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PASTORAL HOMES OF STRUAN.

AUSTRALIA. Narracoorte, South Australia.

The Property of Alexander Robertson, Esq. *eldest son
John Robtson*

Struan Station, the property of Mr. Alexander Robertson, is located astride the Penola-road, ten miles from the town of Narracoorte, in the southeast of South Australia, and is a freehold comprising 11,500 acres of plains and undulating country, on which are run today a flock of purebred Merino sheep, over a hundred head of cattle, and a number of thoroughbred horses.

Apart from constituting one of the largest, and at the same time most productive, pastoral holdings in South Australia in it's flush days, Struan is of outstanding interest historically, the run having been discovered and established in the year 1842 by the brothers John and William Robertson, the first named being the father of the present owner, and in after years becoming famous for the hospitality and generosity of it's Laird, who, singularly enough, was referred to frequently as "Poor Man Robertson."

The original of this holding was 43,520 acres, for which an annual rental of a fraction over \$11 per square mile was paid to the Crown, and until about the time the near-by town sprang into existence in the year 1845, the run was known as Robertson's Plains. At an early date the brothers began to extend their operations by the purchase of the adjoining Warrattenbullie Station from the late Mr. Wallace father of Mr. Donald Wallace, and when resumptions took place in 1868 the opportunity was seized to convert large arears of the Mosquito Plains country, into which Struan extended for some miles, into freehold, thus consolidating these flats with other parts of the station already made secure of tenure.

In the early seventies the partnership between the two brothers was dissolved by mutual consent, and Mr. William Robertson settled down on Wando Vale, near Casterton, Victoria, a few miles away from another brother, Mr. Duncan Robertson, who had taken over Gringegalgon Station, near Coleraine, also in the Western District of Victoria. In 1875 the late Mr. John Robertson enlarged the scope at Struan by adding to it Elderslie, one of the finest properties of the time, comprising 35,420 acres of freehold and situated on the Victorian side of the border adjoining Struan. At one period the estates owned and leased by this enterprising grazier reached a maximum of over 125,000 acres, while the stock carried, when the various runs directed from Struan were at their zenith, may be put down at 60,000 sheep, 2000 head of cattle, and 500 pedigreed thoroughbreds.

The late Mr. Robertson was just as progressive and just as zealous in his methods of sheepbreeding as the leading flockmasters of the present day, and the Struan flocks, which were bred up from the best Tasmanian blood out of the late Mr. James Gibson's Belle Vue stud, became well known for their high quality and their covering of beautiful wool. The owner went about his work with a rare skill, turning the heavily timbered land into rich pastures and generally improving the country. He always kept the sheep separate from his cattle, the latter being run in the fertile flats through which coursed the Mosquito Creek, while the blood stock had special paddocks to themselves.

In 1873 the owner began the construction of a home-stead that was destined to make a name for the property. It was the third house to be erected on the estate, the other two being built in the forties and in the sixties respectively. By the end of 1875 the new residence was

completed, and according to an old record, it cost some £10,000, while the official opening was marked on 27th January, 1876, by a house-warming at which 150 guests were entertained. Struan House is a stately mansion of over forty rooms, in which the acme of comfort and luxury of the day were incorporated. As time went on it became a celebrated half-way house to those journeying between Melbourne and Adelaide in the old coaching days. It is a bye-word amongst the old identities of the district that the owner dispensed a lavish hospitality to all classes, whilst his guests frequently included State Governors, judges, and other high officials. The effluxion of time brought an inevitable end to all these time-honoured customs of country social life, and whilst the house is still in perfect order today, its use is confined to the quiet home life of the present owner.

Many settlements were formed on parts of the old estate, which were alienated for the closer development of the district, and this gradual decrease of areas was completed with the conversion of Elderslie Station after the war into a soldiers' settlement, which brought the size of Struan down to its present acreage.

Mr. Alexander Robertson inherited the estate after his father's death, and was successful in maintaining the high reputation of the Struan sheep and wool. He further improved the property by attending to the pastures, and the splendid state of the run today is largely the result of his close study of the soil and of those outside grasses best suited to the fairly wet climate of the district. In 1927 Mr. Robertson disposed of the Warrattenbullie run, where all the shearing used to be done, and purchased, a new property, named Werringulla, adjoining Struan. It comprises 3500 acres of freehold undulating country and the total area of the two properties, 15,000 acres

is carrying at the present time an average of 14,000 Merino sheep, as well as several hundred head of cattle and a number of thoroughbred horses.

Mr. Alex. Robertson believes in small paddocks, into which Struan and the new run are closely, subdivided to advantage. These methods of concentrated grazing were not possible until the superfluous timber was cleared only sufficient of the fine old red and blue gums having been spared to provide necessary shade for the stock, and the effect is that of a beautiful park. Rabbits have been eliminated by the erection of wire netted boundaries, and the paddocks are kept clean by the use of fumigators. The property is favoured with a plentiful supply of water in sub-artesian bore and wells with up to date mills and engines. The windmills are the most favoured and are kept going night and day, The overflow is allowed to run into the paddocks, and so some green feed is provided through the year. Within three-quarters of a mile of the house there are seven mills. In addition to the inexhaustible underground supply, and an annual rainfall averaging 24 inches, the Mosquito creek winds through the greater part of the property, and, moreover, it is always running. From it's source in Victoria it flows out to the sea near the town of Kingston, and is fed from an underground river, which gushes forth near the Narracoorte Caves.

On the black flinty soil on some parts of the plains the owner has cultivated a good stand of cabbage grass, a legume not unlike lucerne in many respects, and a very succulent feed for stock in summer, whilst elsewhere the soil, after has been turned over and treated with a multi-packer, is sown with a wide range of grasses and clovers, including phalaris, rye, paspalum, strawberry and subterrean clovers.

