

LONGERENONG In which I learned in an exciting environment, did well, but broke a J-Hawk

*To become a farmer of grain, sheep, and llama I enrolled at Longerenong
Ag College, near Horsham, which I thought was awesome, and I earned my diploma ere long.
To be on the land in the country was grand, I loved every minute of it.
Harvesting grain, digging spuds in the rain, and even while shovelling **** (manure).*

At the time I enrolled, Longerenong Agricultural College was run by the Department of Agriculture and offered a three-year Diploma course. Students who entered after matriculating were permitted to by-pass first year.

The College buildings were located at the centre of the property. The main building was a fairly new three-storey brick structure, built to replace the original wooden building, which burned down in 1940. Offices, a recreation room, dining hall and kitchen filled the ground floor, with about fifty student rooms, bathrooms and recreational spaces making up the two upper floors. Parallel to the main building and about fifty metres west from it was an ancient tin shed, fondly known as *The Huts*, which served as accommodation for another twenty students. This was a bit rough, and mighty cold in winter, but there was never a shortage of fuel for the large fireplace in the common room. I was initially allocated a room in the Huts which was a disappointment as I would have preferred to be in the main building. But there was a strong camaraderie in the old building, and I quickly came to appreciate that we'd formed a very special group. This love of the relatively rough accommodation did not last beyond first year, after which I was given the room of my choice from which I could observe the Melbourne to Adelaide railway line on the horizon! Diesels had been introduced into the Victorian Railways in the early 1950s and, in my teens, I was more excited by these modern locomotives than 'old-fashioned' steam. Using official blueprints, I drew on my bedroom wall a 2m long drawing of two S-class diesel electrics back-to-back, using a Rotring black ink pen.



Jim, pictured
front and centre,
during the
initiation of new
students in 1957

The rest of the campus was a series of classrooms, laboratories, a hall (used for meetings, concerts, films, and church services), and a first aid centre with a few beds, staffed by a registered nurse. Staff lived in small houses or the single men's quarters near the centre of the community. Farm buildings included offices, workshops (blacksmith, carpentry, plumbing, engineering, and motor mechanics), garages for tractors and trucks, grain storage barns and hay sheds, a fruit and vegetable sorting shed, a piggery, a semi-free range poultry complex, a butchery centre, a dairy, a shearing shed and yards, and a very large stable indicating the past reliance on many horses. At the south-eastern extremity of the farm was the irrigation area for pasture production using the flooding practice common at the time.

The staff was headed by a Principal, C. Pym Cook, supported by housemaster/father figure, the much-loved Clem Jepson, and other specialist teachers. The farm was led by the farm manager, Ian Reid, an assistant farm manager, heads of departments, and skilled and general labourers. It was a pretty busy place, and I found it exciting and invigorating. After years of school doing the bare minimum to avoid being kept down, at College I could see purpose and a light at the end of the tunnel, and at the end of first year I was fourth overall in a class

of thirty. And I remained one of the top students for the remainder of the course. There was a rumour at the end of first year that our numbers would be cut by five, and in December it was confirmed. We were sorry to see the bottom few leave but relieved we had made the cut.

As part of our education, we made two significant collections, plants, and insects. I don't remember much about the latter other than identifying them with little labels on the pins used to mount them on something (and that's vague!), but the plant collection was quite impressive. We had to collect 99 (we were forbidden to hunt down examples of the then major pest species Skeleton Weed but were permitted to make a specimen-free sheet for it). Some of the collections, which had one or more examples of the plant and much technical detail, were splendid works and highly prized. I even heard of one boy being offered quite a lot of money if he wanted to sell it. Mine was right up there, with Indian ink borders and stencilled lettering, all enclosed in a foolscap four-ring binder.

In second year, we went on a week-long tour around the state looking at features pertinent to our course. One stop was at a farm out of Tallarook, near Seymour, where the discovery had been made of a particularly good strain of subterranean clover which was named after the district. We had a couple of days in Melbourne attending the Royal Melbourne Show, a tour of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works sewage farm at Werribee (impressive, actually, as at the end our guide drank a glass of water from the final dam) and a visit to a grand mansion in the Western District on the way home.

