

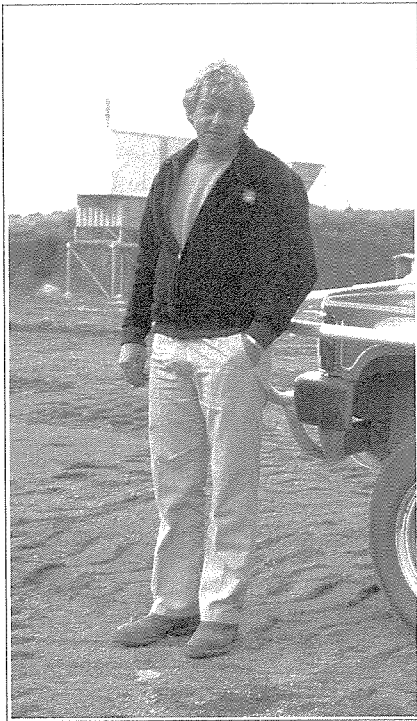
A model operation

Design, flair and elegance the features of deer unit developed around a quarry



Part of the Cowley deer farm and quarry at Bell Block

The small lake (foreground) being developed to encourage waterfowl gives an indication of the work the Cowleys put into landscaping and reinstatement



Rex Cowley

In the family business — but he's worked hard for success

by Lesley Hakkaart

THE BOTTOM line with a deer shed is whether it works for the farmer and the animals concerned — no matter what it looks like. Like cars, the main thing is to get from A to B safely and in a reasonable time.

But when you're talking design, style, flair and elegance, then Rex Cowley's deer handling facility excels. It is the Ferrari of deer sheds.

Rex Cowley's Red deer farm is in an odd location — it's set around a quarry at Bell Block, New Plymouth.

The property at the site is nearly 60 hectares. The quarry, which has been there for 28 years, was started by Rex's father Albert, known as A.J.

It's a family business. A.J. is gone now, but Mrs Cowley Senior has a lovely home overlooking the property and is involved in the business operations.

Her sons Neil, Rex, Bruce and Peter, daughter Joan and her husband Mark have nominal responsibilities for different parts of the

family business, but regularly help one another out. Rex runs the deer farm; Neil the quarry; Bruce, Joan and Mark work in the New Plymouth office of the contracting business; and Peter is establishing a Simmental stud.

They are a close and successful family, but success has not been handed to them. A.J. taught his children the value of hard work and how to make it on their own.

During his school holidays, while his mates were surfing, Rex Cowley worked for his father. He recounts toiling for hours in an attempt to lay road metal to his father's exacting standard of perfection. He failed. . . and had to rip it up and redo the job.

Like his brothers, he had to learn a trade before A.J. allowed him into the family business. He did an apprenticeship in fitting and turning, and is pleased he has "something to fall back on". The apprenticeship also consolidated the standards his father tried to instil and has given him a ▶

FARM LAYOUT & YARDS

precision engineer's approach to farming.

You can hear the engineer (and A.J.) talking when Cowley says, as he frequently does: "Do something right the first time and you don't have to do it again."

Evidence that the philosophy is put into practice is everywhere on the deer farm, but crystallised in the main handling yards and shed.

The yards and shed were once a horse corral and stables for family ponies. Cowley designed the conversion and incorporated some of the original structures. For example, part of the circular corral perimeter, hardlined with ply, now forms the final raceway into the shed. Its sweeping curve is most effective in leading the deer in.

The first shock to a stranger is that the shed is painted inside and out in a warm red-brown, with white doors. Yes, white. . . and they are clean! What is more, all the doors off the central drafting area are clearly numbered.

There's a good, practical reason for

the numbering. Cowley explains that it's useful when he has a stranger such as an agent or buyer in the shed, and is busy trying to cut up a mob. "If I say 'Open that door over there, will you?', and he opens the wrong door, then all hell breaks loose. But I can say 'Open door number 5' and there's no problem." Further evidence of careful forethought is in the piles on which most of the shed sits.

Cowley may have to move the shed some day, if the quarry operation requires that particular bit of land. No problem. It can be taken apart, wall by wall, and erected elsewhere.

The layout of the shed is straightforward. There's a large, central pen at point of entry, surrounded by smaller holding pens. Also near the entry is a special pen with straw-covered floor and lights on dimmer switches. This was the stable, and is now a cocoon-like environment for laying out the sire stags and other exceptional velvets.

From the pens, the animals take an angled route into the final run

through, or past, the scales and crush. If there's anything Cowley is less than satisfied with, it's this final run which — he says — is a bit too long.

Red deer can get toey if they have to go too far in a straight line in a shed, he reckons. Things can get right awkward if you have to start pushing them from behind.

