

R U R A L
ready for *Life-change*

A Handbook for Small Landholders

Bernie Webb

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R U R eady for A L ife -change

A Handbook for Small Landholders

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Acknowledgements

Obviously many thanks go to my fellow assistant authors, Kevin, Leonie and Sue.

Kevin and his brother part owned and worked in an agricultural supply business for over 20 years. During this time he has sold and repaired many pumps of all sizes and descriptions. I feel he is more than adequately qualified to explain the various types as described in the section on 'Pumps' (starting on page 114). Over the same 20 years I have learned a lot from Kevin, tapping into his vast knowledge of many things 'rural', some of which I have now passed on to you.

Leonie and husband Harry started from the ground up with a small alpaca herd. From knowing virtually nothing when they started, they educated themselves about all the various intricacies of alpacas, right through to the successful breeding of a number of crias. After several years they came to realise that unless you got into alpacas in a 'big way' they were just going to cost many thousands of dollars to own and breed with very little monetary return. Thus, I feel Leonie's thoughts are very relevant to anyone contemplating the owning or breeding of alpacas.

My sister, Sue, has owned and dealt with many horses right from when we were kids growing up in an outer suburb of Melbourne through to today. She also carries out treatments on horses with 'Bowen Therapy' and 'Jin Shin Jyutsu'. In addition she has completed, and on occasions won her division, in a number of long distance or 'endurance rides' (up to 160 km in a day). Although she does not consider herself an expert, I feel that her varied and practical knowledge of horses and their particular quirks makes her also suitable to give you an unbiased view on the requirements of owning a horse. Although not having as long an association with cows as she has had with horses, having the knowledge of horses has enabled her to gain an understanding of owning cows.

Thanks to Oakford Agricultural and Garden Supplies for letting me spend an hour or two in their shop 'borrowing' and then photographing the pumps and some of the fencing items depicted in the relevant chapters.

Thanks to all my family and friends who have encouraged me to keep going and offered suggestions for additional chapters for inclusion in this book. Thanks also to my small team of personal checkers (Bruce, Colin, Hazel, Leonie and Sue) who did all the proof reading and boy did I keep them busy! Special thanks to Bruce for the excellent job he has done proof reading the final few drafts. Bruce and I developed a friendship while visiting the Red Cross Blood Bank every fortnight, where we both donate plasma. In his former life before retirement he used to proof read contracts. Some things are just meant to happen!

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Preamble

Are you ready for a life-change?

Well, ARE you ready? Because that is what the sum total of this book hopes to achieve. It's not just a change of land; all the ideas, suggestions, workarounds and mistakes totalled together are going to change you and your family's whole life. Living in a rural or semi-rural area is a different kind of life to suburbia. Not everyone is cut out for it; let's see if we can prepare you for the big change.

When you purchase a car it comes with an owner's manual. If you purchase an electrical power tool it comes with its own instruction book. If you buy a fridge... I **could** go on, but I'm sure you've got the picture. Does a house or land come with an owner's manual or handbook? I have never heard of it happening. The best you are likely to get from the more thoughtful builders is a two ring binder containing the individual instruction books for some of the fixtures and fittings in the house, along with your final account owing. What I have attempted to create here is the missing Owner's Handbook that you ought to have received with your new or second-hand house or land purchase. Unlike most Owner's Handbooks or Manuals I am not going to list all the dangers involved with the product first. (I think it is about time common sense made a rather overdue comeback!) This book will also differ in that it will suggest things you may like to try for yourself and encourage you to complete additional research on the various subjects before tackling them.

In 1991 we moved from our ordinary house on a 1,000 m² (¼ acre) block in an inner residential suburb to our newly built self-designed house on 2.2 hectares (5 acres) in an outer special rural suburb of Perth WA. Little did we realise how much we would have to learn quickly and how much more knowledge we would gain over the next 20 years, about how to make our changed life style 'easy' or should that read 'easier'. A quick glance through the contents of this book will give you an idea of what I mean.

With the mad fast paced lifestyle that a lot of us now lead... Hang on, that should read '**...some of you now lead**' (leave me out of it), gaining knowledge has become not only essential but is usually required 'yesterday' simply to continue forward. The purpose of writing this book is to pass on some of the more essential knowledge gained and some of the not so essential knowledge you will need to make your transition to rural life easier and more fun. Additionally it gives me something constructive to do in my semi-retirement and if I am really lucky, and enough of you purchase this book, there is the possibility of a small income as well!

