

STATIONS

*The Oldfields are
focused on cleaning
up their core herd
of Shortborn/Santa
Gertrudis composites.*

RIDING THE INLAND TIDE

*Cowarie Station hasn't seen a flood since 2011, and a new
generation is standing by ready to make a splash.*

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS ROBERT LANG





The chopper cuts through cobalt sky, bringing news like a carrier pigeon. Craig Oldfield leaps from the cockpit onto the sunburnt soil of Cowarie Station with the message his family has been waiting to hear for seven long years: “The floodwaters are coming!”

Higher up the Birdsville Track, the behemoth Clifton Hills Station has been inundated with water that began as a record-breaking deluge of rain over Winton in Queensland eight weeks prior. Slowly it’s snaking down the Diamantina River into Goyder Lagoon, the Warburton Creek and, eventually, Lake Eyre. It’s a sight to behold as it generously spills far beyond the channels, across the gibber plains of Sturt Stony Desert and the sandy Simpson Desert, sending a saturating lifeline to the long-suffering outback landscape. “From the air, it looks like fingers or arteries, and then when you see it on a big, flat flood plain rather than broken country, it pans right out and the front is kilometres wide, just silently creeping, creeping,” Craig says. “It’s a pretty amazing thing

to see; when that flood’s coming and you know the potential of it, it just makes you smile.”

Craig’s mother, Sharon Oldfield, flies up in a fixed-wing Piper Lance aircraft the following day to see the spectacle, and shares her eldest son’s joy. She used to tell her children that mirages were magic puddles, but this is the real deal. The magic lies with nature. “It’s like veins bringing the country to life,” she says. “In two weeks’ time, this will all be green.”

Seen from 1000 feet above, the headwaters are easy to spot, as hundreds of migratory birds swoop on startled fish riding the inland tide. Cattle stand along the edge of the channels, cautiously eyeing the bubbles that emerge as the thirsty earth gulps the milky flow. Brace yourselves, stoic beasts, for an organic native

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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Siblings Ashlee White, Christopher and Craig Oldfield; Brett White with eldest son Thomas; Craig with pilot Padraic O'Neill from Cloncurry Mustering Company; cattle yarded waiting to be trucked.

*The arrival of floodwaters from
the north is like “veins bringing
the country back to life”,
according to Sharon Oldfield.*

salad bowl bringing up to 2.5 kilograms weight gain per day is but a sniff away. Everything is going to be okay – and it’s about time.

The Oldfields have done it tougher than many. Tough breeds tough, it seems. Imagine the wives of patriarchs Claude and Jim Oldfield, who camped among the coolibahs on the banks of Kallakoopah Creek during the 1930s while their husbands began the dream. Legend has it that the nearby Mona Downs waterhole was named after their moaning, but they stuck it out in their spartan stick huts.

Six decades later, Sharon could also have easily walked away. She was 31 years old when her husband Grant hopped in his plane for a mustering run one day in February 1994 and never came home. His body was found in crumpled wreckage on the same unforgiving land that has raised five generations of Oldfields.

Sharon and their young children, Ashlee, Craig and Christopher, encased Grant’s ashes in a stone monument beneath the Birthday Tree, a sacred family place on the 5000-square-kilometre property. It’s the same spot where Grant’s father, Claude, spent his 21st birthday minding cattle, and where he, too, was laid to rest in 1987.

Six weeks after farewelling Grant, Sharon’s grief intensified when her mum, Maureen, also died suddenly. Everything was a mess, and Sharon wondered how she could possibly stay on at remote Cowarie continuing a family dynasty that felt so foreign. “The odds were certainly stacked against me,” Sharon says. “After my husband passed away, I was left here on my own with three young kids aged 6, 5, and 2. I had absolutely no idea how to run this place – I was a nurse born in Scotland, who had grown up in Sydney, and here I was with a cattle station and little kids to look after.”

Then came the drought. By July 1994, she was forced to destock all but 500 head of cattle, which were sent north to Clifton Hills on agistment. Sharon says she felt so numb that she needed to escape. “We went to Grant’s family in the Barossa Valley for six months – I couldn’t come back here,” she says. “But then I decided that we needed to come home. I don’t know that I made a conscious decision at that point to continue to run the property; I think I was paralysed and couldn’t make a decision. But after a period of time I realised, well, I’m still here, I’ve got a lot of support, and I had better learn how to make this run.”

Ashlee was old enough to feel the sadness and confusion following her father’s death. Now with two small boys of her own (Thomas, 4, and six-month-old Henry), she’s in awe of her mother’s strength. >

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“Imagine being a widow with three young kids, having also recently lost your mum; it would have been so much easier to walk away,” she says. “She’s tough and stubborn as hell and doesn’t back down, and I’m pretty proud of her.”

The year after Grant died, Sharon began the process of gaining organic certification for Cowarie. She became a foundation member of Organic Beef Enterprises (OBE Organic) along with Mary Oldfield from neighbouring Mungerannie Station, and Birdsville’s David and Nell Brook. “We were always organic farming – we don’t use any fertilisers, herbicides or weedicides, and the livestock don’t need nutritional inputs – but we needed to formalise our grazing management practices in order to reach more markets,” Sharon says.

