

An old school stock approach

By **LYNETTE CAREW-REID**

MAL Cavanagh is definitely old school when it comes to livestock.

Whether it is his Murray Grey cattle or his Poll Merino sheep he is widely recognised as having an astute eye for a good animal and it is a gift that has served him well throughout his life on the land.

For more than 35 years, Mal and wife Coral have been loyal clients at Willemenup Poll Merino stud and Mal was a familiar face at many other Merino ram sales in his off-farm role as a sheep and wool consultant.

He loved the role and enjoyed success helping farmers improve their wool and sheep but at 83 Mal confesses he prefers cattle these days saying they are far less work than sheep.

Stock agents will verify that the couple have a pretty tidy herd at their Tenterden property, Lyndale, but Mal still yearns for the one they had before the tragic Tenterden fires.

On December 27, 2014, it was 11 years since the deadly fire ravaged the area and although they can count themselves lucky, they still lost all their livestock, fences and feed and went perilously close to losing their house.

Only a hectare of bushland, their house and sheds were spared but the farm Mal and Coral carved from virgin bush was rebuilt and only now is Mal showing any signs of slowing down.

At the time of the fire they had been Monterey Murray Grey stud clients for every bit of 25 years and the pride they had in the well established herd they had developed added to the enormity of the loss.

Even today they are still surrounded by constant reminders of the fire and its aftermath and still thank the people who helped them rebuild.

The fire swept through only a



Mal and Coral Cavanagh's 100-head breeding herd at Tenterden is based on pure Monterey genetics.

couple of weeks before Monterey's annual sale and it was only out of courtesy that Mal and Coral attended the sale.

As they sat there and were watching, Cranbrook friend the late Barry Williamson overheard their comment that they couldn't buy any cattle because they had nowhere to run them and nothing to feed them.

He insisted they buy what they wanted and offered to look after them for as long as they needed him.

As a result of his kindly gesture they bought the \$1580 top price and best pen of mated cows and heifers at the sale - just 10 in total - and this was to become the foundation of the replacement herd.

Barry ran them for more than six months and in a stroke of luck the five heifers calved down producing four heifer calves.

"We kept all the heifer calves and it was the start of our new herd," Mal said.

Monterey stud principals Gary and Julie Buller helped them out with a bull at mating time sending over a 20-month-old bull, Silverstar X176.

"It was a bull that I wanted to

buy but Gary said I had Buckley's chance but he loaned him to us to mate the heifers and we had him for two seasons," Mal said.

"He grew into a magnificent bull and he later bred many high price bulls for Monterey.

"What surprised me was when he was returned to the stud they lent me another young bull and when he arrived and I looked at him I thought he was the best animal I had ever seen."

Coral says they are forever grateful for the favour that the Buller family did for them saying it was a leg up to the level of genetics that takes a lifetime to acquire.

"Breeding is a slow process and we are grateful of the opportunity to have a second Monterey herd of this quality so quickly," she said.

They also appreciated the underlying reassurance that Gary and Julie would find a way to somehow always accommodate them with the right bull if they were ever again in need.

They still have the original females and although some are getting a bit long in the tooth, they continue to breed top weaners, replacement heifers

and occasionally a bull for their own use.

The couple turned off the first of this season's vealers through the Mt Barker saleyards in December and the 265 cents a kilogram they received for the steers was well above the 219c/kg with which they topped the market in 2013.

That equated to about \$800 for 7-10-month-old calves.

Mal said he has never seen prices this good but they will be handy as they face their second successive summer of carting stock water.

In a normal year they expect to receive about 450 millimetres of rain but 2014 delivered only 380mm and most of it came in small falls and despite extensive catchment cleaning the cattle dams remain low.

Mal and Coral run a 1000-head Merino ewe flock and 100 Murray Grey breeding cows in a commercial livestock operation that includes only enough crop to provide the sheep with grain and the cattle with hay.

It may be old style compared to today's cropping trend but Mal doesn't mind and he still adheres to a few other old fashioned traditions that work equally as well.