WEATHERING THE WET

During its 160-year pastoral history, Isis Downs has always operated on a big scale – and this year's big wet was no different.

STORY **KIRSTY McKENZIE** PHOTOS **KEN BRASS**

Trucks ready for loading the first 30 decks of cattle bound for export from Darwin.

The sky is greyer than the corrugated iron of the old shearing shed on Emmet, an outstation of Isis Downs, the 252,500ha Consolidated Pastoral Company (CPC) cattle station 20km east of Isisford in central-western Queensland. The tension is rising in inverse proportion to the barometric pressure as huge monsoonal rains sweep across western Queensland in an event that will eventually flood vast tracts of the state's south-west and cause property damage and livestock loss unequalled since the floods of 1974.

Under the leadership of Isis Downs managers Mick and Terrena Salt, the team is racing against the clock – and the impending downpour – to muster, process and truck almost 3,000 head of cattle to Newcastle Waters on the NT's Barkly Tableland, before eventual transport to Darwin where a ship has been booked to carry the cattle to one of CPC's 2 feedlots on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Amid the odd wise crack from a team of 8 that's surprisingly well bonded for a group who were mostly strangers just over a month ago, there's a quiet determination to get the job done before the rain comes – even if that means working well after dark.

"We're under the pump right now," Terrena says. "We were already the Plan B. The cattle [for export] were supposed to be coming from Newcastle Waters, but that couldn't happen for various reasons. And now big rain is coming, and we have to get these cattle off. If it's not dry enough to truck from Emmet, we might walk them to portable yards on the bitumen that the trucks can get to. Normally, you'd just cancel and wait the weather out. But if we can't truck these cattle, Henry [Burke, CPC's general manager of stations] will have to buy cattle from stations closer to Darwin to fill the ship. There's so much tied up with that ship. It's booked for a certain date, and you can't send it half empty."

Isis Downs is an aggregation of 14 stations, including the original holding and, depending on the season, it can run up to 25,000 head of cattle. Its first European settlement on the traditional lands of the Kuungkari people was in 1865 by English immigrant politician and pastoralist Charles Lumley Hill and his friends from Oxford University, William St. John Holberton and William Thomas Allen. They bought sheep and drove them up the Barcoo River to create the station, which was one of the earliest in the region, 3 years after the landmark station Bowen Downs had been founded 150km to the north by Nat Buchanan and William Landsborough. The partners named the station for a tributary of London's Thames River, which also lent its name to the town of Isisford, established in 1877. In that year Isis Downs was sold to William John Clarke who owned it until 1883. It then changed hands a number of times before Robert Selmon >

Katie Bailey and Arnika Forrest bring cattle into the Emmet yards.

Whiting and William John Clarke's son, Sir Rupert Clarke, acquired it in 1910. By that stage, the station measured 490,000 acres (200,000ha) and ran 250,000 sheep. A fire destroyed the woolshed along with 1,200 bales of wool shortly after the 1912 shearing. When the distinctive semi-circular 52-stand replacement shed was completed in 1914, it was the biggest in Queensland and the first to have electric overhead gear. Its construction was a logistical feat as the steel was shipped from Middlesbrough in England to Melbourne, then shipped to Rockhampton, transported by rail to Malvernton near Blackall and finally carted by teamsters to the station.

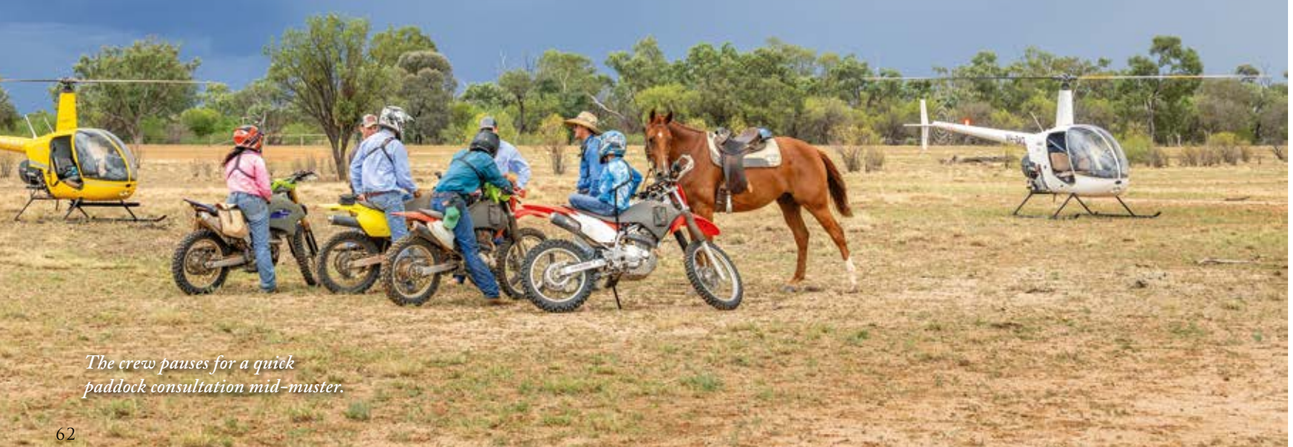
Isisford local and Longreach Shire plant operator Kerry Bailey has been watching the evolution of Isis Downs since he was a child in the 1960s and close-up since 1979 when he left school and got his first job as a ringer there. He left and came back a decade later, then spent the next 22 years working as a contract musterer for 10 or 11 months of each year. "Whatever happens at Isis is always big," he says. "In about 2000 there was a sale at Emmet Downs and there were 22,000 sheep in the yards. Another time in about 2005 or 2006 I remember we lifted 72 decks of cattle off Isis. My wife Trish and I followed the trucks up to Mt Isa where we gave the cattle a bit of a break then reloaded the trucks for the rest of the trip to Darwin."