The farm

To a lad whose idea of farm size was about 150 acres (60 ha), the College's 2,500 acres (1011 ha) seemed massive. There were several paddocks individually larger than any whole farm I'd been on before. The Wimmera is famous for its rich black soil, which at that time produced mostly cereals and sheep. As an educational establishment the college offered a wide variety of agricultural and horticultural experiences. Most of these were valuable, but not infrequently farm practices left much to be desired, so much of our learning was how NOT to do things. For example, making silage with dry grass in December rather than, say, September in the flush of spring. I suppose it was to make the records more attractive. On another level, while all the neighbouring farms were into bulk handling of grain, Longerenong still used bags. I was good at sewing them. Knot your twine, grab a corner of the bag and with one stitch and a couple of turns around the corner to make the first ear, twenty-one stitches, a couple more turns around the other corner to make the second ear followed by a pair of lock stitches to finish the job. On another level, in 1958 the College building department staff constructed a new shearing shed, but the students on carpentry duties were not permitted to do any of the work – we were simply used as labourers. What an extraordinary loss of a valuable practical learning experience this was. I prided myself in my woodworking skills and would love to have had the opportunity to demonstrate them, but apart from cutting one bit of four by two, I contributed nothing. In same shearing shed, later, I shored exactly 50 sheep. Hard work, but fun.

The orchard produced many varieties of fruit which were canned in four-gallon tins for use in the College kitchen for later use. Also, every year apricots would be sun-dried for later use. Flies thought this was heaven and left little black spots as signs of their appreciation. When George, the Orchard Manager, determined that we had done a good job, he would grant us a handful of these 'delicacies'. We thought this a dubious reward.

The veggie patch over the road was a far less pleasant place to work, with a taciturn supervisor and, for hours on end, the only jobs involved hoes and weeds.

Poultry duties were all right, especially when we hurled eggs about in the laying sheds watching with amusement the mad scramble of the hens for the contents. The bloke in charge was a sleazebag and drove a grey MG, in which he'd do dusty spins on the gravel roads in an unsuccessful attempt at self-aggrandisement. We despised him.

The stables were huge, indicating the importance of genuine horsepower in the olden days. There were still half a dozen or so horses in use for various purposes, all overseen by the Stable Manager, an ancient called Alec Bowden. He was tiny, but clearly knew how to manage his huge charges.

Another activity for which the long central aisle in the stables was useful was the making of rope. Stretching many strands of baling twine between a hook at one end and a hand-operated triple hook device at the other which, when rotated, twisted each third of the strands together to form the rope. There was a three-slotted hand-held device which was used to determine the tightness of the finished product, which was of high quality. Splendid fun for we lads.

If you were rostered on for irrigation duties your first task was to hitch a horse to a small cart and drive the mile or so to the irrigation area. Once, when returning to the farm, the horse bolted. I was driving and none of the students had any idea of what to do, and nothing I tried had any effect, so we just hung on and hoped for the best. On another occasion I decided to ride a draught horse bareback, and I'm sure the horse knew it was carrying a load, for it chose to deliberately walk under a low-lying branch causing me to demount swiftly.

Painting was one of the trades to which we were exposed. We mixed our own using raw white lead and commercial dyes. Stir, stir, and stir again. Once when we went to one of the staff houses and the lady wasn't quite sure we had the shade right. So we took the pot back to the paint shop, put it aside, had a cup of tea, then picked it up again and went back to the job. This time the colour was just right!

The College was all but self-sufficient in most things. We grew fruit and vegetables, killed steers, sheep, pigs, and poultry, and produced eggs, milk, and cream. We didn't grind flour or spin wool. Most maintenance was done in-house with motor mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, and painters providing services and instruction.

Our learning was arranged so farm and classes were alternated day and day about. Classes were run like any other school/college, while farm days ran in two four-hour sessions morning and afternoon, with an hour's lunch break in the middle. First and third years did Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and second years had the whole farm to themselves on the other days. It was a good system. We would be called to farm work by the ringing of a bell. This was Alec Bowden's proud responsibility. He would stand under the bell stand examining his fob watch and, at the appointed second, reach up for the bit of fencing wire which formed the bell pull to give it a vigorous peeling. One day some students dug a bit of a hole where Alec stood, and when he reached for the wire, it was out of reach. Naughty boys. There were other instances of mischief, the principal one being the relocation of an unpopular staff member's Austin 7 (you remember the one – so small that it was said you put it on rather than getting into it!) onto the roof of the main building. I'm not sure how they did it, but there would have been some disassembly and reassembly involved.

David Deans, the Assistant Farm Manager was a bit of a pill and thought he knew everything. We lads were not impressed. Seventeen-year-olds, of course, are infinitely wiser, so when this chap declared he needed to introduce us to the intricacies of the new model Fergie 35, we decided to do what Dad would definitely have called 'having a joke at someone else's expense'. 'Deansie' had gone through the whole rigmarole of inspection, systems, 3-point linkage operation, starting and so on, when one of us, unseen, closed the fuel cock. The inevitable happened and, in the embarrassed silence that followed the expiry of the engine, David tried everything he knew to trouble-shoot the problem. Then one of us requested permission to have a go, quietly turned the fuel back on, jumped into the driver's seat and fired 'er up. Oh, the satisfaction of having one over this unpopular man!

