

STATIONS

*Merinos grazing on
out grass on the floor
of the Jordan Valley.*

GREENER PASTURES

*Not wanting to lose traditions going back seven generations,
travel agent Andrew Jones decided to buy and revitalise his family's
sheep properties in the Jordan Valley, north of Hobart.*

STORY + PHOTOS CORMAC HANRAHAN



Across a carpet of bright green oat grass on the floor of the Jordan Valley, near the town of Brighton in southern Tasmania, a flock of pregnant Merino ewes races towards an open gate, a border collie at their heels. When the din of

thundering hooves dies away, the plaintive bleating of a solitary ewe lying helpless on the grass can be heard. Above her stands Andrew Jones – tall, broad and unsure what to do with the stricken beast. A moment later, Andrew's younger brother Richard arrives and the pair carefully lift the animal into the back of the ute.

With the ewe secured, the brothers head off to look over another flock. This lot are on a close-cropped hillside and could do with a bit of feed, but before either of them can mention it, their father, 73-year-old Phillip Jones, chugs into view behind the wheel of the tractor with a bale of lucerne.

"Gee, he loves feeding out a bale, doesn't he?" says Richard affectionately. Phil's continued contribution on land he farmed for more than 50 years is most welcome as Andrew and Richard juggle family life, new ventures and expansion plans in their mission to keep the Jones family name connected to farming in the Jordan Valley. "We're the seventh generation of Joneses farming this valley, and hopefully we can keep going," Richard says.

Running roughly north-south, the narrow, winding Jordan Valley has a flat fertile floor and stony, bush-covered hillsides. The river from which it gets its name rises at nearby Lake Tiberius and cuts a thin ribbon



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Richard Jones prunes chardonnay vines; pregnant Merinos feed on lucerne; Andrew and Richard Jones roll out a bale of lucerne.

S T A T I O N S

through the valley before spilling into the River Derwent. The Joneses’ farming story began with the arrival of Benjamin Jones on the *Britannia*, part of the Third Fleet that sailed into Port Jackson, NSW, in 1791. Facing seven years’ servitude, Benjamin was pardoned after five and married one of the few available women – a widower named Mary Fleming. He was granted land on the Hawkesbury River at Pitt Town, outside Sydney.



In 1816 the pair turned up in Van Diemen’s Land (later called Tasmania) and it wasn’t long before Benjamin was contributing to the survival of the fledgling colony, supplying 2000 pounds of meat from his farm a day’s ride north of Hobart, on the Jordan River. He named the farm Rose Hill after his former home in Pitt Town. Rose Hill was then passed down through multiple generations. “Farms got smaller as the families got bigger, so the Joneses had to keep clearing and buying land and ended up virtually owning all the ground on the Jordan River,” Phil says. This trend continued into the 1960s, and Phil recalls one morning when he was 16 and heading back to boarding school when his father announced he was thinking of buying another farm, and wanted to know if Phil was coming home to help. “I always wanted to come back, so I got to school, packed my bags and caught the mail car home the next day,” Phil says. A short time later, Phil’s older brother Henry also returned to the Jordan Valley and they entered into a family partnership running three properties – the recently acquired 380-hectare Invercarron and its 24ha house block, Spring Valley, alongside the 840ha Sydney Cottage farm on which he and Henry grew up. >



Susan and Phillip Jones with the old colonial homestead on Spring Valley.



Over the next 50 years, aside from a few cattle, canning peas and poppies, the brothers' main concern was Merino sheep, with Henry living and working Sydney Cottage, and Phil and wife Susan, a dedicated nurse, moving into a neglected colonial-era sandstone house on Spring Valley, where they raised three boys – Andrew, Damien and Richard.

At their peak, Henry and Phil were running about 5000 Merinos and had established their own stud under the Sydney Cottage name. However, consecutive dry years, falling wool prices, a devastating fire and the difficulty of supporting two households, combined with rising costs, spelt the end of farming for the Joneses as the brothers entered their sixties and decided to sell.

“Dad had had a gutful of drought and bad times and couldn't do it anymore,” Richard says. “I remember having a conversation with him in my early twenties and he said the assets were good, but there was no cashflow ... He said there was no future.”

Sydney Cottage sold and Invercarron was under offer, all within a matter of weeks. It was then that something clicked inside eldest son, Andrew.

“Growing up I didn't have a farming bone in my body and didn't contribute in any way to helping the

old man,” Andrew says. “The local golf course got a hold of me from about age 12–20, and I never gave farming a second thought.”

While Andrew was a handy golfer, making the state junior team, he was an even better salesperson and had founded a highly successful Hobart-based travel business, Andrew Jones Travel. “There I was, a young kid selling European holidays, and I'd never been further than the Gold Coast on a golf trip,” he laughs.

But after 25 years in the travel industry, Andrew distinctly recalls sitting in his parents' kitchen in 2011, realising he didn't want to see the farm go out of the family.

