

The older generation of Litchfields, Peter (centre) and Gordon (left) take over the management of the family stations.

FRESH TRACKS

The Litchfields are feeling blessed. As a new generation takes the reins, their country at the southern end of the Birdsville Track is in good shape.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS PETER MacDONALD



There is life in the desert landscape, with five good rainfall years following a decade of drought.



A majestic stallion named Mynstral leads a team of horses galloping across the gibber plains of Wilpoorinna Station, their coats glistening and bellies full from the spoils of five good rainfall years. A black swan and two broilgas have staked their claim on a sparkling dam, and newly delivered lambs are taking their first tentative steps among the wildflowers under the watchful eyes of their devoted mums. There's life in this desert landscape in South Australia's heart and, as the red dirt is gradually swallowed up by swathes of green of various shades, Gordon Litchfield can't stop smiling. "At the moment, this country is the best it has been for 130 or 140 years, before the rabbits and the sheep came through, and it's simply unbelievable," he says.

Next door on Mundowdna Station, Gordon's younger brother, Peter, is also shaking his head in amazement. "You've got to pinch yourself every morning to make sure that it's real," he grins. "We usually work on one good year every five years, with one or two extremely dry years during that period, so to have five good years in a row is just incredible."

Put simply, this land located midway between Lyndhurst and Marree, on the bottom end of the Birdsville Track, should never look this good; it's some of the lowest rainfall permanently inhabited country in the world. "There have been plenty of hard times, and plenty of people asking us what we are doing here, but we love it because we were born and bred here, and our biggest asset is our knowledge of this country," Gordon says. "On paper, it shouldn't work if you look at the average rainfall, so it takes generations of experience to really understand the land and know how to get the best out of it."

The Litchfield brothers are fourth-generation station men. Their great-grandfather on their grandmother's side, William Crombie, was the first leaseholder on Mungerannie Station, on the Birdsville Track. Grandfather Harry Crombie managed Glengyle Station in Queensland's south-west corner for Sidney

Kidman, while their own father, Lyle Litchfield, was manager on three-million-hectare Clifton Hills, at the top of the Birdsville Track, before moving his young family to Mundowdna in late 1958.

Lyle and his wife, Lois, had the opportunity to take up a share in the 160,000ha property, and eventually bought out their partners. "We thought we were in the suburbs; we'd never lived within 100 miles of a railway line before!" Lois says. In 1973, the couple went on to purchase neighbouring Wilpoorinna. "It used to be part of Mundowdna a long time ago, when the Kidmans owned it, so mum and dad got it back running as a single station over 260,000ha," Peter says.

Lyle and Lois retired to Quorn in 1992, and Lyle died from heart problems in 2003, shortly after celebrating his 80th birthday. Of the couple's five children, Peter and Gordon were the only two to remain on the station, and Peter lives in the original family home on Mundowdna with his wife, Janine, who works as a teacher in Marree. Gordon and his wife, Lyn, who recently retired from nursing, raised their three children – Adam, Sarah and Ellen – on Wilpoorinna. The homesteads are humble but functional because frippery is unfathomable when drought can come knocking at the door any day.



“There were massive droughts at the turn of last century, then there were droughts during the Depression years, but the first big one I can remember was 1967; it was the year before I left school and it was terrible,” Gordon says. “And then, whenever the country would start to come good, the rabbit plagues would come through and they would just eat everything out and allow the hot, dry dust storms to blow all of your topsoil away. Plenty of times I have been driving along and have watched a paddock cross the road in front of us, that’s how big the dust storms were.”

The Litchfields rate the introduction of the calicivirus in 1995 as the only thing better than rain. “Within days there was just one putrid, rotten smell across the whole of the Simpson Desert and they were gone,” Peter says. “Now, when rabbits get thick, it’s about three or four percent of what we had; you’ve got to be a pretty good hunter with a high-powered gun to even get a feed these days.”

Even before the most recent drought broke in 2010, the country was still in better condition than the previous decade because of the rabbit controls, but the lack of rain still took its toll, and media photos of Gordon standing

beside rotting livestock carcasses in 2005 reveal the grim depths of the 10-year struggle. Off-farm work, combined with the decision to agist the core breeding herd, effectively saved the station. “People would tell us to sell all of our stock and then buy it back again when it rains, but selling them when you get nothing for them and buying them back when they cost a lot of money and you can’t afford it isn’t going to work,” Gordon says. “With this country being so harsh in tough times, the best stock to have here are those that were born and bred here, so it’s very important to hang on to all of your breeding stock.”

