



# Rat traps, flathead and Mr McMullet's tractor!

By Ian M. Johnston — The Tractor Historian

## FISH?

Since the dawn of time, or so it would seem, I have been penning classic tractor articles for *The Australian Cottongrower* magazine. No doubt our "hard working" Editor (his words — not mine) could wallpaper his office from floor to ceiling with the number of classic tractor pages that have been churned out over the years, and there would possibly be enough left over to also paper his executive bathroom!

Now I can understand farmers having an interest in these clanking old tractors, but what about **fish**? Well, I mean to say, practically each issue of the magazine contains information and/or advertising relating to the pursuit of these slippery, elusive, smelly things called fish!

So, I ask myself, what is the connection between farming and fish? I acknowledge the fact that the majority of sugar growers live close to rivers and estuaries, therefore would not have too far to travel to dangle a line. After all, these plantation guys enjoy a blissfully halcyon lifestyle with plenty of idle time. (Only joking!).

I can accept that cotton and grain farmers, during their all too infrequent visits to



Mr McMullet's pride and joy was a 1963 Willys Super Hurricane Jeep station wagon, powered by a six cylinder engine of 115 bhp. The American Willys Jeep range was assembled at Rocklea, Queensland, by Willys Motors Australia Pty Ltd, and distributed in NSW by York Motors and in Western Australia by British Tractors and Machinery Pty Ltd.

the big wide ocean, may wish to brave the crocs and challenge the great barramundi. Certainly this would be a diversion from their normal challenges — drought, floods, locusts, encroaching hobby farmers and Greens.

Perhaps then, I have answered my question. There could in fact be a connection

between our stalwart farmers and fish.

Just for the record (and this may astonish our editor, whom I suspect is inclined to imagine that he alone is this magazine's fish guru) I too have had a brush with fish during my long and intrepid association with classic tractors.

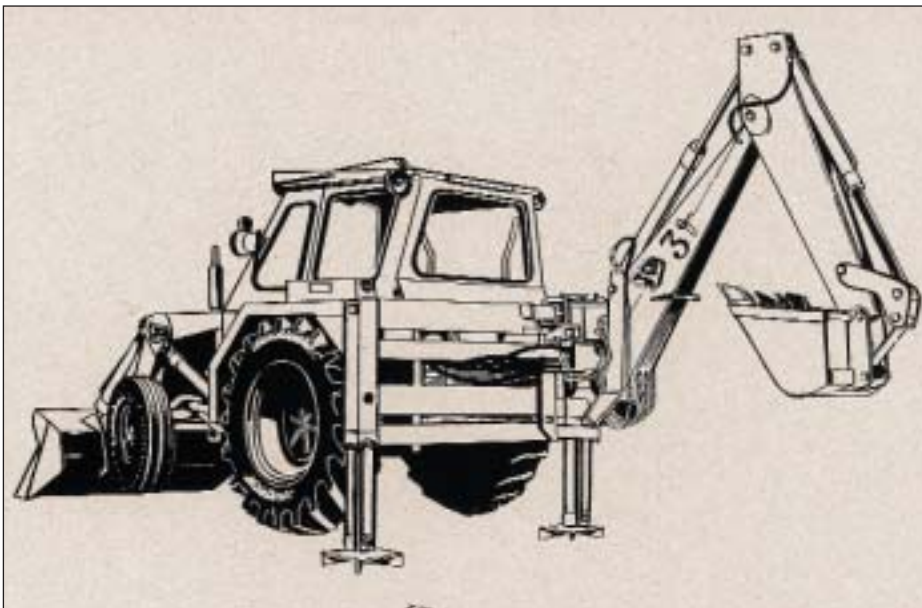
## MR McMULLET AND HIS FISH!

Way back in the days of fountain pens, kero fridges, Ford Prefects and glass milk bottles, there existed a certain Scotsman named Mr McMullet. He lived at coastal Woy Woy, just north of Sydney, and was a self employed backhoe operator. His backhoe was a wheezing worn-out Whitlock Dinkum Digger that dribbled oil over customer's drives and worse, repeatedly blew hydraulic hoses.

