

# The mail order 'money back guarantee' tractor

By Ian M. Johnston



**D**uring the 1930s and 1940s, purchasing from a mail order catalogue was a way of life for country folk living some distance from major commercial centres. The practice was common in Australia, Canada, the US and the more remote regions of the British Isles.

The catalogues were voluminous, glossy, with hundreds of illustrations offering a vast range of products. Any item that could be found in a well stocked city department store would be included within the catalogue pages.

## SEARS ROEBUCK

The most renowned and comprehensive of all mail order catalogues were those sent out to homesteaders in the US by Sears, Roebuck & Co. The few remaining of these bulky catalogues are now considered collector's items and constitute a concise historical record of merchandise of days long gone.

The range of products offered by Sears Roebuck was staggering. A pin to an anchor or a cotton reel to a wedding dress is not an exaggeration. Even two-storey homesteads could be ordered off the catalogue. They were delivered to the nearest rail head and only had to be 'nailed together'. Indeed, the company's providers were often obliged to work around the



**A 1938 Graham Bradley. This tractor was a volume seller in the Mid West of the US despite the fact that there were no local dealers. The tractor could only be purchased on a Sears Roebuck mail order. (Photo IMJ)**

clock in order to maintain the Sears Roebuck supply chain.

The company also did a brisk trade in every conceivable type of farm gadgetry and machinery. As a consequence, the mail order firm created its own brand of

farm implements to which they gave the brand name 'David Bradley'. (The reason for selecting this name has been lost in the mists of time).

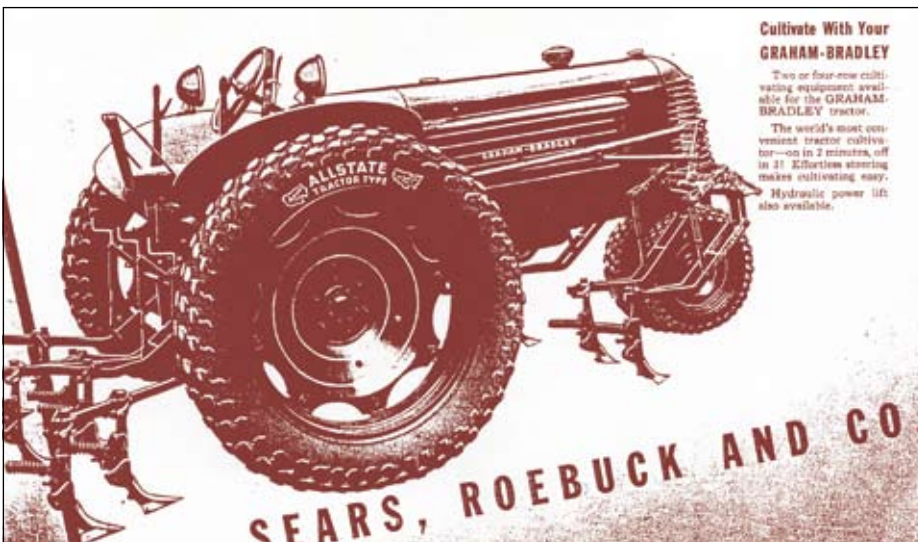
In the mid 1930s, encouraged by the volume of orders pouring in for David Bradley hay and tillage equipment, Sears Roebuck recruited the expertise of the Graham Paige Motor Co. of Detroit and put together a team of young, visionary design engineers.

Their brief was to create a modern state-of-the-art tractor. Graham Paige was contracted to produce the tractor, equipped with its own design six cylinder side valve 199 cu. inch engine. The tractor was named the 'Graham Bradley'.

