



BULLDOZING WAY TO SUCCESS

SINCE THE EARLY 1950S, POOWONG BASED FAMILY BUSINESS, HILL EARTHWORKS HAS VIRTUALLY ACHIEVED LEGENDARY STATUS THROUGH MAINTAINING AND CONSISTENTLY DELIVERING QUALITY SERVICE, GENERALLY WITHIN A 20 KILOMETRE RADIUS OF HOME.

Over 50 years ago, Ken Hill's father, Stan bought a bulldozer initially for his own use on the family dairy farm. Throughout Poowong, soldier settlement farms hugged the rich, rolling hills of Poowong taking benefit from predictable seasons to produce milk for local co-operatives. Being entrepreneurial, Stan was keen to further develop his farm.

As is usually the case in many business stories, Stan's services were soon in demand throughout the hills as neighbouring farmers wanted new dams and old ones cleaned out, driveways and bush cleared. There was an occasional need for building sites to be prepared as well. Stan's part-time earthmoving business soon became full-time.

According to Ken, his father's business was largely serving an area within 20 kilometres of home. Ken's brother worked alongside Stan from the mid-70s onwards, later adding a

scraper, allowing a greater scope of work to be undertaken thereby beginning to insulate the business from other would be competitors.

"I headed off to Melbourne and completed a four year apprenticeship with Vickers Ruwolt in Richmond," Ken said. "From there I moved to the Port of Melbourne Authority for a few more years but I just didn't like city life. I guess the wide green paddocks, hills and unlimited space still remained in my blood and so I returned in 1987.

"Initially I worked on the farm but as dad began to step back, I began to take on more responsibility and a new partnership was formed. For me, it just happened. To take on this work was not really a conscious decision yet I have enjoyed a serious challenge and this was it."

Ken recalled those early days working alongside his father. He acknowledged that "dad was a good teacher" albeit that

he trained himself, soon building an enviable reputation for quality workmanship. It was an on-site, personalized apprenticeship; more like a traineeship where a bond between father and son fuelled Ken's motivation to ensure the final product is always right.

"Predominantly, dad provided a service to farmers; largely determined by their devotion to agriculture," Ken said. "He had a good eye for levels. When cutting into a hill-side, he could stand back and visualize the angles, quantities of earth to be dug and how the fill was to be re-used while ensuring exact contour levels. He would carry on old wooden level and just watch the bubble. And his work has stood the test of time. I preferred to use a theodolite until about three years ago; now I use a laser level. I think dad's wooden bubble is around somewhere."

Their partnership soon flourished therefore requiring another bulldozer and a low-loader to transport the

machines. A grader was added later on as Ken grew the business. In 1995, this partnership was dissolved and new era began when Ken Hill Earthmoving Pty Ltd was formed. Ken's wife, Mary joined as the other partner. Meanwhile, Stan kept on bulldozing until he was about 82 years old.

"I actually trained on dad's old D6C Caterpillar, the one he used until recently; and it still goes," Ken added. "At one stage, he had the first wide gauge dozer in Australia which was only available in the United States. We have always relied on Caterpillar and will soon take delivery of two new 'Cat' machines."

Mary and Ken ventured into interstate transport for several years, shifting general freight across Australia in an attempt to maintain a more constant revenue stream to compensate for seasonal impacts on earthmoving. He remains skeptical about how interstate transport earns income.



In more recent years, Mary and Ken have been journeying north to the Cape York region, not only to enjoy their passion for four-wheel driving, but combining this with civil contracting doing drill lines using (mining) company owned bulldozers.

Like his father, Ken is acutely aware of Gippsland's climate with its unpredictability and subsequent impact on completing earthworks. Leveraging on his innate skills and eye for detail, Ken's strategy is straightforward - that thinking ahead to explore all business opportunities determines the quality of the future for his family business.

Eldest son, Chris opted to join the business in 2004. After training as a diesel mechanic and subsequently working for an agricultural contracting business in America for a year, Chris returned to Australia to work in the transport and logistics sector.

"I expressed an interest to join the family partnership and so added my excavator to dad's fleet," Chris said. "It was a bit like dad adding machines to complement his father's work. Now I was doing the same. In this game, you need to prove many talents and the most

effective way to do this is to have the equipment and to keep this equipment in good, safe working order. It is demanding work which takes its toll on machinery.

"I grew up with the business and working on machinery. It (the business) was always there. Stuff was always happening and it was interesting. I love this type of work and my aim is to grow our business."

Last year, Hill Earthworks Pty Ltd was formed with Mary, Ken, Chris and Vanessa (Chris' wife) as partners. The grassroots work for farmers, while still very much a vital revenue source, now sits alongside a larger range of diversified civil works. Ironically, that 20 kilometre radius "line" still applies albeit it's not too far away when work will sourced from further afield.

Mary is the mainstay in administration as well as being the company's OHS officer. Her credentials also include having a heavy rigid truck licence, being a trained compacter driver and a thorough knowledge of spare parts for earthmoving equipment.

"I know earthmoving is seen

as a man's world with plenty of blokes," Mary said with a wry smile. "I actually enjoy the industry. Anyway, these machines are really big toys for men who once had little toys and just want to keep going that way."

For Ken, earth moving requires artistry. He enjoyed the fine detail and creativity required as a fitter and turner. Vickers Ruwolt and his father "told" him that the end product is what people see.

"I really like a greenfield site," Ken said. "I know I have to create a product for my client and there is some freedom for my artistry to interpret what best suits the client's needs. My work could easily be compared to sculpturing notwithstanding total respect for the earth and its contours."

Yet as the family business succession plan unfolds, Ken must pass on his "eye to detail" expertise to Chris.

"It's all about watching, and then watching even more closely. Be tolerant along the way as you begin to improve; it will all come in time. My main role is being a mentor and coaching him - in a subtle way of course."



