

STATIONS

*Mustering cows and calves on
Bald Blair Angus Stud, NSW.*

BALD AMBITION

*Despite the challenges of a brutal drought, members of the
White Family – owners of the 112-year-old Bald Blair
Angus Stud – are proud of their heritage
and confident of their future.*

STORY + PHOTOS MANDY McKEESICK

A formidable black beast stands on a ridge line overlooking undulating paddocks on Bald Blair Station, 10km east of Guyra in the New England region of New South Wales. He has a crested, muscled neck, a deep chest and broad hindquarters typical of his Angus breed and he exhibits an air of nobility, to which he is rightly entitled.

He carries in his genes more than 100 years of careful and selected breeding and the blue tag in his ear indicates his pedigree is verified and proven around the world. He is Bald Blair Proceed P243 and he belongs to one of the oldest Angus studs in Australia.

Bald Blair Angus supplies stud bulls to commercial herds across Australia's eastern seaboard and is owned and operated by Sam and Kirsty White, following a family line stretching back to Sam's great-grandfather FJ White. FJ and his brother JC bought the property in 1898 and 10 years later the stud was established by Sam's grandfather Harold. Over a century of history makes for a proud heritage, but Sam and Kirsty are determined to improve on and advance what they have inherited, despite the current challenges of a brutal drought.

The White Family has been improving business and challenging conventional thinking since FJ initially refused to buy Bald Blair. He considered the land too "rotten" to own due to the extensive swamps, which harboured the liver fluke worm, a renowned killer of cattle. However he took a chance on Bald Blair and set to draining the land, initially with horse and plough and later with tractors.

Harold then took over the helm, interrupting his stewardship to serve with distinction in World War I. He returned to Bald Blair at a time when the ultimate measure of a stud's success was in the show ring, where visual assessments determined champions. Bald Blair Angus commonly won titles at both the Sydney and Brisbane royal shows and in 1926 Bald Blair Earl the Fourth won the Supreme Championship at the Sydney show. "Then in the 1950s Harold began experimentation with recorded selection of the best performing cattle and this became a precursor to the modern organised performance testing we use today," Sam says. "He was also a great believer in pasture improvement and he gave back to the community by growing food for the war [World War II] effort." >

Stock on the move on a frosty New England morning.



S T A T I O N S

A 1961 newspaper article attests to the success under Harold's reign, describing "sleek cattle grazing in lush picturesque pasture [which] seems to capture the prosperous atmosphere of Bald Blair".

Harold had two sons and, through a succession of family partnerships and land divisions, three of his grandsons now run Angus studs in the New England area: Sam at Bald Blair, Andrew White at Eastern Plains Angus and Frank White at Tangley Angus Stud. "As a family we've managed lots of challenges, including intergenerational transfers and succession, and despite this we've grown and our business has continued to be profitable because of the cattle, our passion for the breed and good management," Sam says.

Sam, himself, has taken a circuitous road to management of Bald Blair. When he left high school he did a stint in the navy, worked in gyms in SA and completed an accounting degree, believing it was important to bring new skills back to the farm. "The gym, especially, taught me how to sell and how to listen – two traits essential in the stud business," he says. At age 30 in 1990, he returned home to the family.

Today, Sam's mother Elizabeth lives in the original Bald Blair homestead, which was built in 1911. His sister Suzie and her family live on a separate block, and Sam, Kirsty and their two children Abbott, 13, and Arthur, 9, live close to the infrastructure and animals that define their daily life. Head stockman Dan Vidler is the only full-time employee, although Jonathon Woods

can be seen operating a feed trailer several days a week.

Bald Blair encompasses over 2500ha of mainly freehold land across five properties, and it has a commercial and stud herd. An annual bull sale is held in the first week of August, and in 2019, 51 lots were sold for an average of \$5300, with a top price of \$11,000. "Our highest priced bull has been \$18,000, but conditions are tough at the moment and our clients have the opportunity to access good bulls at value," Sam says.

The tough conditions Sam talks of have arisen from the drought, which is bludgeoning most of eastern Australia and taking its toll on communities and livelihoods. It is a tough time to run a business in the bush. Bald Blair averages 850mm of rain annually. Up until November 2019 it had received just 170mm. "This is severe because of its longevity," Sam says. "It's been dry since 2014, but this year we've really been hammered. From past droughts we thought we had our process right, but this year we've had to do things differently again." Their drought policy has meant selling surplus stock, young commercial cows and some stud cows, and retaining the core breeding herd. It means daily feeding of animals and the associated stress of sourcing and financing feed. It means tightened belts, bushfires and dust storms; cessation of the embryo-transplant program and constant worry about the cows and bulls under their care.