I formed a saying a few years back, "*it's not obvious, until it's bloody obvious*". As you read through the following pages you will see something explained and suddenly realise that not only does it make sense but that it is also '*bloody obvious*' now that you have the explanation.

My sister made the observation that before tackling some of the projects or chores mentioned further into this book it may be worth considering paying a contractor to complete the jobs that you are not so good at, while you concentrate on earning money from things you are good at to pay the contractor. In such circumstances a contractor will almost certainly complete a job quicker and

perhaps more professionally than you could. Building hundreds of metres of fencing springs to mind as something that may fall into this category. However, if you do have a go yourself and find it too hard, or you do not have enough knowledge, or the appropriate equipment to be able to complete a project, you will then at least, be better equipped to understand why you are paying what seems an awful lot of money to have someone else complete the project for you.



A common theme throughout this book is spending money and usually lots of it. A good friend and neighbour of mine recently made the comment that, whenever he starts thinking about how much something is going to cost compared with a similar item for a suburban block, he finds he has to shift the decimal point one position to the right. As an example, an ordinary mower will cost around \$350 to \$450, whereas a ride-on mower will cost at least \$3,500 to \$4,500! All dollar amounts throughout this book are based on 2012 prices.

Being of the age where I was originally taught the imperial measurement system and have since learnt the metric system, I tend to use both systems entwined with each other at the same time. This can be very confusing for anyone who has only learnt the metric system. So in the spirit of co-operation, I have referred to all measurements first in the metric system and (secondly the imperial system) which hopefully will cater for everyone's requirements.



Figure 1 *All measurements are metric first followed by imperial in brackets.*

My key goals are to provide you with the relevant knowledge before you need it and make you aware of items that you may not have thought of by yourself. Hopefully having prior knowledge will save you money and time in the long term. After reading this book you should be better informed to plan ahead and make the required important decisions, than had you not read this book.

No matter who you are, where you live, what religious belief or political persuasion, always remember, as the saying goes, *“to stop and smell the roses”*. In other words, make a point at least once a day of just stopping what you are doing and appreciate what is around you. I usually do it when I enjoy a cup of coffee on the veranda, in the shade in summer or in the sun in winter. Stop, clear my mind, have a good look around at the near and far trees and shrubs, and look and listen for any wildlife, birds etc. that may be around. It's a way of connecting with the real world and it's always amazing how tranquil and relaxed it can make you. Obviously, it works even better when you are in the bush or at home on your special rural property. We are arguably here on earth only once and we are 'a long time dead', so make the most of life and anything constructive that you can contribute to yourself and others.

Disclaimer

The information contained in this book is a summary of a large amount of knowledge and experience that has been acquired over the past 20 years. It is not necessarily proven scientific fact, but more a collection of thoughts that have continued to produce the same answers. So although you can rely on most of what is in print, I won't be held responsible if you misinterpret my intentions.

Similarly a lot of this knowledge and experience I am now passing on to you is generally relevant to the climatic conditions, type of soil and/or the council regulations for the part of Western Australia where we live, namely the Swan Coastal Plain. You will have to make appropriate modifications to suit the climate, soil type and council regulations for the area of Australia (or World) where you live.

In some chapters there is a 'Legal Obligations' box (orange border) usually showing a specific section of an Act of Parliament pertinent to the topic on the same page. As with all things legal to get the full picture you should examine the whole Act not just part of it. I have reproduced only the specific section/s merely to highlight the noteworthy part of the Act.



Layout of this book

My main purpose in writing this is to produce a book that I wish we could have had and referred to 20 years ago. It would have been great to look up a topic before we started on it and learn by other people's mistakes instead of bumbling along finding out the hard way. Although they say you learn from your mistakes, I would rather learn from the mistakes already made by someone else. I have divided this book up into six separate sections;-

- Part One** – **In the Beginning**
- Part Two** – **Design and Building Phase**
- Part Three** – **After you move in**
- Part Four** – **Tools and Machinery (and other toys)**
- Part Five** – **Animals**
- Part Six** – **Noxious Weeds**

Starting with 'Part One – In the beginning', it is laid out more or less in chronological order, from when the land is first purchased, through the building phase and then continuing after occupancy. If you have purchased or are going to purchase an already established residence, then some segments of 'Part Two – Design and Building Phase' will be irrelevant and other sections will have to be adapted to suit your particular situation. The majority of 'Part Three – After you move in', is relevant whether you have built your dream home from the ground up or purchased an established property complete with existing dwelling.

