

HISTORY ANCHORS MT BRISBANE

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23 December 2008**



IT is rare, these days, to find a property which has remained in the same family for more a century.

In the increasingly populated, sub-divided, and infrastructure-dissected Brisbane Valley, it is even rarer.

So the McConnells of Mt Brisbane, on the shores of Wivenhoe dam can rightly be proud of a long history of family management and ownership.

Mt Brisbane – so named for the nearby range honouring Sir Thomas Brisbane – was taken up in 1842, as prior to this land within a 50 mile radius of a penal settlement could not be settled. However the McConnell family can trace its history back even earlier, as David Cannon McConnell took up Cressbrook Station (outside the radius) at present-day Toogoolawah in 1841.

A Queensland Women's Historical Association plaque at the Mt Brisbane homestead, unveiled in 1966, tells how the 'license to depasture the Mt Brisbane run' was granted to two English brothers, Frederick and Francis Bigge. (They were nephews of Commissioner Edward Bigge of Linden, Northumberland, who arrived in Sydney in 1819. Bigges Camp, now Grandchester, was named in their honour.)

When the Bigge brothers returned to England in 1891, David McConnel's younger son Eric and his wife Susan of Cressbrook were employed as managers of Mt Brisbane, which by this time had grown to 254 sq km.

In 1893, the Bigges' nephew Philip Bigge came out to the property and formed a partnership with Eric. They secured a 14 year lease on 14,164ha in 1895, and when this expired the men purchased 10,117ha with the remainder subdivided for soldier settlements.

After the death of Philip Bigge in 1914, Eric McConnel bought the Mt Brisbane homestead and 4000ha, and the property has remained in the family's ownership ever since.

Today, it is run by Eric's grandson John McConnel, his wife Carli, and their five children – Rob, Susie, Don, Ian and Bruce

Over the last century, four generations of McConnels have seen many changes take place at Mt Brisbane.

In 1954 the property was divided in half between Keith McConnel (John's father) who retained Mt Brisbane, and his brother Nigel, who took the neighbouring Inverstanley.

After land resumptions for Wivenhoe dam, Carli and John were able to buy back two blocks of land, including Mt Byron in 1978 and Top Right in 1990 which were both originally part of Mt Brisbane, bringing their holdings to 4000ha.

Mt Brisbane's records recall an original herd of stud Shorthorn cattle, sheep, and "fine horses", which were marked with 'ZZ0', one of the earliest brands registered in Queensland.

John's parents made a transition to Herefords, then Carli and John trialled Santa Gertrudis cattle. They bought their first Droughtmaster bulls in 1970 and graded-up the existing herd until they could register the Mt Brisbane Droughtmaster Stud in 1985.

The McConnels now run 2000 Droughtmasters, including 100 registered animals and 450 commercial breeders, and the breed has performed well in the mix of creek flats, open forest ridges and steep timbered country which characterises Mt Brisbane.

The Mt Brisbane symbol brand – a horizontal anchor – has featured successfully in prime, led steer and stud competitions over the years.

As well as selling stud bulls off-property, the McConnells fatten steers for Swifts, while culled heifers are sent to local feedlots.

Once a four-day horse ride from Brisbane, the property is now on the fringes of the booming south-east corridor, but those looking for pieces of history at Mt Brisbane will not be disappointed.

In its heyday, Mt Brisbane featured nearly 20 buildings, including staff quarters, a store, stable, butcher, blacksmith, and three dairies (for the house, staff and a commercial dairy). Many of the hand-hewn slab outbuildings still stand and are incorporated into the day-to-day life at Mt Brisbane.

The original cedar homestead was built on river flats in 1850, but after heavy flooding in the 1860s it was rebuilt on higher ground and still forms a central part of the McConnells' sprawling gabled house.

There are pieces of history throughout Mt Brisbane - the veranda of the homestead was dedicated as a church in the 1920's and the original church bell still hangs at the front entry; a timeline of branding irons is displayed in a shed; a bullock's cart rests in a century-old hayshed; and the remnants of an old bush race track still cause a bump when driving through the paddocks.

The McConnel name has been connected with Queensland's pastoral industry (the family also owned Consuelo at Rolleston and Graystonlea at Proston); politics, and institutions such as the Royal Brisbane Children's Hospital, which was founded by John's great-great-grandmother Mary McConnel.

These days, the youngest generation of Mt Brisbane McConnells is spread far and wide. Rob is a Director of Corporate Finance with Deloitte in Sydney; Ian works with the DPI&F in South East Queensland; Susie is Agri-business manager of the Dalby branch of Suncorp; Bruce is the Agribusiness manager of NAB at Gatton and Don runs Mt Brisbane with his parents.

But on holidays or the occasional weekend off, they can all be found back at Mt Brisbane, which they proudly call home.