At half past seven each morning we would front up to the farm office to be allocated tasks for the day. These included Teams and Tractors (no teams existed, but there was a lot of work around the huge stable), carpentry, plumbing, mechanics, painting, irrigation, poultry, butchery, veggies, orchard, irrigation, and general labouring. Those allocated to the Dairy began work at five. Milk was delivered daily in cans to the college kitchen, and wide-mouthed cardboard-disc sealed bottles to staff.

Occasionally one might score a prized job of riding shotgun with tip truck driver Ken Fuckin' Haby, so nicknamed because of his constant use of the expletive. We lads kept a bit of a book on how many times he swore on each trip. The truck would go out to a quarry where Ken would fire up a front-end loader and fill the truck with gravel for use on college roads. The student had no duties whatsoever other than to open and close the gate of the quarry – oh, and keep tally. Farm Manager Ian Reid was very proud of his roadmaking skills on an ancient tractor-drawn grader operated using two large hand wheels. The roads had a camber of about 1 in 5, so drainage was

never a problem. At the time I thought that there were probably duties more befitting a farm manager of such a large, complex operation than making roads, but he saw that as his speciality.

We all enjoyed tractor driving and rather resented the employee whose job consisted of nothing *but* tractor driving. The machines were all much bigger than the Fergusons with which I was familiar, and had all been donated by the International Harvester Company. Most were dual fuel; they were started on petrol, then when the engine had warmed up, they were switched to kerosene. There was one which had the delightful ability to blow smoke rings. If you suddenly throttled back, it would cough out from its vertical exhaust dozens of thin corrugated annular spinning rings. Great! At one extremity of the college was a tip, probably previously a small quarry. It was always a favourite destination because you were far enough away from the powers that be to slip your tractor into top or 'road' gear and thunder along at over 30 km/hr until within earshot of the farm centre.

One day I was operating a new contraption called a J-Hawk. This was a two-wheeled tined device mounted on a ball on the front of a tractor, and it was pushed under windrows of raked hay then elevated onto a stack or truck or trailer. By pulling a rope the load could be released. I was operating it when the tines caught in the ground and the main wooden beam supporting the tines was smashed. I spent the whole weekend alone in the carpentry shop effecting repairs. I was surprised and proud to have been given this responsibility, particularly in light of the reluctance of the carpentry staff to allow students to do other significant woodwork.

The light fantastic

There were occasional dances in the dining room, for which a busload of girls from Horsham would be brought out. I was never keen to attend, and neither was my best friend Colin Porter, but he usually urged me to go down midway through the evening, if only for the supper!

Assemblies

We had assemblies twice a week. On Monday evening Pym Cook had his principal's gathering, which we hated. In retrospect I realised it was the worst possible night of the week, and we did forbidden things like leaning back and rocking on the tubular steel s-shaped chairs. His polite requests that we cease were openly ignored. He was a good, well-meaning man - but weak.

In contrast, Clem Jepson, our beloved father-figure, housemaster, and English teacher, wisely held his assembly on Friday evening. There would be normal housekeeping matters, and then he would read for ten minutes or so from some work he believed would be good for our characters. The only one I can recall was *Letters From a Self-Made Merchant to His Son*, full of wise advice from a Chicago meat-packer being passed on to the next generation. I fear we didn't always enjoy these homilies, but such was our respect for the man we always listened quietly. And then he would screen a feature film. He was an elderly man, but he seemed to whip up the ladder to the projection box with ease.

Clem (no-one would even THINK of using his first name) also offered three other extra-curricular activities which appealed to different groupings. One was a choir which sang old-time light standards, and the second was a classical music appreciation half hour in his home. I was in both of these activities and enjoyed them greatly. And there was the Public Speaking Association which ran debates and provided opportunities for oratory. In third year, I won the annual competition against five others with a speech called 'Operation Phoenix', outlining the Victorian railways' post-war modernisation program.

Sport

In those days students stayed in College full time. We had a student-dug swimming pool, very popular in summer, a billiards room which saw constant use, and there were sporting opportunities such as cricket, tennis and footy. We played in local competitions, and each year fielded teams in the annual Inter-collegiate extravaganza against other agricultural colleges such as Dookie, Hawkesbury, and Roseworthy. One year they were held at Longerenong, and we constructed about eight new tennis courts which proved very useful following the sports, as they were excellent places to augment one's insect collections by simply switching on the lights and waiting for the drop-outs.

A few kilometres from the College and situated on the Henty Highway and the Melbourne to Adelaide railway line, the tiny settlement of Dooen boasted among other things a golf course, which I was happy to frequent. It

was pretty rough, in sand dune country beside the usually dry watercourse of the Yarriambiack Creek. Fairways were tufty and predominantly cape weed, and there were sand scrapes instead of greens. Maintenance was the occasional working bee, and we paid no fees. But it was good for a bit of hit and giggle, and I have enjoyed the game on and off into old age.