The late media magnate Kerry Packer created CPC in 1983 when he bought Newcastle Waters in the NT. He added Isis Downs to his portfolio in 1987 and, under that management led by chairman/CEO Ken Warriner, came the decision to move out of sheep and entirely into cattle in 2004. In 2009, Kerry's son James Packer sold a majority holding in CPC to UK private equity firm Terra Firma, which is owned by Guy and Julia Hands. Since 2020, the Hands Family Office has owned 100% of CPC. Today, the company has 3.2 million hectares of land across 9 stations in Qld, NT and WA and runs more than 300,000 cattle, diverse crops and the Indonesian feedlots.

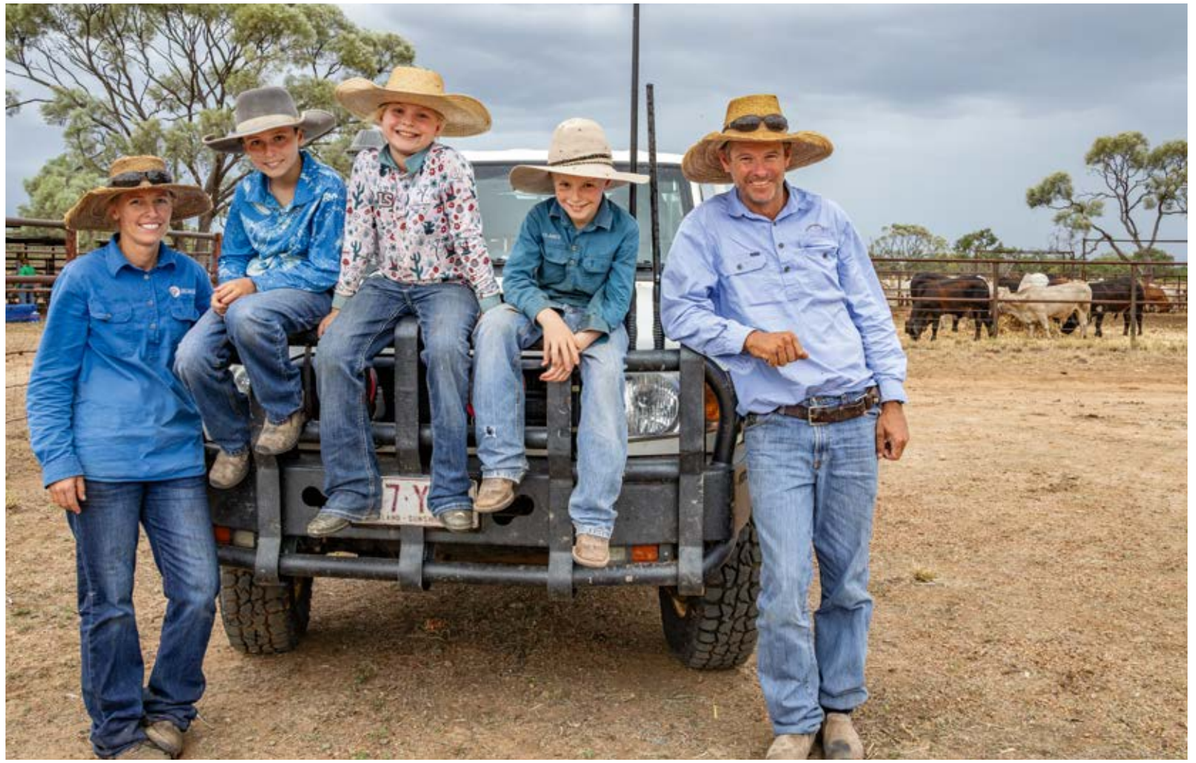
While Mick and half the crew are on the ground on bikes working with 2 R22 choppers to bring the cattle in, head stockman Tom Cobb and his partner in life and the paddock, senior station hand Arnika Forrest are setting a cracking pace in the yards. Tom grew up on a family place near Clermont and Arnika on her family's station at Ilfracombe, so they have considerable livestock handling experience. They're assisted by Lauren 'Kenny' Kennedy, who worked in the Isis stock camp for 2 years before heading to the NT to experience contracting life. She's back working as a contractor until the northern season kicks off.

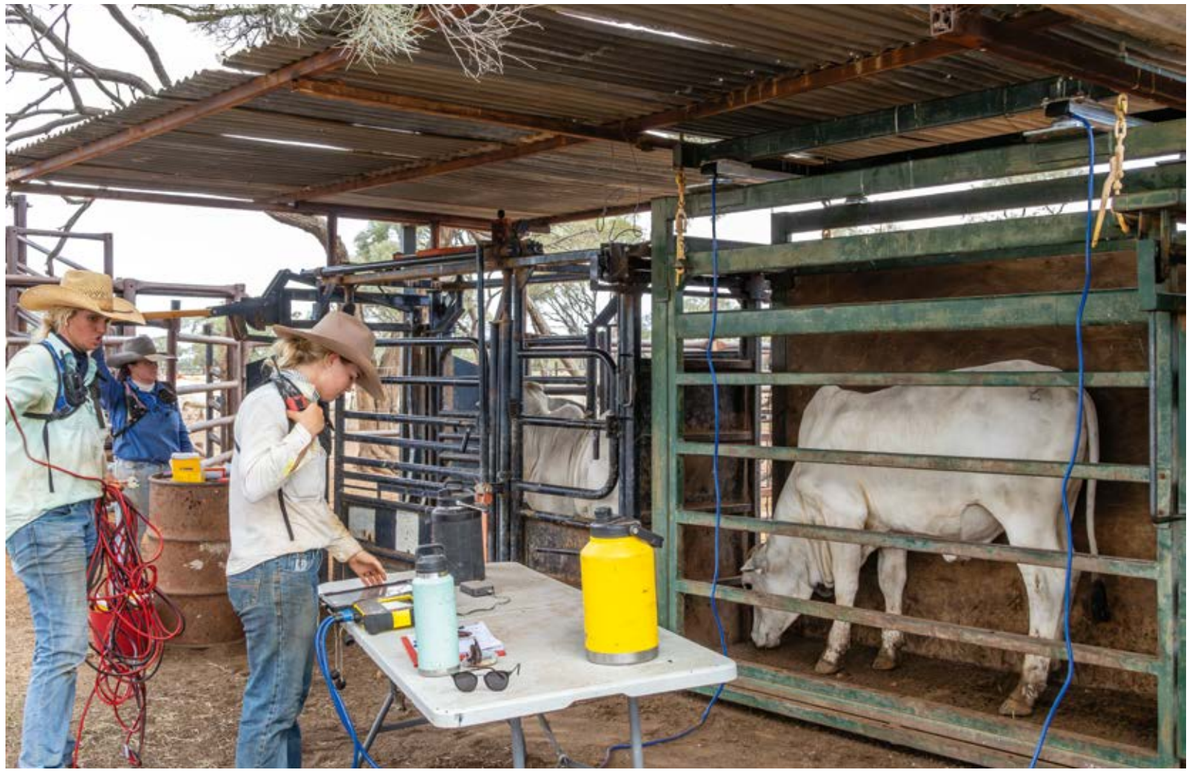
Brett Sherlock is also on deck. Officially he's the caretaker/overseer of Linamar station, CPC's most recent addition to the Isis aggregation. His 'day' job is to keep an eye on the 30,000-odd rangeland goats that are now being run on the station, partly as a diversification for sale to the US, Korean and Chinese meat markets, but also as a land management tool as the foragers are very effective at controlling woody weeds. In his 'spare' time, he helps out as needed and keeps an eye on the waters at Emmet.

