

The Australian Cottongrower turns 40

■ By David Dowling, Editor

THE *Australian Cottongrower* celebrates its 40th birthday this year. The background to that first issue is a little clouded but the magazine entered the world in January 1980 as a quarterly publication. After a difficult early childhood, the *Cottongrower* has progressed for the past 40 years along with the industry it serves – quite a remarkable record for a single commodity publication in Australia.

In that 1979-80 season, there were 75,000 hectares of cotton sown in Australia (almost all irrigated) which produced 366,000 bales at 4.88 bales per hectare – a record yield at that stage. In some cases cotton was still picked into trailers, although module builders had made an appearance. DDT was still in widespread use with maybe some toxaphene thrown in as well.

The founding editor was Barbara Cameron and she set the standard in the first issue with a magazine full of high quality technical and marketing articles, although the overall look and feel of the publication is, not surprisingly, quite dated. Barbara wisely sought the input of a very knowledgeable industry advisory panel including Paul Kahl, John Howes, Norm Marran, Peter Harris and Alan Brimblecombe and they provided the necessary input and advice to maintain a high standard.

The first issue was 40 pages, but the magazine caught on

quickly and by the end of 1980, it had grown to 80 pages or more. By the end of 1981, it seems the ambition of the management had gone a little ahead of the available funds. A rescue mission was instigated by two well known Queensland cotton growers – Alan Brimblecombe and Mal Armstrong – who saw the value of a quality publication in the industry and they were willing to back that idea with action.

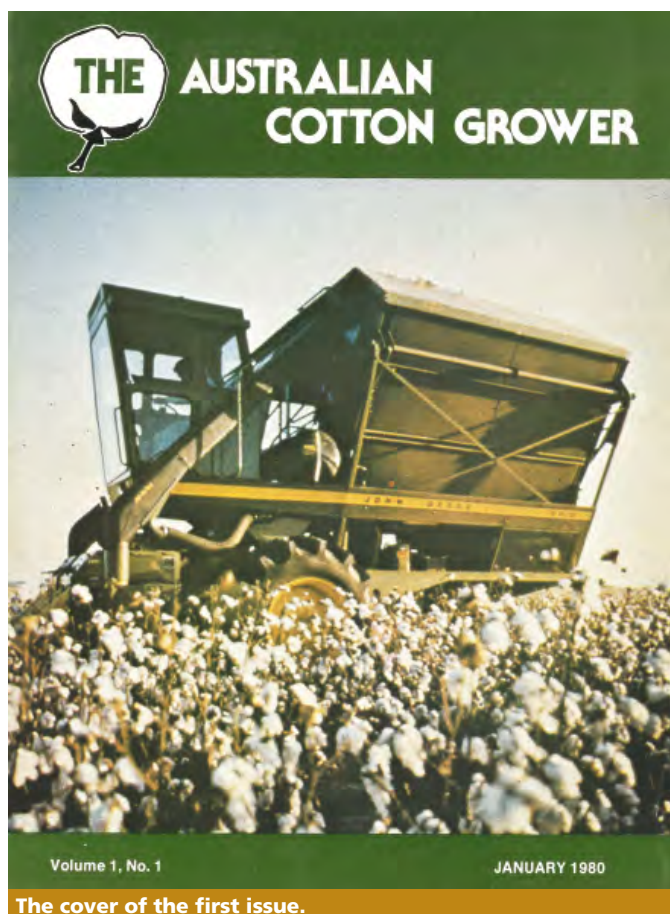
Soon, Barbara Cameron was out and Gordon Graham came in to steady the ship. Gordon and his wife Kathy did a wonderful job for the next four years to continue and improve on the start that had been made.

But Alan and Mal were farmers with no long term ambition to be magazine publishers. By the end of 1985, they had the magazine on a firm footing and they cast around for someone to take it over – which is where I came in. Along with a couple of 'silent' partners, Lloyd O'Connell and Brendan Vaughan, I published my first issue in November 1985 – with absolutely no idea of what was involved in publishing and printing a magazine. Ignorance is bliss, as they say – and there was plenty of ignorance.

A growing industry

Luckily, by then the industry had grown somewhat and remained on an upward trajectory for the next three decades. In that 1985-86 season, there were 177,000 hectares planted to cotton and, for the second year in a row, Australia produced more than a million bales of cotton. Yields had also increased markedly to 6.65 bales per hectare.

From my point of view, it was a matter of learning on the



The cover of the first issue.



