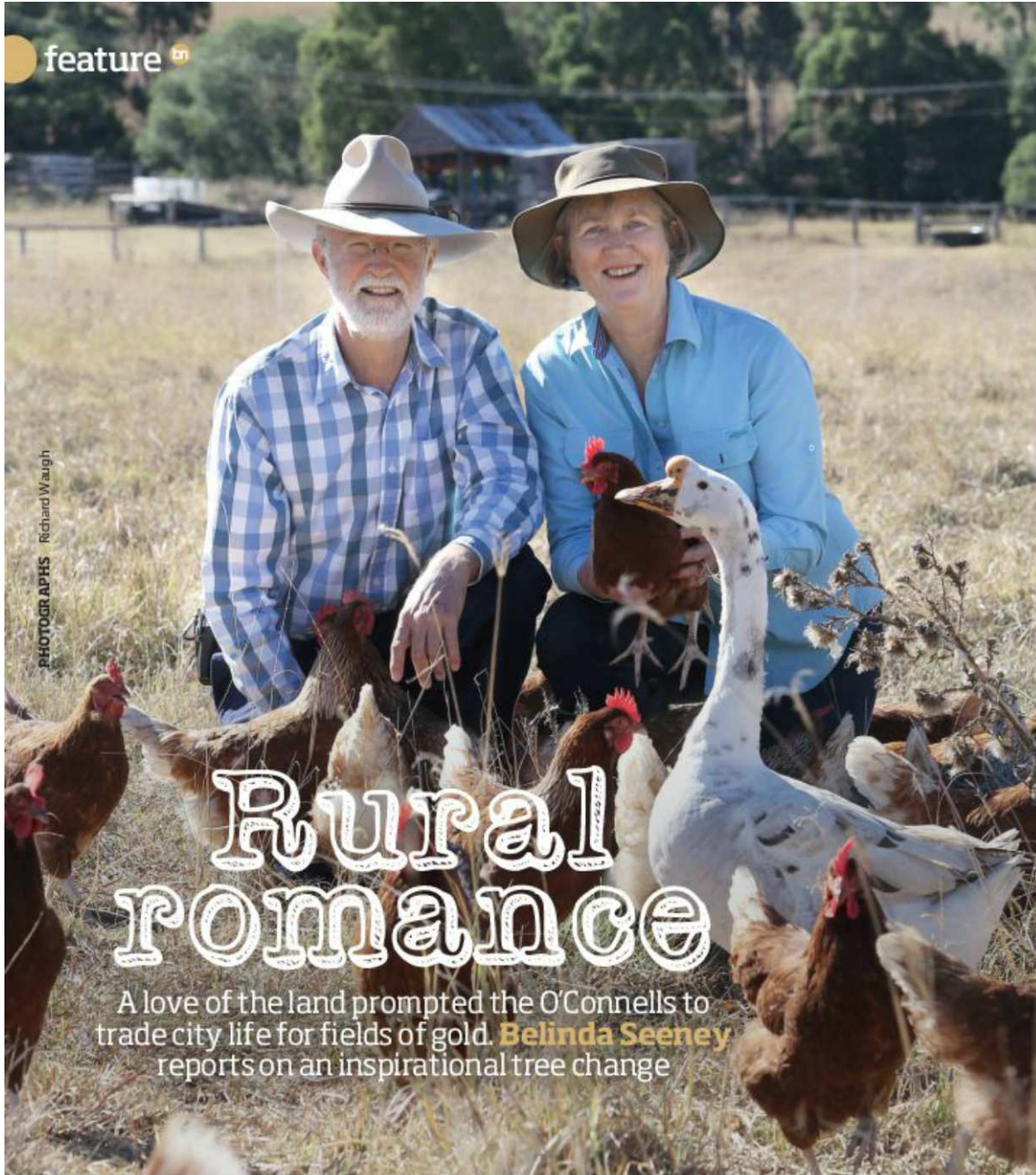


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PHOTOGRAPHS Richard Waugh

Rural romance

A love of the land prompted the O'Connells to trade city life for fields of gold. **Belinda Seeney** reports on an inspirational tree change

Rod and Kathy O'Connell sit on their newly constructed deck sipping tea from blue-and-white patterned china, admiring the rural vista that stretches before them.

The deck was made using timber milled by Rod, 63, and the morning tea is accompanied by slices of Kathy's homemade almond and lemon cake with dollops of thick, fresh cream.

With Rod's arm wrapped around Kathy's shoulder and both bearing contented smiles, the former accountant and teacher bask in a serenity rarely experienced in their second residence, a family home in the western suburb of Chelmer. "I get the best of both worlds," Kathy, 62, enthuses.

The couple bought 156ha Ayton Farm southwest of Rathdowney in November 2007. Still running O'Connells OBM, their chartered accounting practice, as well as raising sons James, now 34, Dan, 32, and Hugh, 30, Kathy and Rod initially regarded the farm, an easy 90-minute drive away, as a weekender.

But in September last year, they did what so many citysiders only dream of, and made a permanent move to the land. It hasn't been easy, but it's a decision they've never regretted.

One of five children, Rod grew up on a sheep station about 30km north of Winton, in central west Queensland. Of the belief that "you can take the boy out of the bush but you can never take the bush out of the boy", Rod had what he jokingly refers to as "the usual midlife crisis" in his 40s, a time where he admits to feeling trapped in the city.

"Rod started talking then about going back to the bush," Kathy says. "I always knew that living in Brisbane would never suit Rod forever."

The couple started canvassing properties within "a manageable radius" of Brisbane about 10 years ago. Kathy recalls when they first set foot on Ayton Farm, her instinct told her it was right but Rod spent 24 hours applying a lengthy checklist to the property before he agreed.

It was a similar mix of instinct and prudence that led to the couple moving last year.