Hence the hanging guard, fitted to an overhead monorail which runs nearly the length of the final corridor. A person can get behind the wooden guard, peer through the Ned Kelly-type eye slit, and push the deer along in reasonable safety.

The scales themselves have a side-opening entry door, hinged in the centre to form an exit door. They are coupled to a Trutest computer-compatible readout. Cowley takes the scale head home after a weighing session and feeds the information directly into his deer recording programme.

The scale head resides in a built-in desk area next to the scale. It's well-lit, and there is room for paperwork and keeping basic remedies on hand.

The crush is a big hydraulic job that lifts the animal off the ground. Operators work from platforms at the side, through sliding wooden screens.

It has been a good crush, and Cowley says he can handle 16 stags an hour through it at velveting time. But he thinks a purpose-built velveting crush would be better.

"This one is more a cradle than a crush," he says. "We've found that the angle is a bit too wide for stags, but it's fine for hinds and fawns. Stags can jump around in it and they tend to damage the velvet on the wooden screens when they do so. When we build the new crush on the velveting block, it will be designed especially to handle velveting stags and will be narrower, with curtains instead of screens."

'Purpose-built for the job' is another of Cowley's guiding principles. He has decided it would be better to handle the velveting herd in a separate facility designed for job, which is why he has recently purchased a 28 hectare former dairy farm over the road and is busy developing it just for stags. He hopes to have 100 on it by spring.

The second farm will undoubtedly be as efficient, well-planned and attractive as the main farm. It gets back to that principle of doing things right the first time, you see.



Keith Goble of Taranaki Deer Velveters with Rex Cowley's crush

Both describe it as more of a cradle than a crush: The deer are lifted hydraulically off the ground

FARM LAYOUT & YARDS



Above: Rex Cowley with a device for dealing with toey deer

The door panel, mounted on a monorail running from the final holding pen through to the crush, allows him to move deer along in safety. Note the eyehole and handbar in the door panel

Left: Rex Cowley's scales, with the rear half-door open to let the animal exit either through or past the crush

At the right is a built-in desk area providing space for the scale readout equipment and for any paperwork required

This story was supposed to be about the yards and shed, but would not be complete without something about the rest of the farm.

The farm is one of the most attractive in the country. . . all the more incredible that it has been developed around a busy quarry and has to adapt accordingly.

The fences and gates are sound — they have to be, with trucks roaring in and out around the clock. The pastures, as do all in Taranaki, sprout lush grass but many of these paddocks have been man-made from re-instated quarrying sites. There are ponds and lakes inhabited by waterfowl.

There is ample shelter — native and exotic trees, pampas and toetoe, Barberry hedges, young oaks, and camellias. The property has been landscaped with style, which makes

the quarry something of a showplace as well as providing shelter and roughage for the deer.

The herd is all Red, with good Swedish, English and Yugoslavian bloodlines. It's a breeding and velvet operation. Cowley aims to take the breeding a further stage — specialisation again! — and breed separate lines for bodyweight, velvet, and trophy heads.

In case it all makes the man sound as though he's got too much money and a mania for precision, that's just not so. The deer farm has been built up gradually during the past five years on its own profits.

Rex is a mate of noted Taranaki deer man and trophy farmer Ross Vivian. Rex Cowley bought his first deer a number of years ago on a buying trip with Vivian around New Zealand. That first mob cost him \$900, and a

couple of years later the prices "shot up". The timing was good.

"I bought enough to sell a few, then the next year I had weaners to sell. . . so it went."

He is as knowledgeable about farming practice as engineering. His hinds attain weights of between 100 to 120 kg, depending on the cross. Fawning percentages are around 95 per cent, and weaning around 92 per cent. He knows how to get good velvet, and last year won an "embarrassing" number of classes in the district's velvet competition.

In the course of a later telephone conversation, Cowley apologises in case he has talked too much about his deer, or been too dogmatic, "because it's not like that. I just love them, so the job's fun for me, and that's great isn't it?" □

The "most brilliant" of Bernard Pinney's ideas

by Trevor Walton



'A young buck in a Carrington crush.'

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BERNARD PINNEY of Dunrobin Station is reputed to have had several good ideas since he began deer farming, a fair swag of middling ones and just two or three really brilliant ones.

The most brilliant one of the lot, he says, is his swinging gate stay.

No matter which way the wind is blowing, the gate can be held in place without an extra pair of hands and without two metres of twisted No 8 wire. Then, when the deer have charged through, there's no time wasting or mucking around — the gate can be swiftly slammed shut.

Anyone who has tried to close a 4 metre by 2 metre steel-framed plywood gate in the face of a screaming nor'wester will see the benefits at a glance. □

Left and below: Every which way but loose

Bernard Pinney demonstrates his swinging gate stay: The gate can be held in place whichever way the wind's blowing