Dr Norman Thomson, CSIRO, Narrabri; Mr Wong, Manager of Farm 148; the Chinese Team Leader on Farm 148; Mr Richard Williams, Director Namoi Cotton Co-Operative Ltd; and, Miss Fu, interpreter.

job, although I had the benefit of some experience in the cotton industry and a short stint as a rural journalist. But little did I envisage that I would still be editing the *Cottongrower* 35 years later. Of course our company has branched out into other publications, events and travels over those years, but *The Australian Cottongrower* has always been at the heart of the business. In many ways, we feel a responsibility to maintain the standard of what has been a remarkable publication. But we couldn't do that without the amazing support of contributors, advertisers and subscribers over the past 40 years. I know of many subscribers who have kept all (or most) issues ever published and sometimes when they retire from the industry they kindly offer them to us to keep the historical record intact.

And some of the advertisers have been just as loyal. A few of them are mentioned below, but the standout story is Cotton Growers Services (CGS) who advertised on the inside front cover of that first issue and incredibly, have advertised in every issue for the past 40 years – always on the Inside front cover apart from a few times they have consented to move elsewhere when we have had a 'special' cover planned. More on CGS in a following story, but this history is something that probably belongs in the Guinness Book of Records.

That first magazine – January 1980

With a John Deere Picker on the front cover, CGS just inside and a Bayer ad on the back cover, you could be excused for thinking that nothing much has changed over 40 years. A quick inspection shows that the production quality and layout has improved considerably, as it should. One thing we hope has remained the quality of the contributors and stories between the covers. Following are some of the stories in that first issue.

History of cotton in Australia – 1788–1900

This extract from 'Cotton in Australia' by Richard Harding kicked off a series over the following five issues by Professor W G Rimmer from the University of NSW. Of course, most people would know that cotton was introduced into Australia with the First Fleet but then, as now, it didn't flourish too well in Sydney.

The cotton plant and its growth pattern

By Rod Browne who was an Irrigation Agronomist based at Gunnedah. Rod was a great communicator and a regular contributor to the magazine in the early years.

Australian Industries Conference on cotton

This is a far cry from the modern Australian Cotton Conference. It was a regular meeting between mainly ginners (who marketed all the crop), spinners (yes, spinners) and government departments. In those days, Australian spinners used about 90,000 bales a year which was a big slice of Australian production.

Australian Cotton Foundation (ACF) report

The ACF was the forerunner of Cotton Australia, supported by the big three processors (Auscott, Namoi and Queensland) although the staff in those days consisted of one part timer in a Sydney PR firm.

Cotton varieties in the USA and Australia

By Rod Wall, the General Manager of CSD. The big news here was that Deltapine 61 was due to be released in Australia in 1980 – a variety which would dominate the market for many years. Of course, there were no Australian bred varieties.



Auscott Midkin manager Don Davis gave advice on land preparation – "Deep rip to break up the surface."

China seeks Australian cotton expertise

Author unknown, but the story chronicles the efforts of Namoi Cotton to help the development of cotton production in Xinjiang, western China with visits by Paul Kahl, Richard Williams, John Howes and Norm Thomson and the demonstration of machinery. Their efforts were certainly successful with Xinjiang now one of the biggest producers of high quality cotton in the world.

Queensland Cotton Grower of the Year Award

St George grower Bill Hill won the award with his first cotton crop which yielded just on seven bales per hectare, substantially higher than the national average.

Soybean stem borer

The topic didn't have a lot of relevance to most cotton growers, but the author was interesting – Neil Forrester from the Agricultural Research Centre at Tamworth who was soon to gain a worldwide reputation as he led the fight against pyrethroid resistance in Australia.

The importance of correct aerial spraying

By Jim Watt from Bayer Australia and a well respected figure in the field of pesticide application.

Advertisers

Apart from CGS, John Deere and Bayer, other advertisers included some names which are still around and some that are no more, including:

- Ken Wells Equipment and Redline Machinery at Wee Waa.
- Aerial applicators such as Gwydir Airspray, Keyland Aviation and Pays Spraying.
- Glencoe Distributors and Seed & Grain Sales.
- Big Bud.
- Chesterfield Machinery – who also advertised continuously for over 20 years.
- Roche-Maag and Shell Chemicals. Interestingly, the Shell ad recommends a spraying program consisting of four sprays of endosulfan and six of pyrethroid with a couple of tank mixes of monocrotophos thrown in. Luckily, modern growers don't have to make those sort of spray decisions.
- Janke Equipment.



Max McMillan (NSW Department of Ag, Moree) and Rod Browne (NSW Department of Ag, Gunnedah) organised an irrigation seminar for over 100 growers in the 'new' production area, the Gwydir Valley.