Cows were scattered far and wide at various properties along the Birdsville Track, with some sent as far south as Victoria’s Western District. The family also leased neighbouring Mount Lyndhurst Station for three years, as it had been destocked. “There wasn’t a lot of spare land about, but thanks to people’s extreme generosity we were lucky to have 1000 breeders to bring home when the drought broke and everything just took off,” Gordon says.

While Gordon jokes that even the pot plants had to be agisted, the pain of watching lives and livelihoods slip away during that agonising wait for rain is still raw for the



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Litchfield mob: Gordon and Lyn (holding grandson Sydney, 3), Kate (holding Olivia, 1) and Adam, and Peter and Janine; Bronco branding is a real family affair, and the littlest calf is always reserved for Sydney to handle; all hands on deck in the bronco ramp with the local policeman, Tom Christley, helping Gordon, Peter and Adam maintain some order; the Litchfields prefer horses over motorbikes for mustering; Peter and his prized Polaris buggy dubbed the “old man’s motorbike”.

“You change and mellow as you get older, and start to realise that there is never only one way to do something.”

– Gordon Litchfield

entire Litchfield family. Their scars, however, are hidden as deep as the cracks in the once-parched dams, because they never gave up hope. “It’s our home and it’s in our blood; we’re here for a way of life – not for money – otherwise we would be working in the mines or on the roads,” Gordon says. “We’ve got a family, and we always wanted to bring up our kids and their kids the way we were brought up.”

Gordon and Lyn’s two daughters both headed to the city for their studies and Sarah, 37, now lives in a vastly different type of desert, in Saudi Arabia, with her Irish husband, Tom Palmer, and daughters Agatha, 7, and Augusta, 5. Ellen, 27, is a Clare-based vet who makes the six-hour drive home as often as possible. “I love the rugged lifestyle and helping with all the station tasks, from butchering our own meat to feeding the orphan lambs,” she says. “Our way of life on the station has become my ethos to live by; a self-sufficient outdoor lifestyle that is very community-minded.”

Getting a vet out to the station was never an option while Ellen was growing up as there was no-one qualified within a 350-kilometre radius. She says she would love to move back permanently some day to put her skills to work within the family business. “I love how different and unique our situation is, and while I have travelled to a lot of other deserts in Rajasthan, the Sahara and the UAE, our desert always feels totally different and like I belong here,” she says.

Older brother Adam, 38, was also destined to work on the land. After graduating from Longreach Pastoral College in 1996, he gained a wealth of experience working in the Kimberley and Queensland’s Channel Country while times were tough back home. A highly accomplished stockman, Adam met his wife, Kate, on the 2005 Great Australian Outback Cattle Drive. She had been working as a vet while Adam was droving, and the adventurous couple went on to fill similar behind-the-scenes roles on the set of the Baz Luhrmann movie *Australia*, starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman. The money they earned from seven months working on location in Bowen, Qld, and Wyndham, WA, enabled them to buy a 250ha farm at Booborowie, near Spalding,

SA, so that Kate could continue to work at a Gawler equine clinic. It’s good fattening country, but the couple’s long-term aim was always to return to the station.

A former Sydney girl, Kate vividly recalls the first time Adam took her home to meet the family. “I had never been north of Gawler; that was rural enough for me!” she laughs. “I didn’t realise that people still lived with diesel generators – it was earth shattering! But I was always willing to give it a go and support what Adam does, and the whole family couldn’t have been more supportive of us both.”

The arrival of their son, Sydney, in 2012, prompted serious talks about succession planning, with the young family keen to play a permanent role on the property. “Adam wanted it to be sorted rather than just assume anything, and we didn’t want to be in a position where the station couldn’t support three families,” Kate says.

“Succession planning is a really tough conversation to have, and I think most people find it that way, but I’ve been lucky that Peter and Janine have treated me like a son almost as much as Mum and Dad have,” Adam says.

