

# Farming in the Shire pays off for

Having one of the region's largest tourism ventures on their farm is a brush with showbiz for the Alexander family, reports **Gerald Piddock**.

**T**HE Alexander family had never heard of Peter Jackson when in 1998 he first knocked on the front door of their Matamata farm.

The movie maker had spotted their 560ha sheep and beef farm from the air and thought the site could make an ideal set for what was to be *The Lord of the Rings* movies.

Unfortunately, Jackson chose the wrong time to call in on Ian Alexander, his son Craig told a large crowd of international farming journalists in Waikato for the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists Congress in Hamilton.

"Dad had never heard of him or *The Lord of the Rings* and shooed him off because it was the second half of the big [NPC] rugby final," he said.

Not deterred, Jackson returned again and told the family he was planning to make a movie on the scope of James Cameron's *Titanic*. Craig said the news was greeted with scepticism. Previously, the family had allowed a rural bank to film an advertisement on the farm, a process he described as "a circus".

"We said we would never do that again and when Peter Jackson came knocking, we had never heard of him.

"He was true to his word and we have an awesome relationship with him and he never nucked us around one little bit."

Today, the movie set remains and Hobbiton has grown into one of the region's biggest tourist attractions, bringing in more than 20,000 visitors a year.

A permanent set was built when *The Hobbit* movies were filmed and Jackson also bought into the business, now owning half of it.

"We're looking at doing 300,000 visitors now. That's the interest



The Alexanders' herd of angus breeding cows are mainly used to groom the pastures on the 560ha property.

we have got to."

Confidentiality was key and nobody leaked details of the film until one day a convoy of army trucks arrived on the farm.

"That got the neighbours talking," he said.

Today, the tourism venture has about 70 permanent staff and twice that number over the busy summer season. It's given the Matamata district a huge boost in earnings and the region is now thriving.

It also gave tourists a taste of New Zealand that was distinct from the typical destinations of Auckland, Rotorua and Queenstown. Buses now regularly stop off at Hobbiton on the way to Rotorua.

"The wow factor, particularly from Asian people who have come from a concrete city – when they drive through here, they are absolutely gobsmacked.

"We take it for granted, but it's a big part of the overall tour."

In the early days of Hobbiton, he remembered showing an orphaned lamb to a minivan full of

tourists. "They wouldn't touch it and after three minutes they touched it and I couldn't get it off them. They had never experienced this and all I was thinking was, 'What I am I going to do with this lamb?'"

"It's like my kids seeing a giraffe at the zoo, we just take it for granted."

On other occasions, if a tourist missed their seat on the minibus and he would give them a ride on the back of his quadbike to catch up. "They were absolutely gobsmacked and by the time they got out there, they had completely forgotten about Hobbiton."

Right alongside the tourism business is their sheep and beef operation, on probably the country's most-visited farm.

While not many of the tourists see the whole farm, the stock is still very much in the public eye, meaning Craig has to be strategic in where he farms stock because of the occasional gate left open by an unsuspecting tourist.

Hobbiton is also ring-fenced with paddocks for stock on either side. "If we're driving a mob of 1500-2000 ewes down the main track and there is a [tourist] bus going through that can be pretty frustrating."

The family business began on the western coast of Taranaki before Ian Alexander and his brother moved to Waikato. Today they farm 560ha, lamb 4300 Romney ewes and calve 170 angus breeding cows, finishing all of the stock on the farm. The farm has

an 80:20 sheep to cattle ratio, with the cattle used to groom the pastures in the spring and summer.

When the family arrived on the farm in 1978 it was smothered in nodding thistles.

Throughout his school years, his father made Craig and his brothers remove the weed using a thistle hoe. "The paddock where Hobbiton is now was smothered. We were spending five days a week in there. We were aged 10 and 11 doing full days on these thistles."

It paid off because today the farm's clean pastures resembled a golf course.

"It proved to be the foundation for the ethics we believe in."

Although linked at a governance level, the farm and tourism operation are kept as separate as possible so both brothers can focus their full attention on each business. Until four years ago, Craig farmed in conjunction with his youngest brother Dean before he moved to Southland to run the family's 600-cow dairy farm. His middle brother Russell runs

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# Hobbiton family

the Hobbiton tourism venture and it was he who drove it.

People kept on turning up to see where the movie was filmed, Russell saw an opportunity and he approached New Line Cinemas with a proposal. "It took him two years of hounding away, every month with their lawyers," Craig said.

Jackson then became a 50 per cent partner when *The Hobbit* films were made and a permanent set was built. "We wouldn't have been able to do that on my own." It is run by a four-person board with the Alexanders having two members and Jackson two.

The farm is the home of Alexander Farming Genetics, a romney stud that sells rams to commercial farmers and other studs for up to \$10,000 as well as running a commercial flock. One of their key focuses in their stud is producing rams that are a good general-purpose animal with high facial eczema tolerance as well as worm resistance and resilience.

The farm has been testing its sheep for facial eczema for 30 years, resulting in rams with a high tolerance to the disease. He likes the romney breed because of its dual purpose nature and good constitution.

The farm produces about 6000 lambs every year with a lambing percentage of 150 per cent. The male lambs are finished while the top third of the ewe lambs are kept as replacements and the other two-thirds are sold to commercial farmers. The replacement ewes for the commercial flock are selected primarily on size.

He is a member of Advanced Romney Designer Genetics, a group of North Island romney breeders, and most of his rams come from within this group.