In the cattle yards, a reduced artificial-insemination (AI) program is underway. "The cows are in good order mate, especially good order for breeding," AI technician >



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Bald Blair station in winter drought conditions; (l-r) Kirsty and Sam White, Dan Vidler and Jonathon Woods enjoy smoko; a young bull; feeding cows and calves through the drought; grain is poured into the feed mixer to combine with hay for cows and calves; semen straws for artificial insemination.

STATIONS



Peter Brown says to Sam, to which he merely replies: “Thank you.” This short exchange carries understanding and empathy beyond words.

“It can be hard for men to talk,” Sam says. “I get pissed off and angry and overwhelmed but I’ve got a good network of friends, which is important, as is exercise, so I go to the gym in town.”

While the running of Bald Blair may appear to be Sam’s world, it is a partnership with Kirsty. She is business partner, farm hand, housekeeper and bookkeeper. She feeds animals, runs a cottage on the property as a farm-stay and coordinates life for the boys at their school in Armidale. She, too, is in drought and recently found herself in trouble. “I’d burnt out with commitments,” she says of a period when her health was at risk. “I realise now I need to look after myself and start prioritising my own needs.”

Looking after herself means taking time to indulge her passion for education, and she derives support and inspiration from other women on the land and in rural communities. “Rebel Black from The Rural Woman has been an unbelievable business coach during this time,” Kirsty says. “Georgie Oakes from the Northern Tablelands Local Land Services (LLS) runs an amazing group called Ladies in Livestock with over 60 local female farmers who meet monthly on farms to share ideas and information. Plus Sam is, at the moment, doing all of our volunteer work, so that’s really freed me up to get to functions such as the Rural Women’s Gathering held recently in Walcha.”

Despite the challenges of drought, Sam and Kirsty believe these times are great teachers. “We’ve learnt to feed better and to prepare our business better,” Sam says. “If this thing [the drought] keeps going, we have a disaster scenario where we will sell off every animal and just retain an embryo bank so we can start again. We learn from our mistakes, as costly or not as they may be, and at the moment we’re using every trick we can.” They are also looking ahead. “The drought

>



(l-r) Jonathon Woods, Kirsty White, Sam White and Dan Vidler.
OPPOSITE: Sam’s mother Liz inspects an early Angus Australia stud book listing Bald Blair bulls.

STATIONS

doesn't end when it rains; there's still the pain of recovery. We've put a lot of pressure on our resource base and it takes time to build up soil moisture and to increase ground cover and plant density again. But we've got 700 Merino and first-cross ewes here and they will provide quick turnover and cashflow when the time comes."

The drought will break. Of that Sam and Kirsty are certain and this confidence is buoyed by the Angus cattle they breed. FJ White and his son Harold were founding members of Angus Australia, which in 2019 celebrated 100 years of operation. The first stud book was published in 1922 and listed nine Bald Blair females, and Bald Blair stock have featured in every book since. "Arguably, no other family has contributed more than the White family to the Angus Society and the development of the Angus breed in Australia over the past century," says Peter Parnell, CEO of Angus Australia. "Richard White [Sam's father] served as president of the society from 1967 to 1969, during which time it hosted the inaugural World Angus Forum in Sydney. The World Forum has continued every four years across various countries. Sam has continued the tradition of contribution to the society and is the current vice-president. He and Kirsty have been extremely proactive in the promotion of Angus, and have been at the forefront of the adoption of innovation and modern breeding technology in the Bald Blair herd."

Innovation and technology have been a trademark at Bald Blair since Harold began his paddock measurements and recording in the 1950s. With science came the study

of cattle genetics and the development of Estimated Breeding Values, which allowed a potential bull buyer to select on heritable traits such as low birth weight. "Now we're an early adopter of genomics, which uses the animal's DNA as another breeding evaluation tool and allows us to verify parentage," Sam says.

Innovation extends beyond the cattle to encompass land management. The Whites have worked with local organisations to plant trees and fence off waterways, to re-sow pastures and to turn rocky ridges into arable land. They are trialling automatic weighing systems in paddocks and assessing their carbon status for a potential carbon market. It is a continual learning process, with Sam and Kirsty open to ideas from all sources. "In 2019 we hosted the Northern Tablelands LLS property planning competition, where 120 school students took a critical look at our environment and operation and suggested their own improvements," Kirsty says. They have also hosted students from the University of New England, Tocal Agricultural College and Kansas State University, as well as Angus Society Youth.

"We want to make a contribution to agriculture," Sam says. "We're a supplier of food to the world and we will continue to get better at our game and grow a healthy and vibrant family farm. We're humbled by our heritage, respectful of our family and grateful for the opportunity to build on the work of previous generations. I'm very confident about the future. This is the natural environment for Angus cattle and, gee, I look forward to when this drought is over."



The station in March 2015, when it was experiencing a much better season.