

Contemplations

■ By Ian M. Johnston



THE new decade is now upon us. We enter it with anticipation, indeed assumption, that as 2020 progresses it will impart a more tranquil and favourable era, endowed with a restructuring of prosperity and comfort, as distinct from the anguish and suffering resulting from the horrors of drought and fires, inflicted mercilessly in recent times upon so many rural communities

Whenever in a contemplative mood, I tend to reflect, not upon sad times, but upon the good fortune that has brought love and laughter, plus fascinating challenges, into my thankfully enduring years. I count my blessings!

Family and friendship, of course top my list of blessings, but my association with classic tractors also rates very high.

Early days

As a youth during the latter 1940s, I grew up with these clanking contraptions. Then in the 1950s I earned my modest keep by merrily driving a diversity of them around paddocks on properties scattered throughout the land.

Possibly that accounts for me being today more than half deaf. Well let's face it, straight through exhaust pipes were common on many tractors, ear protecting mufflers were considered 'sissy' and sound proof cabs were unheard of! Plus, 14 hour shifts were routine!

Try driving a Bulldog for 14 hours, with its giant single cylinder two stoke engine blasting out, what seemed like a million decibels, from its monstrous chimney, with each shattering stroke.

Or maybe a Case 18/32, with its side mounted engine

positioned east/west across the tractor, and its stumpy straight through exhaust located immediately in front of your ear, which in sizzling hot weather could turn red hot, (er, the exhaust pipe that is).

Things changed a bit for me in the mid 1950s.

I was requested by a Narrabri share farmer, for whom I was doing some tractor driving, to call in to the Lanz Australia Pty Ltd office in Pitt Street, for some spares, while I was enjoying a few days break in Sydney. Well after all, it was raining at Narrabri and the wet black soil was not conducive to tractor work.

Incidentally – can you imagine with today's Sydney skyscraper landscape, there being a tractor works in Pitt Street?

I am not sure why, but while ordering a variety of bits and pieces at the counter I was introduced to Herr Tronser, a large pipe smoking gentleman with a deep booming German accent, who just happened to be the Managing Director. We commenced a conversation, which apparently prompted him to invite me into his executive office. While plying me with cups of dangerously strong brewed German coffee, he proceeded to interrogate me with searching questions regarding my background.

It occurred to me that a mere decade previously we had been at war with the Third Reich and he would have been considered part of the enemy!

Two hours later, in a bewildered dazed state of mind, I returned to my Indian motorcycle, which I had left parked in Pitt Street with my mate – a blue cattle dog called Suzie – sitting possessively in the side car, daring anyone to approach too close.

You see, I was no longer a casual tractor driver. I had emerged from the Pitt Street office as the newly promoted sales representative for Lanz Australia Pty Ltd, charged with the responsibility of promoting the sales of Lanz Bulldog tractors throughout NSW!



A 1949 KL Bulldog restored by the author. The Australian made KL Bulldogs were carbon copies of the German Lanz Model P Bulldogs. During WW2 of course Lanz tractors could not be imported to Australia and the Victorian firm, that had been the importing agents, commenced the manufacture of the KL. It should be noted that although similar, there were significant minute differences which rendered the Australian machines notably inferior to the German originals. (PHOTO: IMJ)



This magnificent example of a 1929 Case 18/36 was restored by Norm Mackenzie. The 4 cylinder engine was mounted east/west immediately ahead of the operator, with its open exhaust blasting heat, fumes and noise in front of his face. (PHOTO: IMJ)



This 1949 Case LA was considered one of the most powerful tractors in its day. The big four cylinder 403 cubic inch petrol/ kero fuelled engine produced a lazy 58.3 hp. Beautifully restored by Chris Broers. (PHOTO: IMJ)

And so commenced the next chapter of my association and fascination with classic tractors which, in various directions and configurations, has remained part of my life for the past 65 years, and continues so to do!

Commitment

During the 1970s, now married to Margery and with two sons to educate and support, I purchased the 4000 acre property Chelmsford, located an hour's drive west of Wee Waa. Its rich self-mulching black soil sustained my family generously during drought free years, thanks to the high yielding grain crops and Mitchell grass fattened livestock.

Please note, while modern high tech tractors on Chelmsford were the mainstay, I also put into service a 1952 Case LA plus a 1954 Lanz D1706 Bulldog (see photos). I just loved these old tractors – reeking in character, a factor singularly absent with the 'moderns'.

But in 1980, for family reasons, we were obliged to seek a change in life style. Accordingly, Chelmsford was sold to a neighbour and we purchased a 130 acre coastal farm located in an idyllic setting on the NSW mid north coast.

On the coast, while 'playing' at farming I did get involved with commercial activity surrounding modern equipment. But my thoughts always drifted back to these absurd, preposterous, bizarre, antiquated but profoundly loveable old tractors.