The group progeny-tests 30 rams a year with the best being used among the group.

His beef is processed by Wilson Hellaby, Greenlea and Afco and sheepmeat is sold to the local trade.

The family also owns a small block near Hamilton and once the lambs reach their required weight, they are sent to there before processing.

The lambs are born in August-September and stay with their mother until weaning in December. All of the sheep are shorn in early January and the adults are shorn again in May-June. The lambs are finished to about 45kg liveweight (19kg carcassweight).

The replacement hoggets and the beef cows are wintered on feed crops.

He is considering using the Hobbiton brand for his meat and wool.

When Dean left to run the dairy farm, Craig begun using electronic

ear-tagging in his stud flock along with automatic drafting at the sheep yards to help save time and eliminate some of his paperwork.

The farm has been hit by three severe droughts over the past three years and he has fed the sheep grass silage to keep their weight on.

Black beetle has also been an issue and 100ha has been converted into a summer crop of chicory and pasia before returning to ryegrass. Craig hopes this "gamechanger" will help break the lifecycle of the beetle. He is also re-grassing parts of the farm.

He told the journalists he believed that if he remained innovative and kept creating interest there was no reason why interest in Hobbiton would wane over time. The farm and wider business structure were also well placed to handle future challenges and for the next generation of Alexanders to become involved in the business.

"We have taken the avenue of trying to develop and diversify as a family to give us the strength to go down whatever channel we want. It's up to us how far it can go."

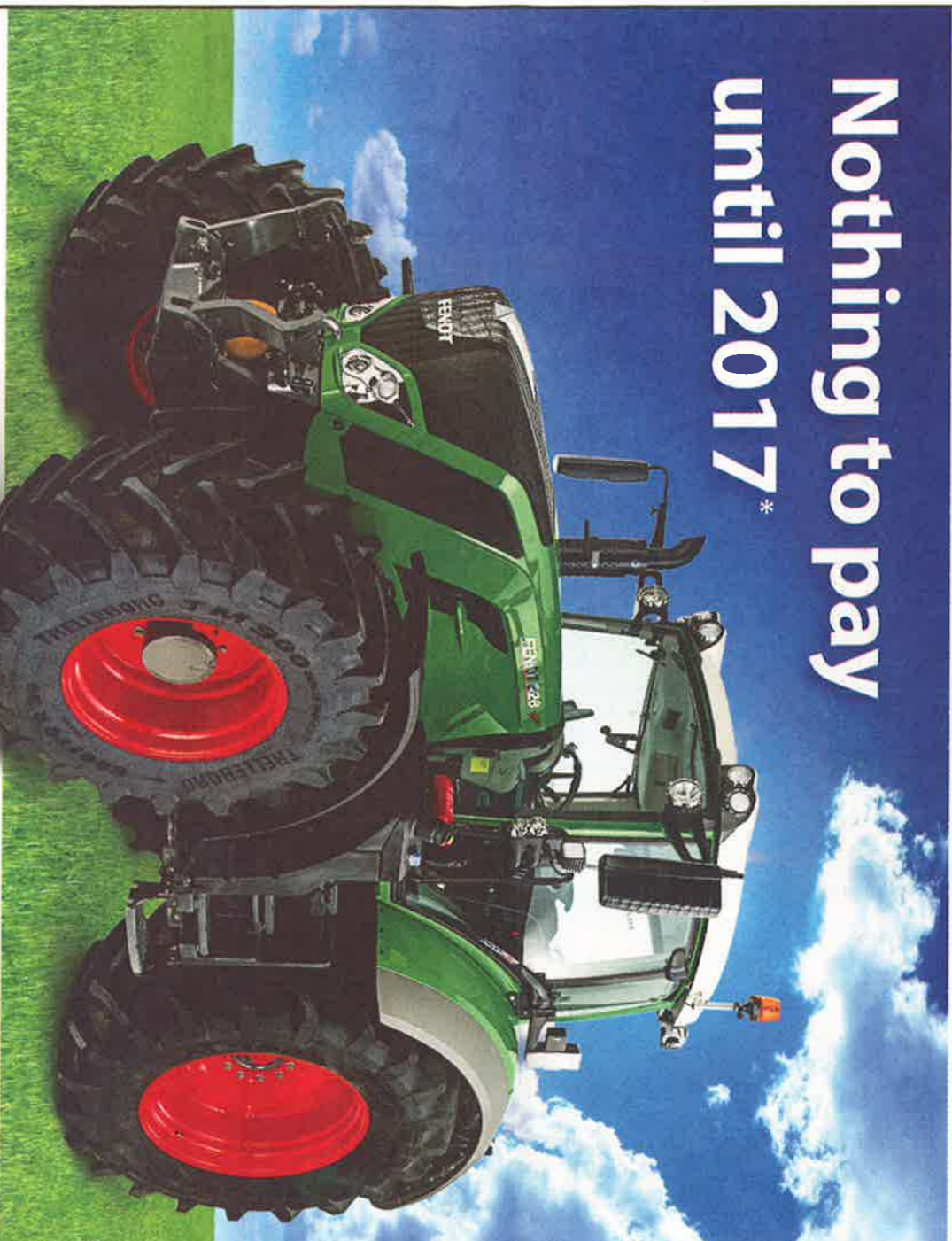


Is it the Shire or the Alexanders' farm? The view from Bilbo Baggins' house.

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