Even though the family called in an independent mediator, there was never any doubt that the older generation wanted them on board. “Gordon and I have always worked well together, and we both planned to have Adam take over – that’s our succession plan,” Peter says firmly. “Even though we are only second-generation after coming here as kids, it’s pleasing to see the property stay in the family.”

“There have been times when we’ve heard people say that it’s cruel to put your kid back on the land with the way things have been in the past, and we worried about bringing the poor bugger back here to work his butt off,” Gordon adds. “But we know that history repeats itself – there have certainly been boom years, so we have always been confident that it would happen again.”

Towards the end of last year, Adam and Kate, along with Sydney and baby Olivia, spent their first night in their brand new modern transportable on Mundowdna. It is the first permanent dwelling to be added to the property in well over a century, and has brought both joy and trepidation for its occupants. “I was petrified that as soon as the house arrived it would stop raining and



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: The newly purchased Australian white dorpers are delivering their first lambs; Stuart Crombie has been the station dogger and handyman for several decades.



jinx everything, but we have been really lucky and it has kept going for the time being,” Kate says. “I’m yet to see it tough and I’m concerned about that and realise that it’s going to be a very big challenge, because drought will always be a ‘when’ rather than an ‘if.’”

Fortunately, the family will be as prepared as they possibly can be for the next big dry stretch thanks to the continued rollout of a comprehensive drought-proofing strategy. Lyn says Adam has become a leading force in the property’s transformation. “It’s exciting, especially since Adam is very proactive; he’s the most positive person, who is so dedicated to improving the properties,” she says. “He’s introduced us to rangelands rehydration and we are expanding our ecological awareness and knowledge under a program called Ecosystem Management Understanding (EMU). He has also designed cattle yards, he’s made double-decker loading ramps – he has tried to improve every little thing from gates to the whole property.”

“Peter and I have been working together for 40 years, and then Adam comes along with a lot of his ideas and that’s a little bit different, but it’s also refreshing for us,” Gordon adds. “You change and mellow as you get older, and start to realise that there is never only one way to do something.”

The station historically carried a Shorthorn-based herd

of cattle before switching to a composite breed of original Santa Gertrudis. With Adam’s encouragement, the family began experimenting with Senepol bulls about a decade ago in order to improve fertility while still maintaining drought and heat tolerance. More recently, they have been having considerable success with Murray Grey and Senegus bulls (Senepol Angus cross), with the 2500-strong organic-certified herd selected for hybrid vigour using a classic cattle management system. “It’s about looking for traits rather than specific breeds,” Adam says.

In another break with tradition, the Litchfields have severed their ties with Merinos and switched to the more resilient dorpers. “They are a composite South African breed specifically developed for arid country like ours. I don’t think the Merinos have got anywhere near the constitution or survival instinct of a dorper,” Gordon says. “For years and years we were lucky enough to be able to get enough Merinos to replace the old ewes; we sometimes had 15 percent lambing compared to 150–180 percent now, so it’s no comparison.”

There are an estimated 6000 dorpers on the property, plus a newly arrived stud of 54 Australian whites so that the Litchfields can breed their own rams. The ewes are already lambing, and as Gordon completes a daily head count it’s clear he’s been completely converted. “Have a look at them all lying there, full as ticks camping in the

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Pet sheep Dharma and purebred kelpie Smokey entertain Sydney on Wilpoorinna; Kate Litchfield and her father-in-law Gordon share a love of horses; the saddle room on Mundowdna was the ‘men’s hut’ in the Kidman days.

M U N D O W D N A

shade,” he grins. “They grow like mushrooms and breed like flies, so it won’t take long to get a good mob.”

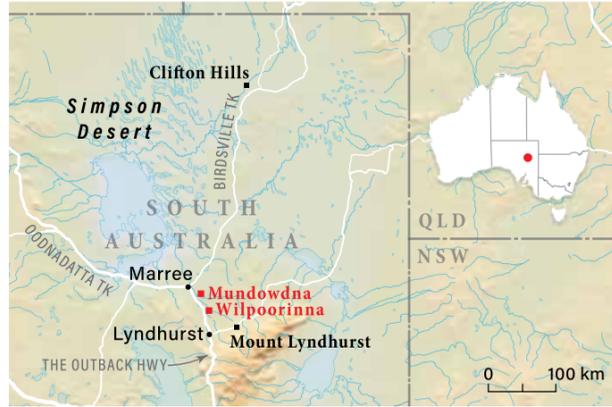
Despite 70km of dog fencing along the station’s northern boundary, dingoes and foxes still sneak in and the station’s resident dogger, Stuart Crombie, has just shot four dingoes in four days. Gordon says the dorpers’ survival instinct offers the second-best protection after a bullet, and it really sets them apart. “They’re heavy to lift and they fight like hell; they don’t chuck the towel in like a Merino if something has a go at them. It’s that big of a fight for a

dog to get the bugger down, kill him and eat him that by the time they’ve finished the rest of the flock has fled and the dingo is too buggered to worry about them.

