

TreeNote

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Farmer experiences in farm forestry

Noel and May Klopper, Mayanup

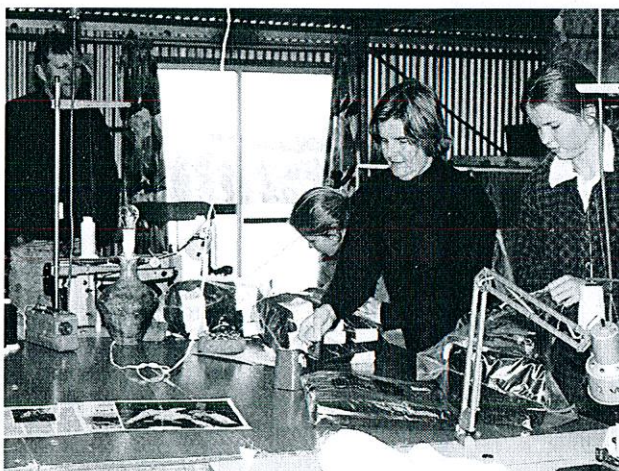
Planting bluegums on their property between Bridgetown and Boyup Brook has enabled Noel and May Klopper to explore a new industry. They have developed the 'Storm Boy' brand of woollen jumpers and socks. In the process, they've discovered that the south-west has enormous potential to be the base for new industry that is competitive on a world scale. Such industry enriches farming communities by creating employment and adding value to farm produce.

Incentive to plant trees

For Noel and May, the decision to plant trees on their farm was driven by the need to preserve a large potential supply of fresh water. By damming a gully, Noel has the potential to harvest 30 million gallons of fresh water which can be used to support many future commercial enterprises.

Farm forestry's major benefits: Noel and May Klopper

- Trees enhance dam water quality.
- Income diversification enabling development of another industry.



The Klopper family are all involved in production of 'Storm Boy'. Noel, May, Naomi and Joanna packing heavy knit jumpers.

Deciding to plant trees

Noel and May found that the decision to plant most of the farm to trees was very difficult. Noel likened it to his father's experience with his orchard. In the Depression years of the 1930s, growing fruit was a good way to farm; it provided a strong and stable income. Later, the trees grew old, the fruit quality declined and prices dropped.

Although it became necessary, it was hard to change from the way of farming that had supported the family for so long. Like his father, Noel also found it hard to change the direction of the farm. In a sense, the decision to plant trees was harder because the quality of farm produce was not declining. However, the move to tree farming was financially sound because it enabled reasonable returns to be made from the farm and freed up time and capital for the development of their new venture. Having made the change Noel can now say that it was not as bad as it seemed at the time.

However, if given the opportunity to start again, there are some parts of the farm that Noel would not have planted to bluegums. The trees are more prone to drought death to the north-east where the soil type is a loamy sand with fine gravel over a fairly hard clay at about 20 cm. This country produces top quality hay suitable for milling and is also excellent sheep country. While farming this soil type conventionally, Noel was able to turn off a strong flock of heavy weaners after a month of grazing by mowing and conditioning the pasture at the boot stage.

Finding the right niche for trees

Noel challenges the idea that the Bridgetown-Boyup Brook area must only produce beef and wool, especially when large price increases will be required to maintain a normal lifestyle. He does not believe that growing trees

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will be the right venture for all of the farms in the area or on all parts of the farm. What he does challenge is the idea that the move to other ways of farming means that there will not be enough food or fibre produced in the world. He thinks it will only change where and how it is produced.

Building the woollen product business

Noel had long been fascinated by the transformation of a fleece into a woollen garment and had always wanted to make something with his own wool. Every year a single wether grows enough wool to make three cones of yarn.

On moving to the present family farm at Mayanup in 1984, Noel decided it was time to begin woollen manufacture and bought his first knitting machine. He decided that if nothing else, he would knit his few cones of yarn into jumpers and sell them. That was how the business started and it went through two phases of development.

Noel, May and their daughters Naomi and Joanna, built up the knowledge required to work and maintain their knitting machines and produce a product that was acceptable and saleable to the public. They began by knitting heavyweight jumpers and later developed fine wool jumpers and woollen socks ('Storm Boy' brand).

However, as the business developed, Noel realised that it would be a full-time job producing his own wool for jumpers and socks and he needed to use finer wool from elsewhere. On going through a period of lowered returns Noel knew that more money and time needed to be put into developing new marketing strategies for 'Storm Boy' if it was to remain viable. At that point tree farming seemed a good option.

Enter tree farming

Without regular income it would not have been possible to continue. Noel and May decided to enter a Tasmanian bluegum share-farming arrangement with Bunnings Treefarms. The return of \$150/ha/yr for leasing land to Bunnings was competitive with what the land could earn by conventional farming. While returns could be greater in good years, they could also be poorer in bad years. May describes the regular payments as a form of "drought proofing" against years of low returns. In addition, it freed up the labour which was necessary for the successful development of their business.

'Storm Boy' – second stage

With about 420 ha planted to bluegums, and the annual income derived from the sharefarming agreement, it was possible to develop the second stage of the 'Storm Boy' venture. This was a full-time job requiring market development in order to become competitive at an international level. Product refinements continued to be made while keeping the cost of production to a level that allowed competitive pricing in the market place.

Home-grown industry vital

Noel believes that the country can be viewed like a large farm, and that we do not need to manufacture offshore when we can do it here.

The future

While he is uncertain about still being actively farming when the second rotation of bluegums is over, Noel believes the farm will be in good shape for whatever venture is to follow, whether that be growing trees or crops to produce fibre, farm-grown sawlogs, specialty hay production, irrigated horticulture and cropping, livestock, or a bit of everything. Noel hopes that in the future the area will not have to rely disproportionately on tourism - rather there will be more farms with thriving businesses creating employment and adding value to Australian produce.

Further information

Contact your local Department of Conservation and Land Management or Agriculture Western Australia office for the name of your nearest adviser representing the Farm Forestry Advisory Service. Other *TreeNote* titles are available from these offices in the higher rainfall area of southern Western Australia.

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