I have no doubt a more charitable person than I would have discovered some possible worthy attributes in Mr McMullet's character, but to me he was a cantankerous old pain in the wots-it, and folks back in Scotland would have danced in the streets when he elected to emigrate to Australia.

One fateful afternoon, in the early 1960s at the premises of Lough Equipment Pty Ltd, of Artarmon, where I was employed as Sales Manager, Mr McMullet arrived to pick up some parts for

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British JCB Excavators were introduced into Australia by Lough Equipment Pty Ltd, of Artarmon, in 1965. There were five sizes of loader/backhoes, complimented by the JCB 7 track type hydraulic excavator. Mr McMullet chose to purchase the Model 3, which was a medium weight general purpose unit.

his backhoe. Noting his presence in the workshop, all the spanner and parts guys seemed to mysteriously disappear, so it was left to me to assist the complaining Mr McMullet carry his parts out to his vehicle.

A brand spanking new gleaming Willys Super Hurricane station wagon, his pride and joy, was selfishly parked across the entrance to the workshop, effectively blocking the movement of other vehicles. He opened the rear doors and we loaded the heavy cartons.

“Be careful!” he kept insisting irritably. “I don’t want any marks on my new vehicle” he emphasised, with a distinct threat in his tone.

I noticed a large wicker basket in the rear of the station wagon full of rat traps, which seemed to be connected to each other by cords. Hoping my question would be in order, I inquired the purpose of the rat traps.

“Have ye done any fishing son?” he demanded.

“Well, er um, only occasionally” I was obliged to confess.

“Hmm. Did you ever fish for flathead?”

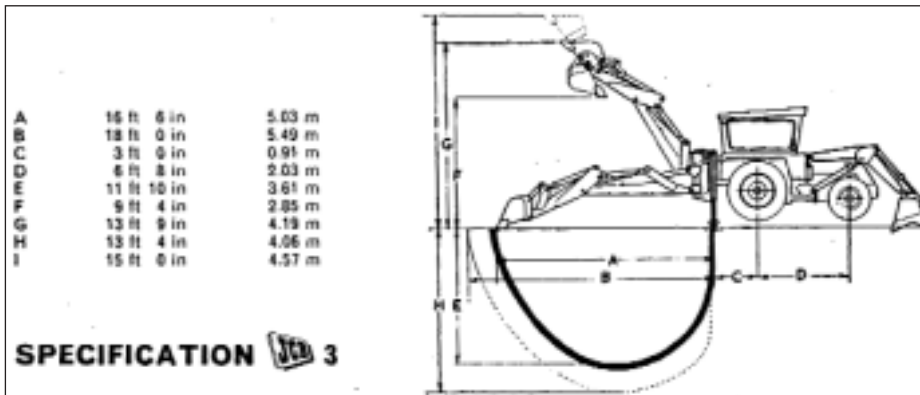
In truth I always had difficulty in identifying one fish from another and was grateful for anything that would attach itself to my hook. But I replied cautiously “Well, er um, only occasionally”.

“Well, I’m telling you son that I am the world’s most successful flathead catcher” he proclaimed triumphantly and with no small measure of egotism.

I played along and said “Gosh!” Then added “What is your secret?”.

“You’re looking at them son. All these rat traps!”

Apparently, and I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of his claim, Mr McMullet had two sets of 50 rat traps,



The tractor unit of the JCB 3 was a modified Scottish built Nuffield farm tractor, powered by three cylinder 44 hp 172.5 cubic inch diesel engine. The skid units were transported to the JCB factory at Uttoxeter, Staffordshire, for the mounting of the loader, backhoe and cabin. The three cylinder engine was in fact grossly under powered for propelling a machine that weighed over four tonnes when fully ballasted. The two rear wheel disc brakes were dangerously inadequate for both site and road operations. The backhoe however was a fairly aggressive digger, but the 36 inch bucket, the largest in the range, was suitable for only light digging. The frontend loader was superb for this class of machine, with an abundance of bucket wrist rotation and could load into a 10 foot high-sided tip truck.

weighted at the bottom with lead flashing so that they would settle right side up, when lowered into the water. Each individual rat trap was spaced a couple of metres apart and joined by a long length of cord with an orange float at either end.