The rest of the crew are school leavers. Sarah Newton is from a cattle property at Meandarra on Queensland's Western Downs, Tom 'Jerry' Hawkins from Wyrallah, in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, did a carpentry apprenticeship following Year 10, but is also a first year at Isis. Luke Hall's family run sheep on a block at Warialda, NSW, and Meg McNamee is from Toowoomba but her family runs a feedlot at Millmerran on the Darling Downs. Katie Bailey is from Northumberland in the north of England and holds a degree in agriculture. She's fresh from a harvest job in the US and also worked with polo teams in New Zealand as a school leaver. "I love everything to do with horses," she says. "I'm used to sheep, but I'm here to experience the outback and learn about cattle. It was supposed to be just for the season before I go back to a 'proper' job in the UK. But after a month, I'm already trying to work out how I can stay longer. It's a great team and Mick and Terrena are good people." >

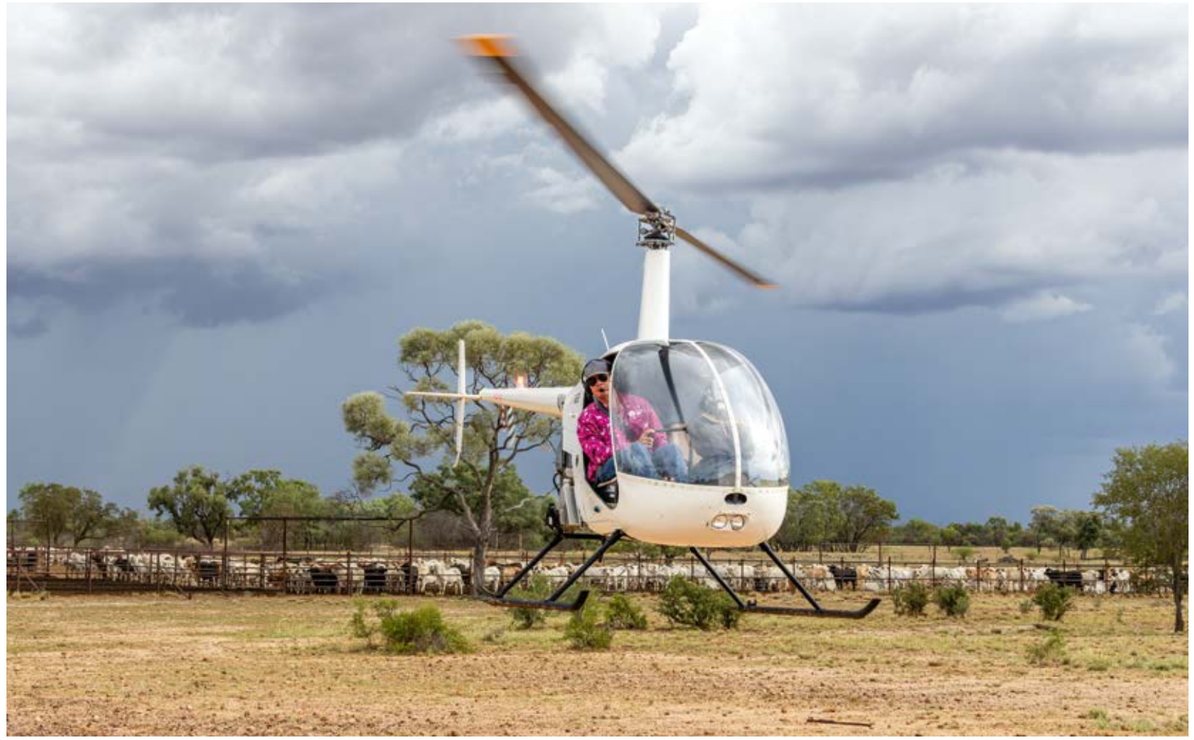


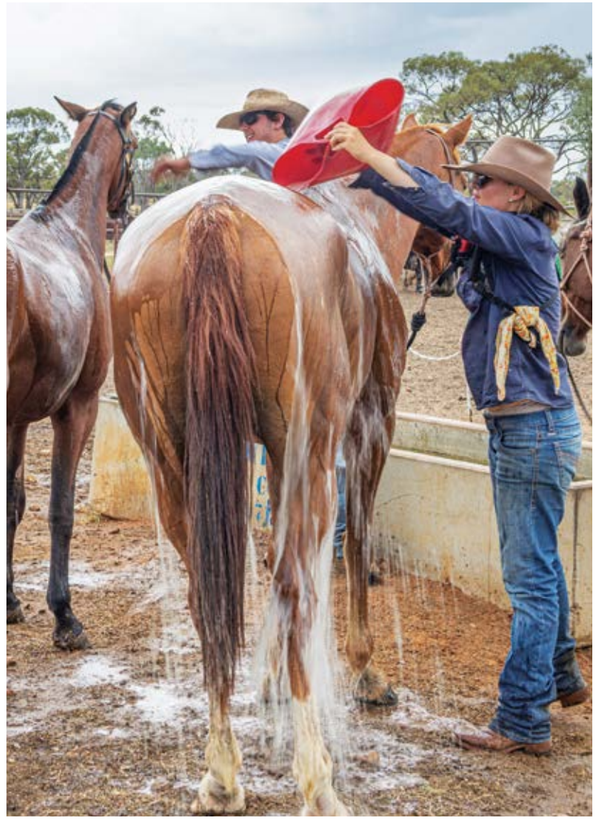
The crew pauses for a quick paddock consultation mid-muster.

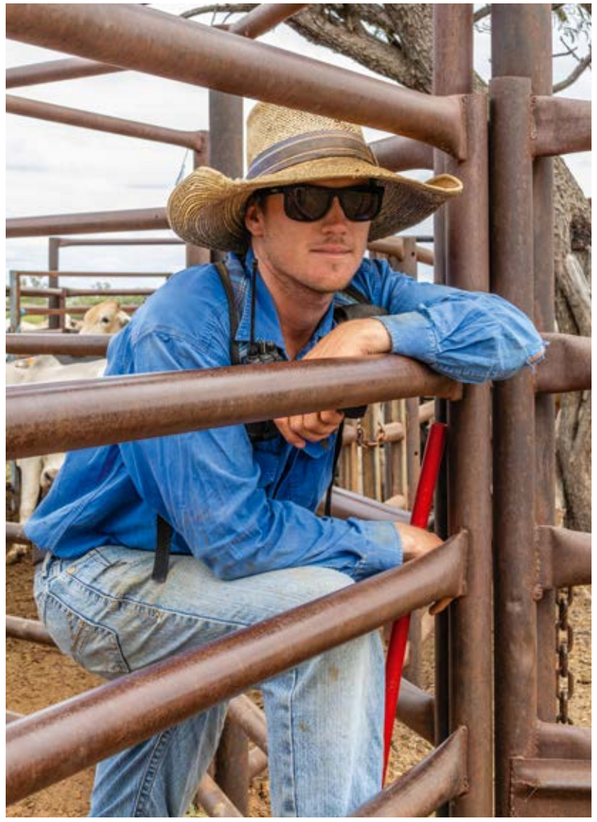




FROM TOP: Managers Mick and Terrena Salt at the Emmet yards with children, Toby, Elcie and Clancy; senior station hand Arnika enters data while station hand Sarah Newton and contractor Lauren Kennedy help process the cattle.







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Chopper pilot Tom Cockburn comes in to refuel; head stockman Tom Cobb; Arnika and Luke Hall wash their horses after mustering.

