

The 'green' chickens of Sassafras

The winds of change are blowing across the North-West Coast. This is a region of rich volcanic soils and reliable rainfall, of verdant farmland and postcard vistas where a family could once make a good living, by Australian standards, on a tiny farm, dairying, or growing spuds for the Melbourne and Sydney markets. Forty years ago it was often described as a 'land of milk and money'.

A familiar feature of many small farms was the traditional windmill used to raise modest quantities of domestic water for hard-working families or to fill drinking troughs for thirsty Jerseys. Free power from the wind always seemed appealing and in their own way windmills are beautiful machines.

Dairying and potato growing are still major industries in the North-West but the nature of farming has changed with changing Australian and world markets. So has poultry farming. Once everyone had 'a few chooks'; efficient poultry production now depends far more on larger operations.

Rob Nichols's connections with poultry farming – and wind power – began with his maternal grandfather, Fred Dickham, in Leicester, UK, 80 years ago. His grandfather, also a poultry farmer, had operated a windmill that was used to grind stock feed. Although, sadly, the mill is no longer operating, Rob has a photograph of it in his office. (The mill's upper section was removed during World War II because it presented a hazard to aircraft landing and taking off from a nearby RAF airfield.)



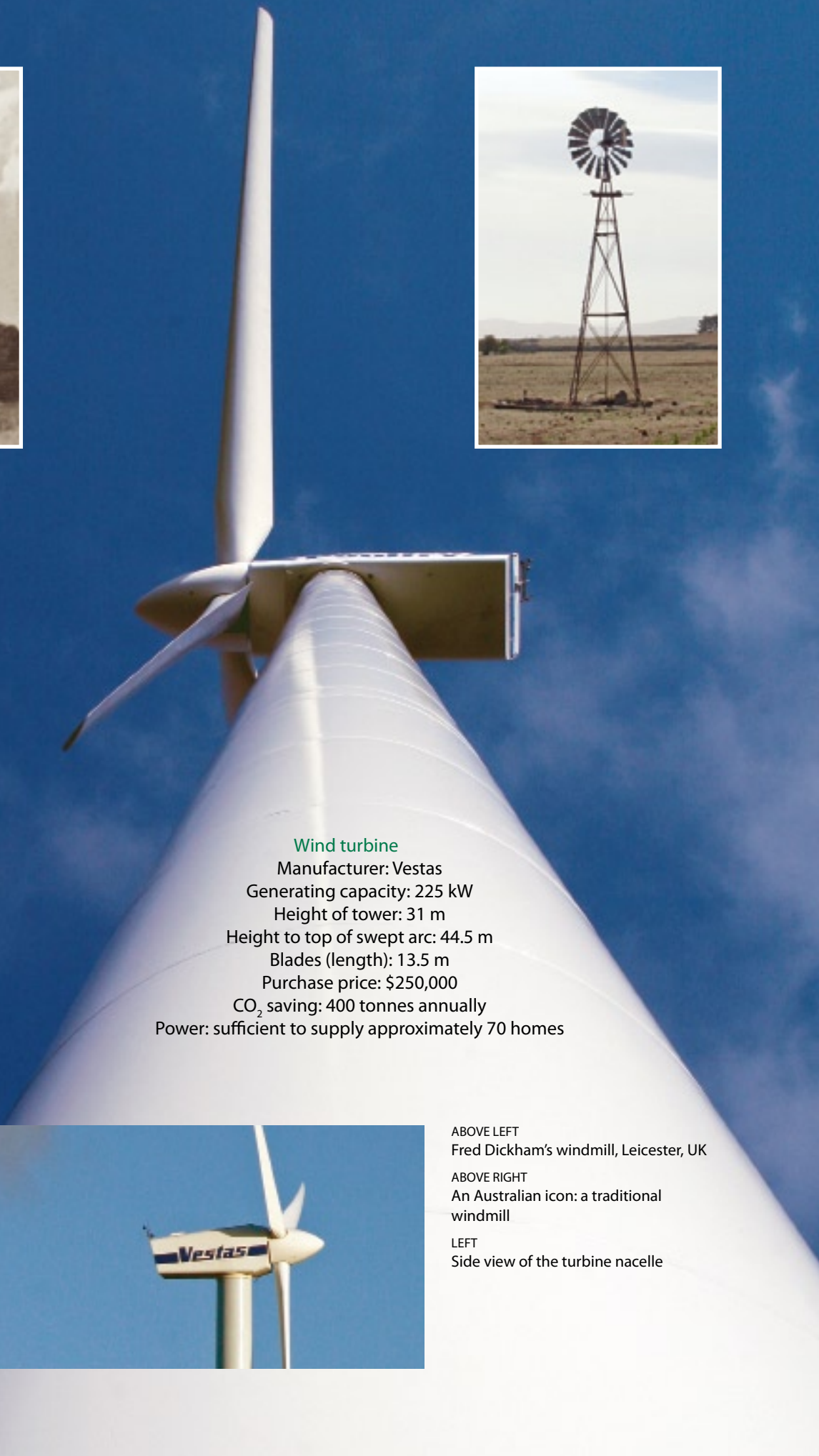
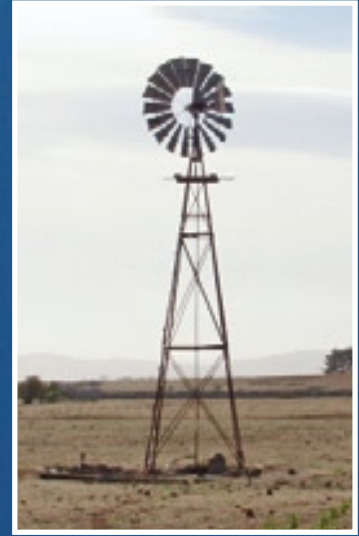
In 1982 the Nichols family emigrated from the UK, where they had been poultry producers. They began their new life farming on the North-West Coast. Brother Andrew established a hatchery at Sisters Creek and now supplies chickens to the Sassafras property. (In 2004 he won the national Landcare primary producer award.) At a Rural Youth function in Deloraine, Rob met Jo Gorrige. They later married and commenced their own poultry operation – in partnership with Rob's parents – about 20 years ago supplying fresh poultry to Federal Hotel's Wrest Point Casino. (Rob's father spent a total of 50 years in the business.) They quickly forged a reputation for uncompromising quality and their business grew and prospered. Nichols Poultry now supplies about 20% of the chickens in Tasmania. Although the farm primarily produces poultry, their 250-hectare property at Sassafras remains in many ways a traditional North-West Coast