On the low hills, where the country inclines to be sandy, the African Kikuya grass has proved a wonderful success. Top-dressing a big part in the improvement of the Struan pastures, and Mr. Robertson who must be recognised as a foremost expert in this direction, spares no expense to achieve a maximum carrying capacity.

The Merino flock is of Tasmanian origin. About 1908⁰ it was strengthened by the introduction of rams from Eli Elwah, in Riverina. This tended to maintain the size of the frames with satisfactory results, and the type new to be seen at Struan has been developed from this combination. In more recent times the owner has worked up a select stud from which to provide his own rams, and the management of the whole of the flock and stud sheep is in the hands of Mr. Begg. The owner follows the principle of classing carefully every one of the sheep, and will not allow kempy wool animals to remain in the flock. Sale sheep receive the same personal attention. In appearance the flock is typical of the fine wool type of the Western District of Victoria.

The sheep are dense on the back, have plain bodies, and a pleasing uniformity, with an even topline and good underneath, as well as a well proportioned conformation. The spinning quality of the fleece is a 64⁸s to 70's, and well known to manufacturers~~es~~ at the other side of the world, while the prices realised ~~at~~ the Melbourne sales are frequently at the top of the market, having returned as high as 29d. and 33d. per lb. The average weights usually pan out at from 9 to 11 lbs. for the wethers. and 8 lb. per head for the ewes.

Shearing takes place in October, and a new shed has been constructed at Wirringulla containing eight stands and modern equipment. Although there is a railway siding within one mile of Struan House, the clip, which is shorn and carted under contract, is taken by bullock teams to

Glen Roy siding five miles from the new shed, where formerly it was conveyed a distance of ten miles from the Warrattenbullie run. Before the advent of the railway, however, the wool from Struan and its dependent properties was carried 120 miles to Portland, in Victoria, and shipped from there to Melbourne.

Until 1928 lambing took place in May, but now the owner intends to change over to spring lambing owing to the fact that cold snaps on the plains have been responsible for too much mortality amongst the young stock during the winter months. He believes that the new policy to come into force for the first time in 1929 will ensure better weights with the ewes' wool and a better fleece, while the lambs should go forward considerably quicker.

A mixed herd of cattle are fattened on the rich flats along the river frontage, and the owner also has the nucleus of a stud herd of shorthorns. These latter comprise a foundation of seven of the picked cows of the late Rosebank, South Australia, stud, and were bought at the dispersal of that well known herd at the beginning of the year 1928. At the same time Mr. Robertson purchased the bull Clifton Cavalier from Mr. a. j. Simpson, of Clifton, Victoria, and with this excellent material upon which to work the stud should be developed successfully. The male progeny will be used to improve the quality of the general herd, features of the cattle being their docility, nice colours and good conformation.

The output of the Struan stables is maintained by the purchase of a few yearlings from time to time at Melbourne and when broken in at Struan they are not put into training for the race track until they are 4 years old. The owner races purely for the love of the sport, and his colours, red and white stripes, gold cap (sometimes redcap), are conspicuous at many of the country

meetings, and a consequence he is the possessor of **same** fine trophies. A prominent winner at Mt. Gambia was Black Garter.

In the area set aside for the cultivation of crops on Struan over 600 acres are at present under barley, and at Wirringulla a further 300 acres are under crop on the share system. This cereal does very well on the open plains country, and yields consistently the splendid average of from 55 to 60 bushels to the acre.

PERSONAL.

The father of the present owner of Struan, the late Mr. John Robertson, was born at Dunachton, Inverness-shire, in the year 1809, and came to Australia in the "St. George" in 1838. He landed at Sydney, and later moving to Melbourne, he soon became engaged in pastoral pursuits at a place on the river Wannon, in the central west of Victoria. A year or two later he and his brother William set out on a tour of the extreme west of the State and of the country on the other side of the border, and this led to the occupation of the Mosquito Plains in the year 1842. Other runs which the late Mr. John Robertson owned were Woodford, on the Glenelg River, and some valuable country near Portland. At Struan, however, the greater part of his life was spent, and in furthering the welfare of the surrounding district a particularly strenuous career, he also found time to devote a good deal of attention to sport of various kinds. His stables included many first class thoroughbred horses, with which he took a lead in the district race meetings, and he also fostered coursing, which sport is recorded as having had its origin in Australia on his cousin's estate, Moy Hall, adjoining Struan. This latter place was opened in 1867 with an elaborate function somewhat similar to the opening of Struan House. Some of the best

greyhounds that have ever been seen in Australia were bred and trained at Struan.

In those days kangaroos were plentiful in the neighbourhood, and the stations organised many drives. But it was chiefly through his openhanded treatment of all deserving causes that the name of John Robertson is held mostly in remembrance, and his death in 1880, at the age of 71 years, was marked by widespread expressions of deep sorrow. He is buried in the private cemetery near Struan House, where there is a monument to his memory and to that of his wife Susan, who was born at Kinara, Inverness-shire, Scotland, in 1831, and died on 27th May, 1906. Their eldest son John, who was born 31st December 1855, and died 19th April, 1917, their third son William, born 4th April, 1862. and who died 20th November, 1904, and other members of this notable family were laid to rest in this cemetery, as well as the late Mr. Wm. Shiels, Premier of Victoria in 1892-3, who for 24 years was member for Normanby, in Victoria, and who died at Struan House in December 1904. The late Mr. Shiels married one of Mr. Robertson's daughters, while another daughter Mrs. May Pender, resides at the present time at Narracoorte, and another daughter is married to Mr. Vincent, of Geelong, Victoria.