## THE MAIL ORDER TRACTOR

The Graham Bradley tractor was released to farmers through the Sears Roebuck catalogue in 1937. Its introduction confounded the established traditional tractor manufacturers. Here was a mail order firm in association with a vehicle manufacturer, who in two years could design and have in production a tractor that was broadly equal to the best the others could

...52▷



**This 1938 advertisement shows the Graham Bradley fitted with a front and rear cultivator. Both attachments could be fitted or removed in three minutes. Note the tractor was equipped with an upholstered sprung seat at a time when most tractors were still fitted with 'hay rake' type steel seats. (IMJ archives)**



Vern Anderson of Lincoln, Nebraska is the owner of this well presented example of a 1938 Graham Bradley. The tractor is equipped with narrow rowcrop rear tyres. (Photo IMJ)



With the side panels removed, easy access is provided for servicing the Graham Page six cylinder side valve engine. (Photo IMJ)

### <51...CLASSIC TRACTORS

offer after years of tractor manufacturing experience!

There was no doubt the Graham Bradley was a splendid tractor brimming with desirable features.

Whilst the efficiency of a tractor should not be judged by its appearance, the mail order tractor was a superbly styled machine. Certainly 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder', but few would disagree that the appearance of the Graham Bradley eclipsed the styling being offered by Oliver, Massey Harris, Case, etc. But its beauty was not just skin deep.

The six cylinder engine was governed to a relaxed 1400 rpm and produced 32 brake hp, which was sufficient to easily handle two x 16 inch or three x 12 inch mouldboard ploughs. The second gear speed of 4.4 mph translated into 15

acres of ploughing in an eight-hour day. This may seem insignificant compared to the cultivation that can be achieved with broadacre equipment pulled behind modern high horsepower tractors. It should be remembered, however, that the figure of 15 acres related to a mouldboard plough cutting a mere three feet swath on each pass, but to a depth of 16 inches.

The Graham Bradley had four forward gears, including a transport speed of 22 mph. Only a light clutch pedal pressure was required to operate the single-plate semi centrifugal Velvet-grip clutch. Drum brakes could be used individually for turning or jointly for roadwork.

A centre PTO shaft, swinging drawbar, lighting equipment and comprehensive instrumentation were all standard equipment. The side mounted belt pulley was driven from the rear of the gearbox and had four forward and one reverse speeds.

This was a clever initiative which could result in considerable fuel savings by simply adjusting the engine rpm and pulley gearing to suit individual applications.

The overall impression of driving a Graham Bradley was one of silky smoothness. Everything seemed to happen without fuss. All the controls were light to the touch, including the steering, which was of a design used by some earlier tractors, including the Wallis Bear. It featured a drag link attached to a roller chain wrapped around a circular grooved casting fixed to the front axle by a vertical spindle.

### MARKETING STRATEGIES

Today's agriculturalists might find it incomprehensible that farmers of the 1930s would even contemplate purchasing a tractor through a mail order firm. However it should be remembered that back in the 1930s, many of the farms on the North

...54▷

## Guaranteed - BY SEARS

The GRAHAM-BRADLEY had to make good - had to outshine every other tractor of its size in power and economy - before Sears would offer it to the American farmer; before they would endorse it with the famous Sears money-back guarantee, the fairest guarantee ever written to cover a farm tractor.

The GRAHAM-BRADLEY exceeds our greatest expectations and is now ready for the American farmer. Sears announce this great new addition to their farm machinery line with pride and confidence!

The above advertisement appeared in farming periodicals in 1938. The money back guarantee was absolutely unique to the Graham Bradley. It seems that no other tractor manufacturer, anywhere in the world, had such confidence in their product. (IMJ archives)

## IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR

QUESTION: Can you identify this lightweight crawler? (Manufacturer and model please).

CLUE: Think of one of Australia's great farm machinery pioneers.

DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY: Trickier than you might think.

ANSWER: See page 64.



American prairies were remote from tractor dealers.

Such was the acceptance of Sears Roebuck as a reliable provider of quality goods, that few farmers would have harboured any hesitation in posting off a mail order accompanied by a cheque for the deposit on a new tractor.