"Coming from the land myself, I know what people were saying about us: 'that city slicker pouring all this money into the place and he'll never get any of it back', so I knew we had to have something to show for it," Rod laughs.

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Receiving certification from Safe Food Queensland in January, Kathy began selling Ayton Farm's eggs online and at local markets. She now operates stalls at Hawthorne's fortnightly Twilight Farmers Market and Brookfield Market on the first and third Saturday of each month, and will soon sell pasture-fed chicken meat after Safe Food Queensland certified the farm earlier this month.

Dividing her time between residences also allows Kathy to babysit grandchildren Allegra, 7, and Heath, 4, play tennis, attend her book club and patronise her beloved Queensland Theatre Company. Rod, too, is in Brisbane most Tuesdays to help two of his sons with their own businesses.

The O'Connells started small but have big plans for Ayton Farm and, eight months into their tenure, they oversee laying hens, a few dozen broiler hens, one dozen Dorper sheep and 80 head of beef cattle.

The morning peace is momentarily shattered as Genghis, one of their four geese, honks a warning to the brood of hens pecking and poking in the paddock below their deck. The gander alerts his charges to a wedge-tailed eagle circling overhead, looking to pick off a hen or two for its own morning snack.

"We put Genghis in among the chickens to bond with them and, to our knowledge, we didn't lose a single chicken to the eagles in those first few days," Rod recalls.

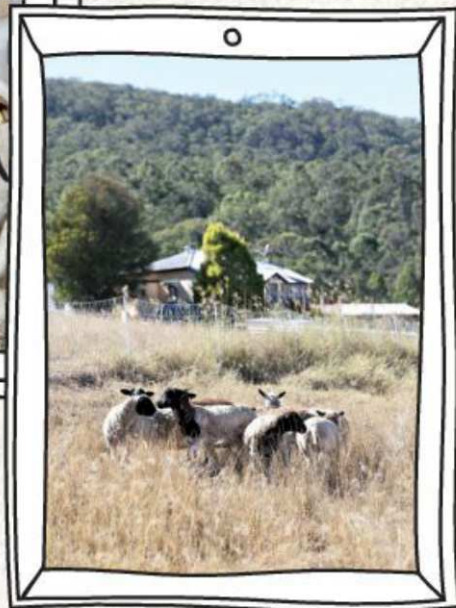
Kathy added a second line of defence: Lady Matilda and Water Lily, two vintage scarecrows who once stood guard in the suburban garden of one of Kathy's great-aunts. The stylish duo are bewigged, hatted and dressed in 1960s fashion – a flowing kimono for Lady Matilda and a striking kimono of blue and green for her companion.

"It's great because (the dresses) blow in the breeze," she says. "We gave our neighbour a heck of a fright because in the morning mist the one in the pink looks ghostly!"

The pest control and poultry protection is indicative of the natural, holistic approach they take to managing their fledgling farm. They follow the principles of US farmer and author Joel Salatin, after attending a one-day masterclass with him at Noosa in 2015.



GREENER PASTURES... Rod and Kathy O'Connell take a natural approach to their farm and stock, including pasture-fed chickens with Genghis (opposite); cattle; and sheep.



The farming evangelist advocates a chemical-free, anti-factory farming model, and encourages independent farmers to run a variety of crops and livestock and to seek out multiple revenue streams to ensure survival.

That same weekend, the O'Connells bought a second-hand caravan for \$1000, towed it from Port Macquarie and converted it into a home for their hens. The hens ended up laying all over the farm. Lesson learned, the couple commissioned a specialised chicken caravan with laying boxes that open and close on a timer, a conveyer belt that deans the eggs, and adjustable awnings.

Rod sections his paddocks into smaller cells and rotates cattle through to rest and regenerate the pasture. The chicken caravan follows the cattle with poultry pecking away in each vacated cell to clean up after the cows and fertilise the earth.

Eyes alight, Rod and Kathy outline their ambitious plans for Ayton Farm which centre on stacking it with enough enterprises to make it financially viable.

"Part of what we're trying to do here

is provide a possible path for children or grandchildren to come back into agriculture," he explains. "Out in the bush where I grew up, there were Mum and Dad, the kids, a governess and two or three jackaroos. There was an actual community which added a social dimension. I want to do that here."

Ayton Farm's community already includes Alberton builder Emanuel Spiteri, whose handiwork has shaped various structures, and Hong Kong holidaymaker Yummy Chu, 20. In return for food and lodging in a cabin, Yummy pitches in with cooking, sorting eggs and going to markets.

Educated at a Charters Towers' boarding school, Rod was adamant he'd "go back to the land" when he graduated. But

with a drought and his family on the brink of losing their farm, Rod took his grandfather's advice and studied accountancy in Townsville. "It was a meal ticket, effectively," he recalls. "I walked out of my last exam, packed, had two beers at the pub then came straight down to Brisbane for interviews."

Part of what we're trying to do is provide a path for children to come back into agriculture

It wasn't only his professional life that began in the north Queensland city.

"I met Rod during my first week of uni. I was 17 and he was 19," Kathy reveals.

Kathy's teaching career took her to Barcaldine before she got a job at Lourdes Hill College and moved back to Brisbane. The couple married in 1980 and had three sons, with Kathy leaving teaching to raise the boys and help Rod at O'Connells OBM.

Their innate synergy translates to rural life well, as they assume responsibility for different elements. Kathy talks about cultivating a permaculture garden and developing healthy recipes to best utilise Ayton Farm's bounty. And Rod hopes to, longer-term, build a slaughterhouse and contract local workers to butcher the beasts then sell the high-grade beef – currently a mix of Brahman and Charolais, with plans to add Wagyu.

"It would be great to get people in to do that – it goes back to that idea of building a community," he says.

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