Terrena's eyes are everywhere as she helps out in the yards. If someone's slow to open a gate, she's there in a nanosecond, she's quick to spot the steer that missed having its tail trimmed in the chute and frequently jogs between the back of the yards and the front to sort any holdups. She grew up on her family's beef cattle and lucerne farm in the Lockyer Valley. She deferred uni to go and work for a year in the NT and didn't return to study until 5 years ago when she completed a nursing degree remotely through Central Queensland University in Mackay. Mick also grew up in south-east Queensland on his parents' mango and avocado orchard and, apart from 2 years working in the meatworks at Grantham, has worked on stations all his career. He met Terrena when she was in Year 12 and they've been together ever since, working on a string of stations across western Queensland and the NT.

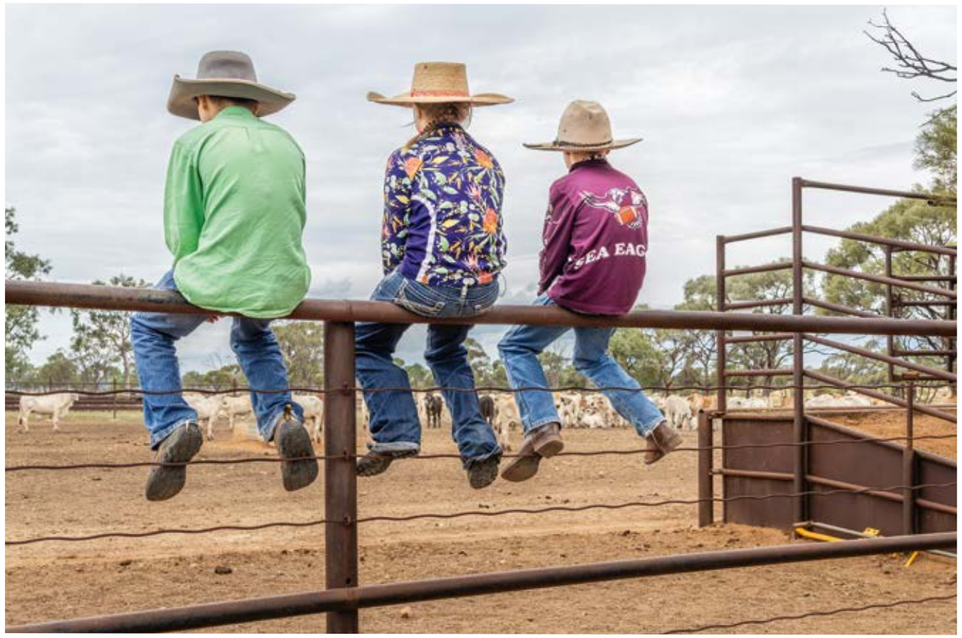
The Salts arrived on Isis Downs at the beginning of 2024, moving from the privately owned Doongmabulla cattle station, on the Central Highlands north-west of Clermont, which they had managed for the previous 11 years. Anne McMillan made the move with the family, having been with them since 11-year-old Toby started prep with Capricornia School of Distance Education. Between sessions on air with teachers at the school's bases in Rockhampton and Emerald, Anne supervises the lessons Toby, Elcie, 10, and Clancy, 8, have in their dedicated classroom in the homestead.