'Part Four - Tools and Machinery' follows and is reasonably important as there will be a number of tools and machines required that you may not have even thought of up till now.

'Part Five - Animals' details information on some of the livestock you may be considering and some of the wildlife that may cross your path.

'Part Six – Noxious Weeds and how to recognise them.

This is then followed by the **Afterword**, a **Glossary** and lastly the **Appendices A - I**.

Some chapters have a Summary box to give you all the relevant information all together in one spot. I suggest you read the rest of the chapter first to see how I came to the particular summary, rather than just read the summary.

Don't feel you have to read this book sequentially from front to back, but I do suggest you have a good skip through each page to better acquaint yourself with what information is held within and encourage you to return and read a topic before it becomes more applicable at a later date.

Part One - In the Beginning

Before you purchase any land

Discuss with family

I made the mistake of mentioning to one of my wife's girlfriends that we were thinking of a tree-change *before* I mentioned it to my wife - BIG mistake. The lesson here is that you have to discuss *all* major changes to your lifestyle with all members of your family, especially your partner. If you haven't yet broached the subject with your partner and you leave this book lying around without explanation, be prepared for the worst, you may end up practicing your apology with the dog while you share the doghouse. It may be better if you show this book to your partner when you first bring it home and suggest he/she may be interested in having a look as well.



Isolation

By definition a larger block of land is going to be more isolated than in suburbia because there are less blocks per given area and they are usually situated further out of town. Personally, I find this one of the main elements that makes it a better place to live, but it is not everybody's cup of tea. Just to nip next door and borrow a cup of sugar or the 'Elders Weekly' is probably going to knock a hole in ½ an hour (not including the chat time) simply because of the distance involved. Compare this to only about five minutes in suburbia to collect the same cup of sugar.

Distance from shops, schools, workplace, entertainment etc.

For similar reasons as given above, a trip to the shops¹ or school to drop off or pick up kids is also going to take longer. Depending on where you work, the trip to and from may also be a greater distance than you are used to. Entertainment, such as going to the cinema, or just going out for a meal may also be a bigger deal than it was in suburbia. I am definitely not trying to discourage you from moving to the more open spaces, but would rather you stop and think of some of the repercussions that may exist before you make the big change, rather than afterwards when it is too late.

¹ Ensure you have all the details with you that are required to purchase the item/s you require; it could be a long way back home and back to the shops again if you have forgotten something.

Public Transport

Public Transport may solve some of the travel problems but bear in mind that you will probably still have to drive to the bus stop or train station, neither of which is renowned for an abundance of empty parking spaces.

Check out the future plans

Make contact with your local council and establish any proposed plans, subdivisions, changes to land usage, etc. While you are there pick up a copy of the local Firebreak Regulations, suggested fire evacuation plans, building regulations, find out about

what livestock you can and can't own and any other pertinent information. Make contact with the local Bushfire Control Officer and check out the history of bushfires in the local area and the likelihood and possible severity of any bushfires in the future.

If there are any major roads nearby, heading your way or proposed, you may need to contact the main road authority for more detailed information.

Rent first?

It may be advisable to rent a house in or near to a location that you are thinking about moving to, while in turn renting out your existing house. This way you and all your family can experience firsthand the lifestyle, the good and the not so good points of living in a rural or special rural community. The beauty of this arrangement is that it could all be arranged in a relatively short space of time and at comparatively little cost, as the cost of renting a house in a rural/special rural area would probably be outweighed by the income from renting your existing home. The downside would be that you would be delaying the point in time when you could actually start building or purchasing your own property. However, it may be worth the sacrifice in time to confirm that the lifestyle/location is suitable to you and your family and you may accumulate other thoughts and ideas along the way that could eventually be included into your own future property.

Unforeseen costs

Before we purchased our land 20 years ago, the rural real estate agent pointed out that we would be up for an additional \$20,000 that we probably hadn't even thought of. The items included in the \$20,000 at the time were; fences, driveway, large water tank, elevated house pad and the cost of phone and electricity connections. You will also have to consider all of these items but the cost now is probably nearer to \$50,000.