Sharon is now an authority on holistic and environmentally sustainable management. “Mum’s been involved in organics for over 20 years, so a lot of people are now coming to her and asking her for advice,” Ashlee says. “I think it’s pretty cool that this little townie nurse from Sydney is now really respected in her own right.”

Sharon credits Birdsville Track locals with the bulk of her learning, and says Grant’s uncle Eric Oldfield offered critical direction during those freefalling early years when she was trying to find her way. “He would come up and drive around with me and tell me about the different grasses, and he’d say ‘that’s good

grass, that’s sweet grass, that’s good sweet grass,’” she says. “I was confused but so keen to learn, so I tried a different approach and asked him why the cattle were eating a certain type of grass, and then he explained that it was because there was nothing else to eat. I learned to ask the right questions.”

Eric’s detailed knowledge of the Channel Country’s complex supply chain has helped to ensure Cowarie’s survival in the driest of conditions, and his wisdom lives on in all who work the land. “Cowarie is special because of the land systems; you’ve got a very even mix of sandhill country, gibber country and channel country and they all react differently to rain and all offer very different types of feed, which can last a long time,” Eric’s great-nephew Craig explains.

“Most city people would look at the country out here and wonder how the cattle live – they look at it as a very dry, barren, unproductive place, but the amount of different feed growing is unbelievable,” adds station hand Warren Glynne. “The cattle will eat leaves off the coolabah trees, they get a taste for the saltbush, and you even get clover in the right conditions.”

Cowarie’s mantra is simple: you have to match your grazing load to your pasture availability – and when the menu runs dry, it’s time to lighten off. Average annual rainfall is a modest 120–200 millimetres, but the property rarely sees those figures and has fallen on



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Mustering the last of the agisted cattle; Craig Oldfield, Maria Madsen and Brett White ready to truck cattle; Maria and Brett examine cattle; Brett inspects the solar power system, housed in a dust and vermin-proof storage container; Sharon Oldfield views the floodwaters from the air.



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extremely hard times on numerous occasions. “It actually got that bad in 2014 that we were completely destocked and nearly had to sell the place,” Craig, now 30, says.

Everyone felt the pain. “You’re seeing poor, weak cattle and everything looking dry and horrible and, as a mother, it was so difficult watching the kids deal with it,” Sharon says. “I wondered if this was the future that I wanted for them – constantly tackling drought and also dealing with the business realities of it. But they came back to me and said they wanted to give it a crack. I think it was their energy that I admired so much, as I had nothing left.”

All three Oldfield kids embarked on work, studies and travel after completing high school in Adelaide, but one by one they returned home to their roots. Craig was first, and after several years working at Cowarie as an apprentice to then manager John Germein, he asked for the top job. “I was sitting here at 21 and our manager was 70 by then and wanted to retire,” Craig says. “I was faced with the call: do I take it on, or what? I took it on for 12 months, but I thought it was a bit big for me, so we got a manager for another 12 months, and when he moved on, I was faced, at 23, with the question: Do I try again?”

Sharon had already advertised for another manager, but John convinced Craig to take charge. “He knew my father and grandfather really well, and I was telling him

that I thought I was too young to take it on, but he said, ‘That’s not right mate – you were born here. This is your place, you know what to do,’” Craig says.

Craig promised his mother that he would give it a minimum of five years, and wouldn’t back out even when it got tough. It was an enormous learning curve. “We actually had three floods in a row in 2009, 2010 and 2011. They weren’t massive, but each one was a little bit bigger than the last and they were pretty bloody handy for the station. Unfortunately, though, we were bugged as we didn’t have the stock to run on it,” he says. “I didn’t know enough then to take my opportunity.”

Instead, the situation worsened; by the end of 2014, they were down to 600 cows. “Mum and I went to see the bank managers to tell them that we just didn’t know where we could go any more,” Craig says. “There was no more money, there was no more time, we had no cattle and we had big debts.”

In December 2014, the Oldfields were told that they had six months to sell Cowarie. By this stage, Ashlee and her husband, Brett White, had been back living on the station for a year. Christopher had also returned home full of energy, leaving Adelaide as a certified boilermaker with now-fiancé Kristy Pinjuh. “I’d been gone for too long – I missed the lifestyle and the people,” he says. >

ABOVE: Derwent Creek Waterhole at the Cowarie homestead. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Cowarie mob: Christopher Oldfield, Kristy Pinjuh, station hand ‘Wazza’ Glynn, Sharon Oldfield, Ashlee White, Brett White (holding Henry), Thomas White, Maria Madsen and Craig Oldfield; station hand Kathleen Waterman (left) and Jody Brown, of Latrobe Station, catch their breath after mustering; Craig, Maria, Christopher and Kristy cool off after cut-out at Mona Downs waterhole, where the Oldfield story began.

Mildura-born Kristy says she was overwhelmed by a sense of isolation when she arrived. “I wasn’t sure if this was for me, but the longer I am out here, the more I love it and the more I see how much it means to these guys,” she says.