Apart from her longevity in the children's lives, Anne is unlike most home tutors or govies in that she is also a qualified teacher. She hails from Victoria's Mornington Peninsula and spent 20 years as an instructor in the army reserve before she did a teaching degree and subsequent early childhood post-graduate studies. "I always wanted to teach remotely, but the opportunity didn't arise," she says. "So I decided to leave the mainstream classroom for this job."

Although she lives 20km down the road in another house on Isis Downs, she's practically part of the Salt family and Terrena admits Anne is one of only a handful of people she trusts to drive with her kids in the car when she takes them to mini schools in Emerald. "That's because I've spent 8am to 4pm with the children every weekday for coming up for 7 years," Anne says. "I taught Toby to drive when we'd collect the mail from the box near the main road and I've taught all of them to swim. All three are proficient on motorbikes. That's what happens in the bush – kids grow up young."

Despite a tangle with a loose wire and a cow that's left him with a very sore ankle, Toby is an integral part of the 'all-hands-on-deck' team. He musters alongside Mick and does the work of an adult, manning gates in the chute. As it's the weekend, he's allowed to stay in the stock camp and come Sunday evening, he's a reluctant passenger in the car heading back to the homestead, so he's ready for schoolwork on Monday. Elcie and Clancy are also in the yards, though perhaps a bit young for responsibilities beyond keeping Arnika's Jack Russell Penny company.

"Back in the day I was often the only woman in the stock camp, so I was usually the cook by default as well," Terrena says. "These days we have pretty much 50/50 gender parity and that's a good thing. Girls tend to be kinder to the horses and cattle, but you need a bit of male >



The Salt children watch from the rails.

strength and even bravado to balance it out."

While there's a cook at the kitchen beside the staff quarters near the homestead, in the stock camp everyone takes it in turn to prepare dinner. It's sink or swim and they learn fast, egged on by the gentle ribbing of their co-workers. "Many of these kids are straight out of school and have never cooked a meal in their lives," Terrena says. "If it's just a gap year before they go on to uni, we send them back to the city with a stronger work ethic, an understanding of teamwork, and greater self-sufficiency. From our point of view, if they like the experience, they might stay another year or two or even go on to build a career in ag. We have trained some really awesome young people."

She adds that she 'screens' first-year applicants by checking that they at least have relatives on farms, spent time in the bush, perhaps worked on family or friends' properties, or have experience as horseriders before they land in Isisford, population 80-odd. "I always look out for young people who have captained a sporting team at school, or even been a long-term member of a team," she says. "It shows they have the discipline and commitment to stay on the job and not let others down."

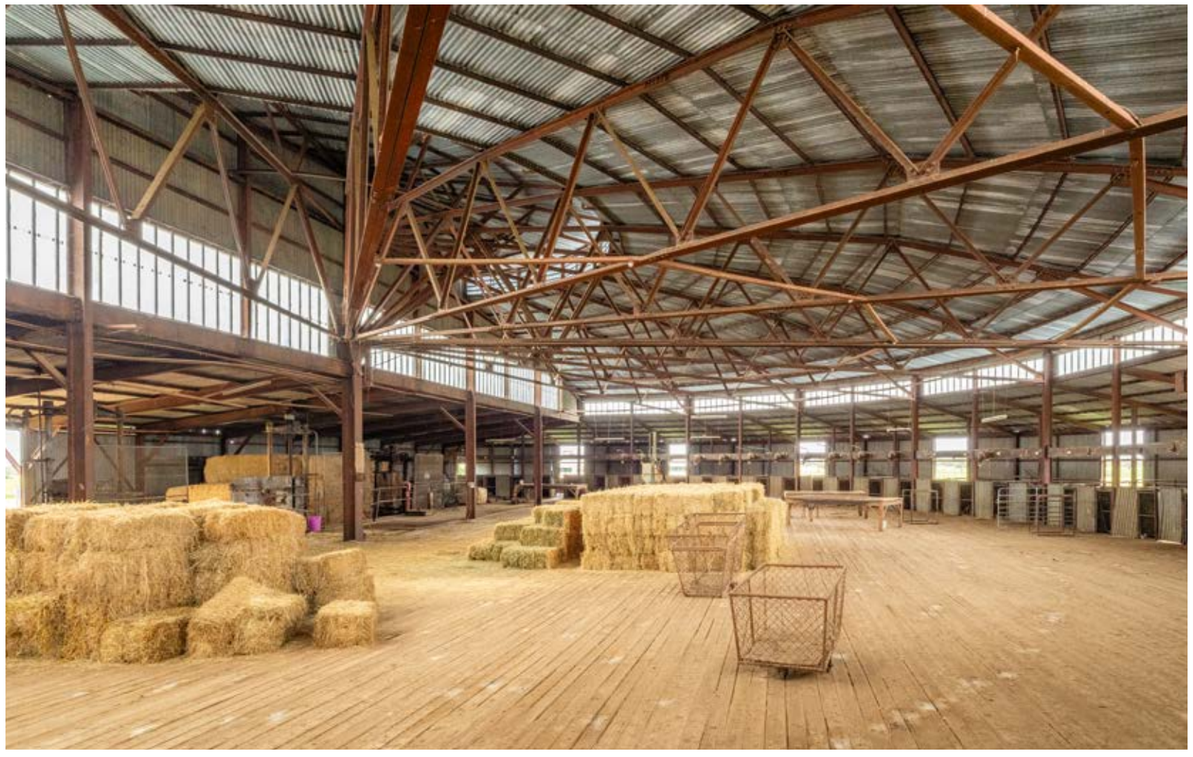
Induction in February is a crash course in everything a station hand needs to know. How to change a tyre, ride a horse, service a motorbike, fix a poly pipe, strain a fence, the fundamentals of mustering. During the year they'll do horse breaking and handling schools, first aid courses and further courses on low-stress stock handling.

