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A diverse business with textiles and accommodation spreads Fiona's income streams.

strong local community. "You get all sorts but everyone is supportive."

Since coming home to work on the farm in 2011 she has started her Coast Road Interiors line of cushions and soft furnishings, renovated the shearer's quarters into Coast Road Backpackers, taken on the job as wool classer for the family farms, and is part-time bar manager at the local Pongaroa Hotel.

If that wasn't enough to keep her busy she is actively involved in the community, acting as treasurer for the local Akitio hall and sitting on the equestrian committee for the Dannevirke A&P Show. She travels to Dannevirke once a week to play tennis, goes horse riding and plays netball. On top of this, she maintains the large, established garden and lawns at Ware Ware.

Fiona works alongside Ware Ware's long-standing stock manager, Rod Searle, who does the majority of the stock work. "I just fill in the gaps like drenching or spraying and I class all the wool here as well as at Moanaroa (another family property).

"Rod has been with us nearly 30 years and he's been amazing to me, like a mentor. We get along well, that makes a difference. He takes care of all the stock in terms of grazing, but he involves me."

Her parents, Dan and Barbara, purchased Ware Ware from Barbara's family in 1971. It was originally run alongside Moanaroa, which was also owned by Barbara's family. Fiona and her brother Hugh grew up at Ware Ware and Dan also supervised the running of Moanaroa for her great aunts.

They were keen for Moanaroa to stay in the family and in 1999 they bought the rest of the family out.

After going away to boarding school Fiona went to Wellington to study a Fashion Design Diploma at polytech. She then spent three years working for a dressmaker in Wellington.

"I enjoy textiles and design. I thought about what I was good at at school, and I loved making things and

of design and textiles with farming and create a diverse business. Rebecca Harper visited to see how she's making it work, her way.

The bright lights of London's fashion industry are worlds away from life on a coastal hill country sheep and beef station in northern Wairarapa, but for Fiona Ramsden, the transition home to her family farm was a natural one.

Fiona grew up at Ware Ware Station between Pongaroa and Akitio, and it has always been home to her.

"Even when I was working in Wellington and away overseas I felt a strong connection and always wanted to come home. I have a strong bond to the land and couldn't imagine living anywhere else."

Despite the isolation and weather extremes – it's not uncommon for her to be flooded in – Fiona loves living on the station and says there is a

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design – that was my thing. It's a pretty cutthroat industry but it gave me a trade."

Her first job was as a machinist, making jackets and dresses for the store as well as made-to-measure garments for clients. "I can still measure up and pattern make. I can make my own clothes if I want, it's just a time thing these days."

Overseas beckoned and Fiona headed for London where she worked in fashion stores like Alexander McQueen and Jean Paul Gaultier, sourcing clothes for stylists.

"It was fun and I loved living in London but it was expensive and I ended up working in a country pub in Oxford and then doing care work for people who needed help cooking and running their household."

This enabled her to save and travel through the Middle East as well as five months backpacking through Europe.

"Living in London, and even Wellington, the whole time I was away all I thought about was home and wanting to be back home. Now, here I am."

Living alone, far from town doesn't bother her. She is resilient and able to adapt to whatever life throws at her.

"I'm the extreme really, as a single woman, but I don't mind. I have so much going on. It might be an hour to town but you can get stuck in traffic for an hour living in Auckland so I don't see it as a big deal. You have to be organised and have enough milk and things. You just work it out."

With a plentiful veggie garden and bulging pantry Fiona reckons she could last for a month without going to town, if she had to. The Owahanga River, which bounds Ware Ware and snakes around below her driveway and home, is tidal. The combination of high tide and heavy rain from the ranges can cause the river to rise quickly, flooding her in.

Coming back from overseas she returned to Wellington for four years and then moved to Hawke's Bay for three years, working for interior design companies, before heading home to the farm. Her parents were very supportive of her decision to come home.