Figure 2 Mandurah Train Station - the day it opened.

Building Envelopes

You may have never heard of a building envelope as they are usually only required in Special Rural and Special Residential zones. The main purpose of a building envelope is to limit the spread of all dwellings, sheds/workshops, swimming pools, effluent disposal facilities, water tanks and landscaping to just one part of the property.

Building envelopes are usually situated in the most degraded part of the property and are located in such a way as to have minimal impact on local vegetation, including trees, wetlands and any other natural features.

Another stipulation is that they are not situated any closer than 20 m from the front boundary, 50 m from the rear boundary and a minimum of 10 m from the side boundary, to minimise the potential impacts to surrounding neighbours. These distances may vary depending on local council and size of property.

A building envelope is usually no larger than 2,000 m². The size, setback and location of a building envelope can be varied by council if it is satisfied that such a variation is desirable. In some instances a building envelope can be split to allow the minimum disturbance to surrounding vegetation or to locate workshops, sheds etc. further away from the main dwelling.

The main point here is to check with your local council to ascertain the specific rules and regulations in regard to building envelopes in your particular location.

We have a five sided building envelope; to indicate the location of every corner for future reference we planted a pine tree at each of the five corners. In the intervening years this has proved most useful when trying to establish if something is in or out of the building envelope. If we had just banged in a couple of pegs at the corners they would be long gone by now, but instead we have medium size healthy pine trees marking the corners. The 'marker' doesn't necessarily have to be a pine tree and the idea may not work in all circumstances. This concept could also be useful in other situations where a permanent marker is required.

After Land Purchase

Once you have selected and purchased your perfect property as well as deciding what to build, you have a number of other tasks to complete. You will need adequate firebreaks, a secure perimeter fence, water supply, power box, a driveway, and a cleared 20 m circle of safety around the proposed house site. Read on for further explanation.

Firebreaks (Fire Access Trails)

All existing properties and practically all new subdivisions should have some form of firebreak already installed. However, there is a good chance that it will be inadequate or barely meet the regulations.



The term 'firebreak' often conjures up a false sense of security. A firebreak in the path of a fire will not necessarily stop it dead in its tracks, in fact it probably won't. Depending on wind conditions, temperature, fuel load and the state of the firebreak, there is a good chance that the fire will jump straight across the firebreak at one or more locations. Conversely a firebreak will, under most circumstances, stop a fire burning back into the wind and is arguably one of a firebreak's most useful attributes. A firebreak can also provide a relatively safe edge from which to conduct a back burn. Fire fighters will often let a fire burn back into the wind and up to a firebreak where the fire will usually extinguish itself.

Probably the most useful role of a firebreak is to allow a 4WD Fire Fighting Unit to be able to drive safely around the property and thus gain access to anything that is burning. In reality this means any 4WD vehicle should be able to traverse along a firebreak without anything touching it on the sides or from above, hence the 3 m wide by 4 m high legislation (in some shires this has already been changed to 4 m wide by 4 m high). A good way to test this is to drive a 4WD or tractor around the firebreak ensuring that there is easy access and that there are no overhanging branches. Perhaps firebreaks would be better identified if they were referred to as 'Fire Access Trails'. This term better describes their use and does not conjure up the false sense of security mentioned above.

For a firebreak to meet the minimum standards and be trafficable, it needs to be at least 3 m wide, 4 m tall, bare earth with all burnable material removed and maintained as such throughout the fire season. Ideally all firebreaks should be run straight along and adjacent to the boundary fence line. If your neighbour's firebreak is adjacent to the other side of the fence and you keep the fence line clear of all trees, shrubs, grass and leaves, you have effectively doubled the width of firebreak.

3 m is the minimum width of a firebreak but I suggest where possible it is increased to 4 m wide. Due to the steady and relentless growth of understorey² towards the light, making the firebreak 4 m wide will help to keep it at least 3 m wide during the fire season.

Where possible large trees should be protected and sometimes this means they are in the way of a firebreak. If this is the case simply construct the firebreak to go around the tree and veer back to the fence line, maintaining the 3 m width and 4 m height. In these circumstances it is also advisable to keep the area of ground between the fence line and the detoured firebreak clear, by removing with hand tools, all fuel (dead bush, grass etc.), to assist in the protection of the fence.

² The plants growing at the lower level (saplings, seedlings, shrubs, bushes etc.) under the main canopy.