ABOVE
Jo and Rob
Nichols in the
control room of the
turbine

BELOW
Nichols Poultry
processing factory
from the nacelle of
the wind turbine
31 m above the
ground

WRITER AND
PHOTOGRAPHER
Warren
Boyles





Wind turbine

Manufacturer: Vestas

Generating capacity: 225 kW

Height of tower: 31 m

Height to top of swept arc: 44.5 m

Blades (length): 13.5 m

Purchase price: \$250,000

CO₂ saving: 400 tonnes annually

Power: sufficient to supply approximately 70 homes



ABOVE LEFT
Fred Dickham's windmill, Leicester, UK

ABOVE RIGHT
An Australian icon: a traditional
windmill

LEFT
Side view of the turbine nacelle



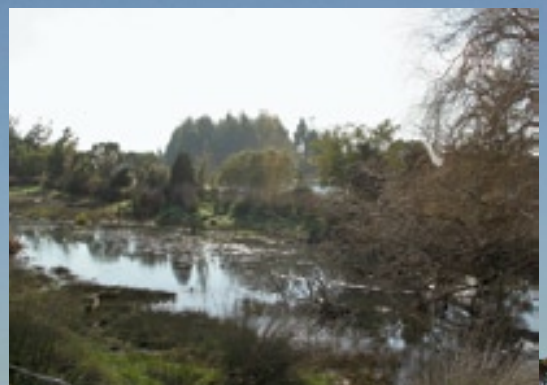
mixed farm, grazing sheep and cattle and producing cereals (predominantly wheat), onions, potatoes and as well as pyrethrum.