“And the other thing is that even if the good price we’re getting goes down, it’s still wonderful to see such nice big, healthy and strong animals. They’re a pleasure to look at and to handle, and they do really well in this country.”

Fat lambs are trucked twice a year to Murray Bridge for processing and export to the United States. “If you told some of the old people that used to work this country that you were selling fat lambs twice a year they wouldn’t believe you,” Gordon laughs. The station’s cattle are also sent to Murray Bridge, and huge demand for organic beef and lamb from the US, in particular, has pushed up prices. Lyn says that organic certification has not only boosted income but has turned out to be a better fit for the landscape. “Getting certified organic made sense given the scale of land that we are working with, and we feel that growing the best quality meat with no chemicals and animal husbandry of a high standard is demonstrating our responsibility to both stock and consumer,” Lyn says.

Daughter Ellen is proud of her family’s passion for sustainable food production. “They are really innovative in their ideas and it’s not just about kilograms of beef or lamb per hectare; it’s about preserving a way of life and



East Dam, 25km east of Wilpoorinna homestead, was dug out in time for last year’s rain and was recently fenced off for regeneration.



Sydney and Olivia Litchfield: a new generation growing up on Mundowdna.

ensuring that the production systems are sustainable for the next generations,” she says. “I really admire this, as I see these goals get lost in a lot of food production areas, especially when they are no longer family-owned and become large, corporate enterprises focused solely on production not longevity.”

Kate confirms that the stock are in exceptional health. “The land can be brutally harsh, but from a vet’s perspective we can see that it works because there are lots of advantages for the animals in terms of space and nutritious feed,” she says. “There is a lot less disease, the dirt here is clean, and the sun and space kills off so many things that cause disease, so there is a lot less production loss in a good year. They also have enough time and room between management practises to be animals; it’s just as nature intended.”

Traditional, low-impact methods extend to cattle management, with horses used for mustering whenever possible. “We do use motorbikes, but they can stir up a herd, so horses help to slow things down a bit,” Adam says. “If you have to mother up a cow to a calf, it’s much easier to poke them out of the mob using a horse.”

When mustering, everything is managed around watering points, with 200km of pipeline pumping water from the Great Artesian Basin across the entire property. “The pipes are Uncle Peter’s legacy,” Adam says. “The basin is in the northern third of the property, but we now have a network of permanent water that we haven’t had in previous tough times.”

A handful of stockhorses are cooling off in one of the waterholes under the watchful eye of their custodians after a busy afternoon of bronco branding. “The business is really strong at the moment, and with each bit of rain the land responds more,” Adam says.

“We’ve gone from hanging on by the skin of our teeth to feeling very blessed, but it’s been good for us,” Lyn says. “We’ve had the sense of achievement and the confidence that you can push yourself that bit further. You don’t realise what you can do until you are challenged, and we could never have got where we are without it being a family business.”

Incredibly, the Litchfields’ confidence has reached such a peak that in April, they successfully bid on neighbouring 350,000ha Mount Lyndhurst station. Sharing 980km of boundary fence, it more than doubles their existing landholding. “We all realise that we need to expand now while times are good in order to make this sustainable and economically viable during the next dry stretch,” Adam says. Mount Lyndhurst was once a part of the massive Beltana Pastoral Company operated by the Barr Smith family, one of the original owners of Elders. Its future is in good hands, with a new pastoral empire now taking shape in the South Australian desert.

The older generation remains supremely confident that everything will work out. “We’ve had our hearts in our mouths a lot of times, but really, our whole life has been a dream and it’s been a team effort,” Gordon reflects. “It’s taken us 50 years to get to this; this is the epitome, and it seems at the moment that it’s our time.”