There was an annual handicap bike race for a mile up the main drive. I entered once and, with a single-speed highly geared bike lent to me by the orchard manager, and a front marking of 150 yards, led the field for the entire race until the last few yards when I was pipped at the post.

Every now and then groups of students would be taken out of the College for whatever purpose. We didn't have the luxury of a bus in those days but rode in a canvas-covered steel canopy which lived in the roof space near the farm manager's office. This was lowered onto the tray of the Bedford truck as required, and we'd all climb in and have a right royal time making a lot of noise to wherever we were going.

The academic year ended in mid-December, but the College year officially concluded at the end of the summer grain harvest for which the third years provided labour. 'Stripping' tended to begin within a few days either side of Christmas and run through for three or four weeks. While almost all farms around were bulk handling their grains, Longerenong persisted with bags. Admittedly one of the functions of the grains program at the College was to bulk up new varieties of seed, and bags were the preferred containers when using drills to plant the crops. But no bulk! In 1960. What a lost training opportunity.

Harvesting was fun, with lots of hot hard work, but no classes. It was like we were at last being real farmers!

Holiday jobs

Many students took holiday jobs in the vacations, and I was no exception. Over two summers I, with a couple of friends, picked pears in Shepparton East. We were lucky in that the orchardist was a fine fellow, and we not only camped in the farmhouse, but were fascinated by his gorgeous daughter. And we were allowed to drive his V8 Fairlane.

On another occasion I was on a cereal farm during crop sowing. The farmer's sideline was breeding turkeys for the post-Christmas period – apparently there was a demand – and he had a specially trained turkey dog to usher the birds out onto the paddocks to forage on fallen grain from harvest. He was not good on general maintenance, so I imagine his header would provide plenty of feed for the turkeys. His fences were abysmal, and he used a shotgun to manage his bull. And that's no bull! Anyway, I was there in winter. He was a Lutheran and not willing to work on Sundays. But the season was getting on and sowing was urgent, so at about eleven o'clock on Sunday night we decided that God was asleep and got into it. The conditions were such that we needed two tractors, linked with a chain, to haul the drill. His ancient Hanomag tractors had seen much better days, and there was only one working headlight on the two machines. I drove the lead tractor using the light from the second to which was attached the drill. Fun and games.

Then there was a harvesting story of note, but I don't recall whether or not it was from my time as a student. I think it was over a lunchtime shift that I drove from the header with a long extension rod to the tractor steering wheel and ropes to operate the clutch and brake. It was a real Heath Robinson affair – but it worked and reduced the operating personnel to just one.

Church

As soon as I could I became a member of the Horsham Presbyterian church, then ministered by Rev Reford Corr. I was keen to move away from Anglicanism with its rituals and repetition in the services, to the more liberal Protestantism typified by the Pressies. And the rest of my family were Presbyterians, most notably, of course, Uncle John Lloyd. I enrolled in confirmation classes which were held after the Sunday evening service. Usually I managed to cadge a lift into Horsham, but one night I was unsuccessful and walked the whole eight miles, arriving just in time to be whisked back to College. They were all a bit amused at my earnest endeavour, but I knew I was certain to be offered a ride home!

The old stone church building was subject to the peculiarities of the black clay Wimmera soil, which moved according to the state of its moisture content. The bell tower, being heavier than the walls, had sunk faster than

the remainder of the building, so the whole structure had a significant lean and many cracks. So, it was demolished and cleverly rebuilt to a modern design using the existing stone. It had an elevated organ loft and choir stalls. Visiting it many years later showed they had got the footings right this time.

Post Longerenong reflection

And how did the Longerenong experience affect me? School gave me a general grounding in life, but I emerged with no goals, and no direction which, on reflection, was probably not at all unusual for a 16-year-old. By a curious set of circumstances, I had the extraordinary luck to be offered a chance of a career in a specific area in which I had had some experience, and in which I was very interested. And it excited me, thrilled me. I could put the past behind me and, knowing that I could achieve significantly better results if I but tried, I could make a fresh start and really make something of my life.

Longerenong comprised teachers and students all striving for one goal – excellence in agriculture. We lads bonded together well and formed lasting friendships of a more mature nature than those we had left behind us. There was a commonality of purpose in discovering new information and practicing new skills that would carry us into the broad world of farming and associated pursuits. I, for one, could see light at the end of the tunnel, and I wondered anew how I would make my way.

I was once a child, talking like a child, thinking like a child, reasoning like a child. Then I became a man and put the ways of childhood behind me.