The contributors

Other names to make an appearance as contributors over the first couple of years included:

- Dave Anthony – cotton defoliation;
- Don Bacon-Hall – cottonseed;
- Peter Fahy – bacterial blight;
- Peter Twine and Geoff McIntyre – host plant resistance;
- Angus Wilson – thrips;

- Jack Warnock – dryland cotton;
- Don Davis and Bill Cowell from Auscott;
- Frank Cutting – cotton research;
- Peter Cull and Brian Hearn – irrigation;
- Norm Thomson – improved cotton varieties;
- Max McMillan – soybean harvest losses;
- Andrew von Mengerson – Namoi Cotton in China;
- Des McGarry – soils; and,
- Greg Constable – cotton physiology;

Other notables who made a contribution in the first two years (including many growers) included: Vince Mungomery, Peter Blood, John Rose, Kevin Moore, Richard Williams, John and Jim Grellman, Keith Coulton, Peter Thomas, Alan Austin, Ivan Shepherdson, Mostyn Fletcher and a host of others.

Changing technology

Just as the business of cotton growing has changed over 40 years, so has magazine publishing. These days we take it for granted that we can have instant email communication anywhere in the world, enabling stories and text to flow freely in both directions. Each photo that is used now (usually stored in the cloud) is bigger than the hard drive on the first computer used in this business – and that wasn't until the mid 1980s.

Back then, all communication was by phone (this was before faxes). Stories would arrive in the mail and would have to be typed up and made into 'galleys' which were laid out by hand. The text then had to be re-typed into a 'state of the art' typesetting machine, combined with any photos to produce film which was used to make plates for printing.

These days, it is a bit like driving a self steering tractor in an air conditioned cab – everything is digital and basically goes straight from the computer to the printing press, which could be anywhere in the world.

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The original *Cottongrower*

The history of *The Australian Cottongrower* name goes back a lot further than 40 years. A monthly publication of that name (cover price, sixpence) was first published by the British-Australian Cotton Association Ltd (BACA) in 1923. The BACA was formed to promote the cause of cotton growing in Australia – mainly to provide a more reliable source of cotton for British spinning mills at a time when the boll weevil was playing havoc with cotton supplies from the US.

And the new publication arrived at a boom time for cotton in Australia – mainly in central Queensland. In 1923, there were about 25,000 hectares of cotton grown in Queensland by, incredibly, over 11,000 growers, with another 2000 cotton farmers in NSW. There were seven gins and two oil mills under construction.

The big crop was not helped by one of the driest summers on record, but this didn't stop *The Australian Cottongrower*, which was there to boost the industry, from predicting big things for the following season:

"...we do not think we are over-optimistic in anticipating that next year will see 250,000 acres under cotton in Australia, and will witness 30,000 to 40,000 settlers successfully producing the commodity.

"Australia's whole future lies in peopling her waste spaces and developing her natural resources. She owes it not only to herself that she shall find a home for British immigrants, but she owes it also to the Empire of which she is a part.

"...it is our imperative duty to absorb those immigrants within the Empire, and more especially in this outpost of white civilisation in the Orient."

The language and the sentiments have not aged well. Nor did

the optimistic predictions become reality. Cotton continued to be an important crop in the newly developing farming country of central-southern Queensland, but it never reached the lofty heights predicted by *The Australian Cottongrower* in 1923.

But cotton was important as a 'pioneer' crop in freshly cleared scrub country, especially for young farmers with little or no capital. As one young farmer put it in the magazine in 1926:

"Any energetic man with a little experience of the land can become an independent farmer on the Upper Burnett, with a capital of less than 50 pounds (\$100)."

The \$100 was enough to buy 30 sheets of iron, a 1000 gallon water tank, tools, six months of tucker, with \$10 left over to buy cotton seed and for any unforeseen expenses.

After clearing the country and planting a crop, the farmer was eligible to borrow 80 pounds (\$160) from the Agricultural bank to get him through to harvest. With a bit of contract (hand) picking on the side, he could clear \$600 from his 50 acres of cotton. As the cotton starts to open, the idea was to scatter Rhodes grass seed on the country and start dairying as soon as the cotton was harvested.

So cotton was largely a precursor for the dairy industry and by the end of 1924, *The Australian Cottongrower* had become *The Australian Cotton Grower Farmer&Dairyman*.

Alas, the bright future predicted for cotton in 1923 did not come to pass. By September 1926, the guaranteed payment system for cotton had been terminated and the BACA stepped back from the cotton industry with its gins operating under contract to the Cotton Pool Board which controlled the industry in Queensland.

So that was the end of *The Australian Cotton Grower Farmer&Dairyman*.



Cotton plantation, Wowan, Dawson Valley.



Load of cotton, 48 cwt (2438 kgs), to Wowan.



Cotton at Cairns. Dr Thomatis' plantation of caravonica tree cotton.



Cotton plantation Queensland 1925.