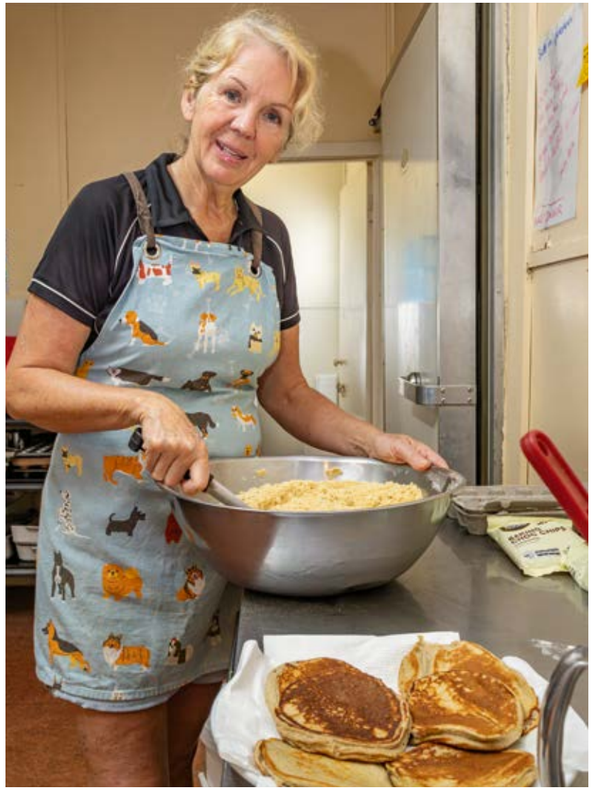
As the team loads the first 30 decks of cattle onto 5 waiting road trains, Arnika is punching the vital statistics of each of the 958 cattle into a rugged laptop. "Starlink has been a game changer," she says. "All the data goes directly to the cloud. So, everyone in the company can see how many cattle we've loaded, their weight, when they were last fed and watered and which truck they're on. The people at Newcastle Waters know what's coming to them as soon as the trucks pull out and can plan everything including the rations accordingly."

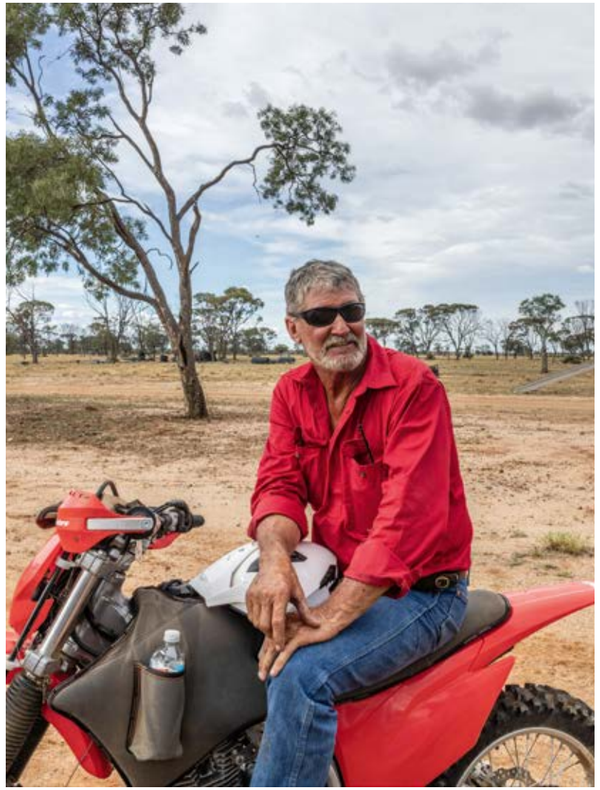
There's a collective sigh of relief as the trucks leave, and the crew heads to the camp for smoko and a brief regroup before processing more cattle for loading the following morning. Two trucks from Blackall company OMA roll in early and another 6 decks are loaded, bringing the tally to 1,342, almost half the target. Then it's straight to the horse yards to saddle up in readiness for another big afternoon mustering. The sky is looking more menacing by the minute as the helicopters, bikes and horses head out to round up more cattle. By late afternoon there are another 1,800 head in the yards.

Then the inevitable happens and the skies open. Terrena packs the kids in the wagon and heads 70km back to the homestead, navigating some slippery and sticky blacksoil patches along the way. There's steady rainfall overnight, and she's up late on the phone to Mick discussing Plans C, D and E for getting the cattle out, come what may. By daybreak it's a different story, as there's been 56mm

>







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The 52-stand shearing shed, which now stores hay, was a challenge to build as most of the materials came from the UK; Linamar caretaker/overseer Brett Sherlock helps with the muster; station cook Sue Vaughan turns out pancakes and biscuits.

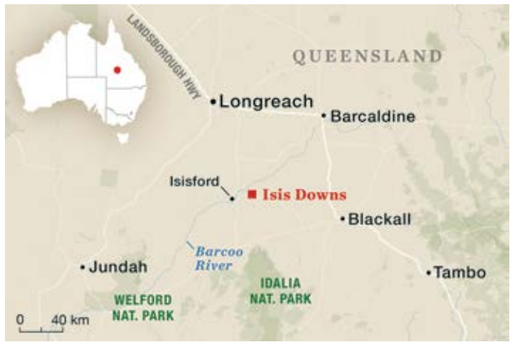
On the rail (l–r) Meg, Clancy, Sarah, Terrena, Toby and Elcie, (at front) Tom Hawkins, Tom Cobb, Lauren, Mick, Arnika, Katie and Luke. OPPOSITE: Rounding up stragglers bound for the Emmet yards.

at Emmet. "They're swinging the gates," she announces. "Henry [Burke] has decided to let the cattle go. Or at least into holding paddocks until the weather eases."