“I had been making pure business decisions for years,” Andrew says. “And then Dad's telling me he had an offer on Invercarron. I realised then that I didn't want to drive up here one day and think, ‘That's where we used to live’. So, my wife Karen and I bought it with our super. It was the first time I had made an emotional business decision in my life.”

“I honestly didn't know the difference between a ewe and a wether. I was really out of my depth – way out of my depth. Sometimes I still wonder if I did the right thing.”

TOP: Richard, Andrew, Henry and Phillip Jones check out some historic family photos.
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Billie and Rachael Jones with Nugget the ram and Andrew in background;
Phil and Henry's grandfather Harold Jones (back to camera) at the old sheep dip on Sydney Cottage;
Edith Jones on Richard's lap; Richard in the coolroom with Invercarron Pastoral crossbred lamb for market.



Andrew and Richard sample Invercarron pinot noir.

Andrew realised that the sale of Sydney Cottage meant the loss of crucial economies of scale. “I soon realised that you needed to run more stock,” Andrew says. “So, the first thing I did was double the dam capacity and put in an irrigation system, so we could grow the feed to grow the stock.” He added to the property mix nearby 200ha Tarella and 100ha Spring Field, and bought shares in a Roseville Park ram to rebuild the stud, trading everything together as Invercarron Pastoral. Pivot irrigators and new fencing enabled the transformation of dryland, mixed-species grass paddocks into irrigated fields of oats, turnips and lucerne for strip grazing and silage, with the aim of becoming self-sufficient in feed.

Andrew hopes to run 1500 pure Merino ewes on Invercarron and 1000 crossbred lambs on Tarella. “It’s in my blood to want to expand,” he says. “But I’m used to things happening in an instant. It’s been eight years and we’re still going.”

While progress may be slower than Andrew wants, it’s moving in the right direction, with 63 bales of wool collected on Invercarron last season – the highest that property has ever produced – and plans for a 100-bale clip once all properties are fully stocked.

Once the ewes are checked, Andrew and Richard drive to an undulating site high on the west side of the valley, where 6ha of young pinot noir, pinot gris and chardonnay vines have made their way out of protective guards and wrapped themselves around support wires between posts.

First out of the ute, with secateurs in hand, Richard is straight in among the vines, revelling in their presence. “It’s a perfect site – good soil, north-facing and always a bit of wind to keep the frosts away,” he enthuses.

After being dissuaded from farming, Richard had worked as a process technician at refineries in Western Australia and Geelong, but all the while was looking for an opportunity to come back to the farm. “I kept seeing how good grapes were doing in Tasmania, so I just said to Andrew out of the blue one day, ‘We should have a look at this, instead of gathering wethers off the back of Dixon Hill’,” he says.

Industry experts were consulted to help select the site and fruit varieties and, after putting in every post, wire and plant themselves, Invercarron Wine was born. “We were a pioneering family in the 1800s and now we’re the first to put vines in the Jordan Valley,” Richard says proudly. More than just a means to diversify, the new venture has created the welcome opportunity for Richard and his wife Rachael and their three kids to move back to the valley.

At the top of Dixon Hill, the brothers look across the valley that has been home to their family for more than 200 years. On the valley floor sheep move beneath the long arm of pivot irrigators and between pylons supporting high-voltage power cables carrying electricity from hydro generators in the nearby Derwent Valley. With no irrigation scheme for this part of the valley,

>

Richard and Andrew looking over Tarella.

farms rely on winter flow to fill dams for summer irrigation.

“In the corporate world you knew your margins, you knew when you were making a profit or not, and you knew the peaks and troughs in advance,” Andrew says. “It was all straightforward, predictable and there was daily cashflow. Coming into farming, it’s an amazing industry, but I have no control over pricing. It’s all made by third parties and overseas markets, and I get paid twice a year and have to make it last.”

Back at the old sandstone homestead, long since rejuvenated and restored by Phil and Susan, two sets of Jones brothers gather around the dining room table and examine a trove of black and white photos and family heirlooms. A hush descends as Henry reads from his grandfather’s Boer War diary. In a delicate cursive penned 120 years ago, Harold Jones tells of a time he had to guard a Boer who was to be executed. The doomed man gave Harold a red silk scarf and secured from him a promise that he would take it to the man’s family. When Henry stops reading, Phil leafs through some plastic pockets and removes that very same red silk scarf. Andrew is clearly moved at the sight of it.

“This place means more to me now than when I bought it, because I know more of the history,” he says. “I didn’t realise we went back to the Third Fleet, so to think that we are still farming the valley today is exciting.”

While there are worries and concerns, personal doubts and fears, and plans as yet unrealised, the main game has already been won, for the Jones family continues to farm in the Jordan Valley and opportunities have been created for generations to come.

“All I want is to work with my brother, for the old man to still be around, and for the kids to have a place to experience this kind of life,” Andrew says. “It’s the whole family history. I didn’t want to lose that.”



S T A T I O N S