Graham Bradley tractors sold particularly well in Iowa, Indiana and Illinois, where market centres could be many miles apart. Speeds of up to 40 mph could be achieved by overriding the governor, even when hauling a wagon. As the fee for a tractor road permit in these States was only \$8, compared to around \$60 for a truck permit, many farmers sold their conventional tractor plus their truck and ordered a high speed Graham Bradley and a wagon.

From 1938 Graham Bradley tractors were equipped with a bigger capacity engine. It was a Continental 217 cu. inch six cylinder side valve unit. While producing similar horsepower to the Graham Paige engine, it had a greater torque backup, enabling the tractor to 'hang on' longer in a specific gear when encountering a stiff patch of soil or a steep incline.

Contributing to the popularity of the Graham Bradley was the policy of Sears Roebuck in offering deals that no opposition company could match.

Upon receipt of a 10 per cent deposit, the mail order company would land a brand new tractor at the nearest railway siding, while giving the farmer five years to pay off the balance at an attractive low rate of interest. Further, a new plough and cultivator would be 'thrown in' at no extra cost. These were compelling reasons for a farmer to bypass the traditional tractors, particularly as the delivered price for the tractor, plough and cultivator was around the same as for a bare John Deere or Allis Chalmers of the equivalent horsepower.

Additionally a money back guarantee accompanied the purchase of each Graham Bradley. This unprecedented and generous offer exhibited a total confidence by Sears Roebuck in their tractor.

America went to war in 1941 and the priority requirement for Graham Paige was to switch to military production. This marked the end of the remarkable Graham Bradley tractor, following the production of 1596 units. The marque was not revived after the war.

Graham Bradley tractors were not marketed in Australia, but it is known that at least one example was privately imported.

## Plans to double water efficiencies

The Australian cotton industry has announced plans to double its water use efficiency in the next 10 years, through investments in research and further changes to on-farm practices.

According to Cotton Australia CEO Adam Kay, Australia's cotton growers are already three times more efficient than the global average, but with a changing climate and continuing drought, getting the most out of every drop of water is the industry's greatest challenge.

"With cuts to allocations and higher prices for water, cotton growers have been ahead of the game on this issue for many years. Data shows 70 per cent have changed their irrigation practices in the past five years," Adam said.

"The industry will invest \$17 million in research and development to improve water efficiency over the next three years and the Cotton BMP Land and Water Module will provide the framework that irrigators can use to achieve further on-farm change.

"Meeting difficult challenges isn't new to the cotton industry, nor is setting ambitious targets to achieve environmental change. Fifteen years ago we set out to reduce pesticide use by 50 per cent — but through a whole of industry effort, the end result was a 80–90 per cent decrease in the past decade," Adam said.

"The application of water on cotton farms has become an exact science, with

growers careful to measure and monitor every drop to get the most out of scarce supplies," Adam said.

"The idea is to have the most efficient and practical delivery system possible. All this is done through a scientific system using moisture probes, weather stations and forecasting tools," Adam said.

"The cotton industry has long recognised reducing evaporation is a major challenge, with one study showing as much as 39 per cent can be lost from on-farm storages.

"To overcome this, cotton growers are also using techniques such as deepening dams, lining channels, watering at night, removing weeds quickly to stop them taking up soil moisture and using overhead sprinklers and drip irrigation systems.

"On some farms, these systems have improved water use efficiency by over 20 per cent, and there are new varieties of cotton being trialled showing promise of using up to 30 per cent less water than conventional varieties.

"Large scale efficiency changes are expensive, and that's also why we're preparing detailed plans for how funding under the Prime Minister's National Plan for Water Management could best be spent in cotton regions.

"To achieve our ambitious goal of doubling water use efficiency in the next 10 years, all sectors of industry will work together to find new and improved methods of cotton production," Adam said.



Cotton Australia CEO, Mr Adam Kay, pictured with some of the latest technology used to manage water.