During my frequent journeys around the bush, I became conscious of the number of old tractors I was seeing, simply abandoned and rotting away, often parked under trees around a homestead. This saddened me, because as far as I was concerned these tractors were actually part of our heritage and undoubtedly had contributed to the development of our agricultural industry.

I decided – enough is enough! I would commence a program of 'saving' old tractors. Although ridiculously pious, I felt it was my duty. (Truth is – I was suffering from a degree of inactivity and needed to put some new enthusiasm and spice back into my life.)

So together with Margery, who shared my passion for classic tractors, we embarked on a mission of procuring rare and unusual tractors. Our commitment was to restore these machines to, as near as possible, brand new condition both mechanically and cosmetically.



The German Lanz factory at Mannheim was heavily bombed by the RAF during the final days of WW2. Production commenced again in 1953-54 and the D1706 represented a new generation of Bulldogs. Gone was the blowlamp start, in its place the entire range of new Bulldogs were started using a unique pendulum starter motor. The D1706 was the smallest of the range, but despite its single cylinder two stroke semi diesel engine producing a mere 17 hp, it had amazing torque and could outpull Ferguson, International and Fordson equivalents, and ran on an average one pint of fuel an hour. This unit was restored by the author. (PHOTO: IMJ)

Frankly we never imagined this involvement would develop into being practically never ending! But certainly, the next 20 years saw us travelling extensively in search of discarded tractor gems, transporting them back to our property, then attacking them with spanners, grinders, sometimes even crowbars and finally paint.

While engaged in all this unaccustomed and often challenging activity, to my delight there was an awakening extending throughout Australia, Europe and North America of the importance and fascination of classic tractors. Hitherto, the focus on early vehicles had been confined more or less exclusively to cars, motorcycles, locomotives, tramcars and boats. Tractors had been overlooked.

But commencing in the late 1980s, tractor clubs were springing up everywhere. The previously valueless tractors were now much sought after and prices rose steadily. Weekend tractor rallies were becoming common popular occurrences.

I had for years been writing articles for various magazines, but now I was being approached by publishing houses to write books devoted to the subject of early agriculture and in particular old tractors. I required no second bidding. At the last count I have had eight tractor books published which surprise surprise, sold around the world. To be truthful, I doubt if their sales hinged upon my writing capabilities, but rather because they were crammed with the subject matter tractor enthusiasts were craving.

So in between messing around with spanners and spray guns at home, I found myself, together with Margery, driving around Australia, North America and Europe visiting rural museums, tractor collectors and the archives of tractor firms, in pursuit of accurate and precise historic information to be shared with fellow classic tractor enthusiasts through the medium of my books.

A few years ago Margery and I took the difficult decision, with a heavy heart, to offload our tractor collection. We had reduced



One of the restored gems in the author's collection was this 40 hp 1935 Marshall 12/20. Only a total of 200 were produced. Although having only a single cylinder, it differed from Lanz tractors by being a full compression diesel. Starting was by an igniter and hand crank of the flywheel. (PHOTO: IMJ)

the number from 50 to 20, only retaining ultra rare machines. But of course these were hidden away from public view within the confines of our sheds. Accordingly, due to necessarily restricted invitations, sadly only a small number of enthusiasts ever shared the joy of gazing upon these glorious artefacts. That is apart from when I displayed a few at rallies. This situation had to be rectified.

We have a mate named John, who is president of a tractor club, of which I am a founding life member. John agreed to construct a large museum shed on his grazing property, into which he would house the collection for posterity and make it available for public inspection. So now it is John's collection, to which he has added numerous other classics.

Tailpiece

In my opinion, which is not widely shared, the interest in old tractors has unfortunately encouraged the introduction of competitive tractor pulls at tractor rallies. This involves dragging a grand old tractor out of retirement then hitching it to a type of sled, which as it is dragged along the ground automatically increases its draw bar pull load. The poor old tractor, often with tyre pressures appallingly reduced in order to gain greater grip, with counter weights added for the same reason, is flogged mercilessly in an endeavour to outpull the next injudicious competitor! The struggling tractor often ends up bucking and rearing dangerously as the apathetic operator endeavours to win the challenge.

Back in the days when these tractors were an important element on a farm, any operator treating his machine in such a manner would have been sacked on the spot. Okay, I know they are just bits of metal held together with nuts and bolts, but to a softy like me – they deserve better!

But let me not end this epistle on a cheerless note.

We should all be elated that around the world thousands of these glorious classic tractors are being preserved for posterity, ensuring that in years to come, future generations may have the opportunity to gaze in wonderment upon their magnificence.

IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

Question: Can you identify this early tractor?

Clue: It was made in Michigan.

Degree of difficulty: EXTREME. If you know the correct answer you should be entitled to a free trip to Michigan. (I said "should").

Answer: See page 72.