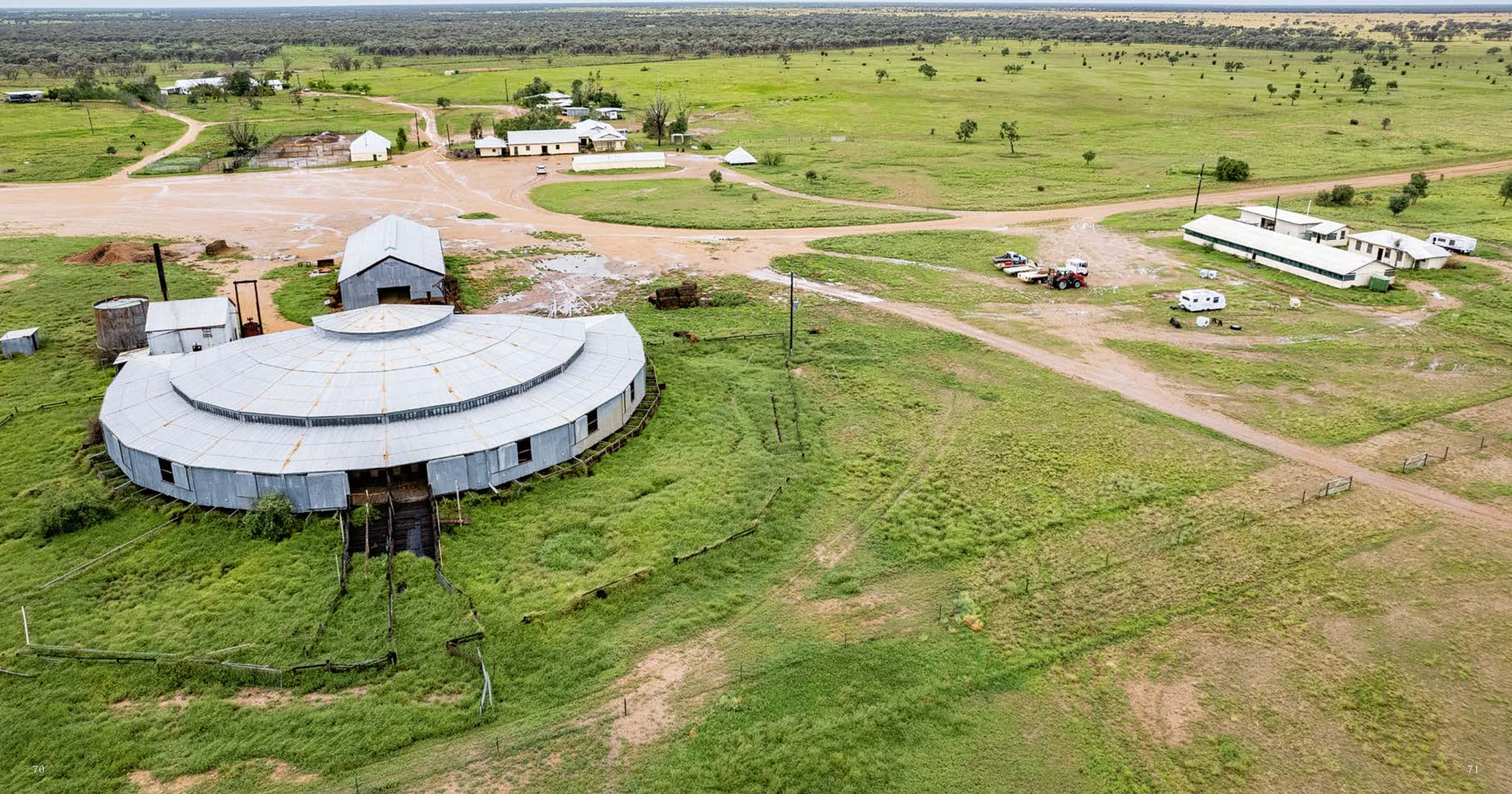
As it turns out, Henry's call was the voice of the experience of more than 50 years in the industry. The self-confessed "mischievous little bugger" from Cloncurry was advised that the best thing he could do was leave school at 13 and get a job on a station. "They ended up with about 450mm at Emmet and 250 to 260mm at the homestead, so those cattle will just have to wait until it dries out," he says. Henry adds that while there was some damage to fences, particularly exclusion fences, it was nothing like what stations further south experienced. "There were no livestock losses," he says. "It ended up that Newcastle Waters pitched in with 1,000-odd and we ended up buying 500 or 600 head to fill the boat. The Isis cattle will just go on another boat – at this time of year we have one going every week, though it usually slows down a bit from May and CPC averages 5,000 to 6,000 a month across the year."

Henry explains that the Isis Downs operation is a mix of commercial breeding and fattening cattle. "The recent muster was mainly Bos Indicus that had been sent down from Wrotham Park [another CPC station 300km inland from Cairns]," he says. "While Isis is important to the CPC operation from a backgrounding perspective, there's also about 5,000 head of Angus-infused cows that are put with Wagyu and Angus bulls and a replacement herd of 3,000 Angus heifers that are joined to Wagyu bulls." There's also an EU-accredited component of F1 Wagyu calves that will go to domestic feedlots in southern Queensland for eventual sale to local and export meat markets.

"Progressive" is the word Michael Spencer, managing director of Allied Rural Marketing based in Inverell, NSW, uses to describe the company's approach. He's been observing the direction of the herd during a decade of buying and selling on CPC's behalf. "For a company that's been Brahman-focused for so long, it's very strategic to make the herd more diverse," he says. "It increases their options in the market and that's what ensures longevity." >



The semi-circular shearing shed was completed in 1912.