The traps would be set (no bait required) and then let settle on the sandy bottom of an estuary during an ebb tide. According to Mr McMullet the flathead, being voracious bottom feeders, would inquiringly nose the trap and — bang!

Remarkable though it may be, the claim must have been true, for I was to discover later that Mr McMullet kept everyone in his street supplied with flathead — providing they were Presbyterians.

### MR MCMULLET AND HIS TRACTOR

A few months after the rat trap episode and following weeks of nerve shattering negotiations, Mr McMullet purchased from us a new JCB loader backhoe. He arranged for a low loader to pick up his purchase at Artarmon and deliver it to his yard at Woy Woy.

A few hours following the departure of Mr McMullet's new machine, a phone call was transferred to my desk. It was Mr McMullet. At first I thought he was choking — and then discovered he was!

I was able to diagnose, just by listening to the shouts and invective blaring through the phone, that he was in immediate risk of a serious heart attack or stroke. After about 10 minutes of this one sided communiqué I gathered that Mr McMullet had received his tractor and was less than satisfied with its paint job.

I let him accuse me of fraudulent trading, misrepresentation, dishonesty, theft, being a disgrace to the industry, a traitor to the nation who should be jailed, thrown out of Australia, reported to the Prime Minister, and “— just let me get my hands on you!”.

After an interval or around half an hour listening to Mr McMullet it occurred to me he must indeed be vexed. I managed to get in a few words and told him that the very next morning the firm would dispatch our most experienced master spray painter, complete with compressor, paint and all his gear to Woy Woy. The JCB would be rubbed back and re-painted.

Jacko was in fact employed mainly as a gardener, tending the odd flower or two and the diminutive lawn around the premises. He also served as our spray painter, but one would never have let him loose on a Rolls Royce, if you gather my drift. I impressed upon Jacko the utter impor-

## IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

**QUESTION:** The photo is of the front section of a 1919 Glasgow tractor — a fine example of Scottish engineering. Had the rear section being pictured, what unusual feature would be evidenced?

**CLUE:** Observe the front axle and wheels — although this may only serve to create a “red herring”.

**DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY:** If you are a Scottish octogenarian reared on rare malts, can produce a Highland reel on the bag pipes and have been known to wear a kilt, then ye'll hae nae bother at all.

**ANSWER:** See page 80.



tance of pacifying Mr McMullet and to be sure and do a perfect job. We all kept our fingers crossed as he headed the next morning for Woy Woy.

At 4.00pm, later that day, Mr McMullet was again on the phone and this time he was totally indecipherable! I was certain he had gone over the brink and frankly I could only gather that something drastic had gone wrong and in the centre of the problem was Jacko! The phone went into a state of near melt down before Mr McMullet thankfully slammed it down in my ear!

A short while later a highly distressed Jacko was on the phone hysterically telling me that Mr McMullet had chased him around the yard with a stock whip — and he had a wield on his backside to prove it. I recommended to Jacko that he swallow a Bex powder to ease the pain and remove himself from Woy Woy with all haste.

It seems that the JCB was parked in a shed alongside Mr McMullet's pride and joy — his Willys. Jacko, mindful of our instructions and anxious to do everything by the book, had moved the station wagon to outside the shed, away from his paint activities. He had then rubbed-back the errant paint job on the backhoe prior to applying a shining new coat of gleaming Highway Yellow enamel.

But Jacko apparently did not have an understanding of the law of physics, as it applies to thermal currents. He was obviously unaware of the ability of spray paint to drift!

When, later that afternoon, Mr McMullet arrived back at the shed to inspect the new paint job, he had first to walk past the Willys parked outside. When

he had left in the morning, his sparkling Willys had been coloured an attractive cream and tan. On his return, one complete side of the Willys was coloured a bright Highway Yellow!

Jacko refused point blank to ever visit Woy Woy again, and I suddenly found that I had some urgent tender business to discuss with the Walgett Shire Council, some 500 miles distant, which required I depart Artarmon immediately.

**Editor's Note:** Portions of this epistle relating to Mr McMullet are authorised excerpts from Ian's latest book which he is currently writing. 🍷