Rob is very widely read on environmental issues and is firmly of the opinion that good environmental practice is good for both the environment and for business efficiency. For example, 'waste' water from the factory, which carries a relatively high level of nutrient, is all retained on the farm. This water has been used to create a wetlands area that has become a haven for waterbirds. Jo and Rob enjoy having their own wildlife park and participate in the 'Land for Wildlife' program. Wetlands are the ultimate purifying system, ensuring that water going into the creek is of the highest quality.

Power is a major cost for their processing factory so some years ago Rob began to explore the possibility of installing a wind turbine. He discovered that, somewhat paradoxically, Denmark, a world leader in the generation of wind power, is seeking to reduce its number of wind turbines. It is aiming to increase its total

generating capacity by installing fewer but much larger machines. This means that there were second-hand machines available at prices that appeared to make economic sense for the scale of the Nichols operation. So 'in a moment of madness' it was decided to purchase and install an industrial scale wind turbine adjacent to the factory. From the planning stage to its official launch in May this year required four years of battling logistical problems and bureaucracy.

The Nichols windmill is a very modern 225-kW machine manufactured by the Danish company Vestas. It towers over the entrance to



From Roaring 40s Renewable Energy

When Roaring 40s heard what Rob Nichols was planning for his poultry business in northern Tasmania, we were extremely pleased. The catchcry of Roaring 40s is 'Thinking Energy'; Rob's initiative is exactly the kind of forward thinking that companies and individuals need as we move towards a carbon-constrained future.

We couldn't wait to see Rob's project get off the ground and we were very keen to be involved and to offer any assistance based on our own experiences of 'farming the wind' in Tasmania. To Rob's credit, he was already most of the way there. All that was required from Roaring 40s were words of encouragement and some familiarisation with the technology through a site visit to our Woolnorth wind farm on the far North-West Coast. (See Issue 41.)

The success that Rob and his team have achieved with this development should make all Tasmanians proud. A local company showcasing alternative, renewable energy to the world in a time when the decisions we make now will impact greatly on our future. Rob's definitely 'Thinking Energy' and Roaring 40s wish his venture all the success it deserves.

Josh Bradshaw

the farm, and, like the windmills of the past is, to my eyes, a beautiful object. If indeed form follows function, then modern wind turbines epitomise this principle.

The turbine cost \$250,000 with additional costs for transport and installation. In recognition of the significance of the project the state government provided \$65,000 through its CleanBiz Tasmania Grant Scheme – a scheme designed to foster innovation. Rob also received technical support from Roaring 40s Renewable Energy, Tasmania's highly successful renewable energy company. The turbine is now providing 60% of the power needs for the Nichols factory: an annual saving of \$60,000. Rob expects the capital investment to be recovered in three to five years at today's energy prices. This is a project that exemplifies the principle that what is good for the environment is good for business.

So the next time you select a Nichols chicken you will not only be purchasing a premium quality Tasmanian product but you will also be buying probably the 'greenest' chicken in Australia. ☺☺

One chicken farm that doesn't run on batteries

As the world makes the transition to a more varied and environmentally-friendly energy mix, Nichols Poultry is already in the forefront. By turning to existing wind technology, Nichols has established an independent, safe and reliable power source for its business.

Smart businesses move with the times, and at Roaring 40s, that's exactly what we do too. We've capitalised on the growing wind energy market to become the leading foreign wind investor in China, and we have a number of wind farms in development throughout Australia and in other parts of Asia.

Nichols Poultry raises its chickens the way that nature intended. At Roaring 40s, we think that working with nature is the solution too. Our turbines harvest power from the wind, and that's about as natural as it gets.

That's called Thinking Energy.

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