Craig’s Danish partner, Maria Madsen, has now also joined the siblings permanently since finishing her nursing studies. She initially visited Cowarie as a backpacker, with dreams of becoming a cowgirl. “Sharon picked us up, and first the houses disappeared, then the trees disappeared, then the bushes disappeared, and then it was just rock, if you were lucky, and sand, and we kept asking ‘Are we there yet?’”

Sharon has a real soft spot for these girls, for that was her story once. “The three kids bring different strengths to the business and so do their partners and, as part of our succession planning, we’ve identified each other’s strengths rather than any shortcomings, which is a positive note to start on,” she says. “They’re brothers and sisters, and they’re family – warts and all. They all bounce off each other, but they all complement one another, and I want them to be friends – it’s important.”



The Oldfields credit Ashlee’s husband, Brett, with Cowarie’s high cattle-handling standards. The six-foot-four Queenslander swapped lucrative stud cattle and the intoxicating smell of lucerne for dusty station life, and has slotted in well with his wife’s family. “I met the love of my life, packed up and followed her to paradise,” he jokes.

The couples live in separate houses, but meet up to discuss the day’s work schedule over breakfast and dinner in the main homestead. Sharon remembers the guilt she felt during the 12-month period when no-one drew a wage, but everyone could see the bigger picture: the recovery from debt is almost harder than drought itself. “For every one year of drought, it takes five years of recovery – you can’t afford to buy back your breeders, so you have to breed your way back out again,” she explains.

But when the rain came in 2015, the next generation had hatched a plan. “The kids had a discussion and decided they were sidestepping me because they thought I had become a little cautious,” Sharon says. “Their plan was to bring in agistment cattle to get us out of a hole.”

After the first stock arrived at Cowarie, everyone spent the rest of the year with their hearts in their mouths for there was no further rain. It took a new-year downpour to wash away any doubts. “It kept raining and we ended up with nine different clients in on agistment; I was just going for it, and we went big,” Craig says. “I’d been waiting for 10 years and we’d nearly gone down, and I wasn’t going to let it happen again. We pushed every risk to the absolute limit – there was a 12-month period during that agistment when we had only one inch of rain – but we got them out at the right time and everyone did very well; they were all fat and we haven’t looked back.”

The Oldfields ‘sold’ \$9 million worth of stock for other people in 2016-17. The outgoing profit highlighted the land’s potential and, with growing confidence all round, they began to rebuild their own herd of Shorthorn/Santa Gertrudis composites and gradually send the agisted stock back home.



Cowarie is low-stress country, and while the feed takes a long time to run out, floods bring welcome relief.



Star trails over Cowarie, where Sharon's three children and their partners are working towards the future.

About 500 Droughtmaster cattle from Latrobe station near Longreach, Qld, were the last to go. Owners Donald and Wendy Brown can't believe the condition of their animals after spending three years at Cowarie. "This country is as dry as I've seen it in three years, and the cattle are as good as I've seen," Donald says. "When your cow herd is 1000km away, you've got to feel comfortable that the people who are looking after them feel like you do about cattle. The last three years, we've got everything right."

Cut-out was held at Mona Downs waterhole, where the Oldfield story began. It was stinking hot, and a spontaneous dunking by the brothers and their partners highlighted the youthful energy of this new generation of station overseers. "Agisting cattle here has certainly got us out of trouble and helped us to get back on our feet, but we also hope that we have been able to help other people, too – we've used our own skills to look after their herds like our own," Christopher says. "We're now a powerhouse compared to what we were, and we're not relying on a manager; it's our decision now, and it's a good feeling to know that we are going forward and succeeding, so I suppose you've just got to have a party, I guess – dip your toes in, crack a beer and be happy."

Craig wonders if many other families would be able to stick together and sweat it out for a single goal. "I've got to give it to these guys – at the end of the day, they leave the big calls to me and let me be boss, and it would be hard for them working for your

brother," Craig says. "I struggled a bit and I made a few mistakes, but now we are so far in front that we can go anywhere we want between the three of us. Three years after being told to sell the place we're back to full capacity, we're getting this flood and we are just cocked, primed and loaded, ready to go."

Sharon Oldfield knows that Cowarie is in the right hands. "We've had a few discussions along the way – Craig still calls me a handbrake, which I think I'm quite happy to be at this stage, but I have to be honest, I'm extremely proud of the way that they have all got together," she says. "They have worked incredibly hard through the process and have done a really good job of managing it, and we've come out the other side."

It's getting close to 80 years of Oldfields on Cowarie and Mona Downs, and the young guard already has centennial celebrations in its sights. They're thinking big, for the dream of this new generation is to grow the station beyond its existing boundaries – buy more country to not only future-proof the business, but accommodate an expanding brood. It's the next exciting chapter, and three born-and-bred station kids are so grateful that their mum stuck around to help them write it. "It's taken more than 20 years to recover from a devastating blow to a station family and here we are," Craig says. "We're all young and ready, we've got so many exciting ideas and skills, and we just know what we want to do."