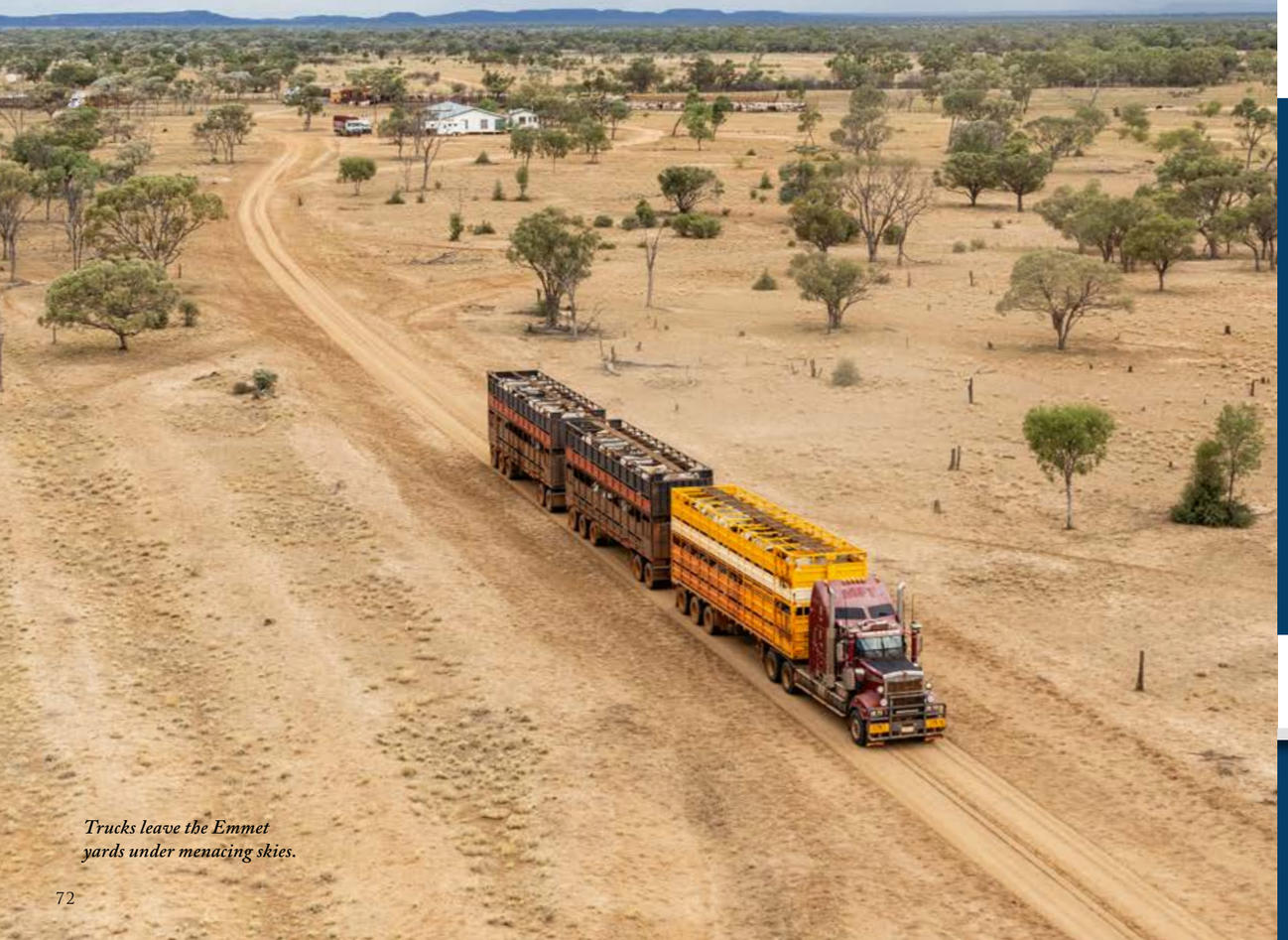
As steady rain continues to fall at the homestead, yet another challenge arises when the water pump at the kitchen packs it in. The irony of the situation is not lost on borerunner Shane Vaughan, who's helping Terrena fix the problem. "Can't run a kitchen without water," he observes, adding that his wife Sue, who is the station cook, will be hard-pressed to prepare dinner without it. Shane and Sue are 'retired' grey nomads. After 30 years of running convenience stores up and down the Queensland coast, they imagined they were ready for a rest and set off for the big lap in their motorhome. "We enjoyed being on the road," Shane says. "We realised we were both still active and healthy enough to work, just not in our own business. So, we came out to Isis and we're loving it."

Sue insists she's "just a mum cook", but the way she deftly multiplies a recipe to produce meals for whoever ends up around the table – anywhere between 6 and 14 on an average day – suggests otherwise. "When I arrived, we had head office coming to visit, so Terrena arranged for a CPC chef to come in for a week to teach me the ropes."

"We're lucky to have Terrena and Mick as our managers," Shane says. "They're capable, caring, kind and hands-on. There's nothing they can't turn their hands to."

Sue's day begins before dawn, prepping for breakfast, which is served after the day's toolbox meeting at 5.30am. If the crew is heading out to the paddock, she will also have ingredients lined up ready for them to make lunch. Otherwise, breakfast will be light, in advance of a big smoko served around 9.30am. Pies, jaffles, sausage rolls, quiches, fritters, pancakes, pikelets and biscuits satisfy hearty appetites. "Lunch is sandwiches and wraps, then dinner becomes the other big meal of the day," Sue says.

With the water back on, she's about to start making everyone's favourite chocolate chip bickies for when the inevitably bedraggled crew gets back from the stock camp and needs a lift. Crumble 9 cups of flour into a kilo of butter, add an indecent amount of sugar, almost a kilo of choc bits … everything at Isis Downs is larger than life.



Trucks leave the Emmet yards under menacing skies.