scientists working on the same projects in China were sponsored by the same province, Gansu.

Looking back, I would not have missed any of it “for quids.” From Gaopoling’s scrubland to Gansu’s recognition, the journey was as much about people as pastures. The work demanded energy and sacrifice, but the outcomes — improved livelihoods, strengthened institutional reputation, and enduring friendships — made every kilometre travelled and every challenge faced worthwhile.

David Michalk



With my Chinese colleagues and friends in Xinjiang celebrating the Friendship Award 2008.



The Gaopoling Farm Team 1983

Newsletter by Email

There have been significant increases in the cost of printing and postage of our Newsletter. Whilst there is no intention to stop printing and mailouts it would be of great benefit to increase the number of Newsletters sent out by email. There is an added benefit as many of the photographs are in colour in the email edition.

If you wish to change to the email edition could you please email the Editor or Treasurer

jkpbowler@bigpond.com or cbshort@bigpond.com

Thanks