"I think being away and coming home you feel more appreciative of being out on the farm, there are lots of people who would love to be able to come home to a farm. It's the hills I think. It's hard to explain. I think the draw is the love of the land. You are only a caretaker in the world for so long and you make sure you do your best to care for the land."

A love of wool

Fiona gained her appreciation for wool from her father Dan, who is passionate about the fibre.

"I learned to class wool from him and am completing the Lincoln University course in wool technology at the moment. It's another skill to have under my belt and is useful on the farm," Fiona says.

"I love wool, I love textiles. It's an amazing product, just very unappreciated. We are getting good prices at the moment and classing the wool does make a difference, with the finer edge taken out you can get a better price. Being in the shed you can eliminate faults, take out vegetation and make sure the bales are labelled and classed properly.

"Keeping the sheds up-to-date takes a lot of time. My father is very passionate about his wool, we always say if you can't find him he'll be in the shed."

Ware Ware also has a Romney stud, founded by Dan, and Fiona does all the stud tagging and recording. She's keen to further develop her interest in the stud and ramp up the number of rams sold.

She has created new logos and websites for both Ware Ware Romneys and Moanaroa's Angus stud to help lift their profile.

Farming, hospitality and design

At first glance farming and fashion might seem incompatible, but Fiona has been able to incorporate her love of design and textiles, particularly wool, with her farm life. She has the best of both worlds.

Coast Road Interiors happened almost by accident. Fiona made a pile of cushions for a local school gala and also made some for her brother with their farm names on. More and more people started asking about them and placing orders.

"You can have your farm name on a cushion, what year it was established, a stud name and brand. They



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make good gifts for a man or look good on a nice leather sofa. They are rural and a bit different. They look like what you had on the wool bales in the olden days and are printed on natural linen."

Revamping the shearer's quarters and turning it into Coast Road Backpackers was something that came naturally to her. Guests can expect good old-fashioned country hospitality as Fiona has a knack for entertaining and looking after people.

"It was a project. It's what I do, always hosting people and wanting to make sure they feel welcome and put on a good spread. I think that all came from my mum and how she does things."

She identified a lack of accommodation for workers and visitors in the area and realised that, with shearing gangs travelling out daily for main shear, the shearer's quarters was underused.

"I didn't want it to go to wrack and ruin."

Through a property maintenance company in Palmerston North she has also instigated a staggered approach to up-keeping the large number of buildings on all the family properties. One of the first jobs was to paint the buildings the same colour scheme across the farms.

"It's another branding thing, being consistent and having the same colours."

Fiona sourced most of the things for the backpackers from second hand shop and sales, upcycling items herself. She's got a nose for a bargain or hunting out backyard treasures that can be turned into furniture – like an unwanted wood pallet that was painted, had castors added and now acts as the coffee table.

"The mirror in the bathroom I got our fencer to make. We framed it with old rails from the sheep yards."

The comfortable backpackers sleeps 11 and with Akitio Beach, local walks and waterfalls handy, as well as a nearby golf course and country pub, there's no shortage of activities.

"It's mostly word of mouth at the moment. People come out here as a retreat from Wellington and think it's great. There is no cellphone reception and they can relax."

She hopes to develop more activities for visitors, like farm walks or having horse trekkers come to stay.

Her goals are to further lift the profile of both Ware Ware Romneys and Moanaroa Angus, to find more ways to incorporate wool into her textiles, and to concentrate on her design and farmstay business.

Coming home, she was determined to cut her own track and make her mark.

"My thing has been to prove that I can do it on my own, and do it well."

She has certainly achieved that goal, and is showing no signs of slowing down. "I'm here for the long haul. I want to keep the farms going and in the family."

Moanaroa Farming Company

Fiona is a director of Moanaroa Farming Company, which is a family-run sheep and beef steep hill-country operation.

The company comprises two breeding farms, Ware Ware and Moanaroa, and a finishing farm, Maku. They run a total of 23,000 stock units.

Fiona's brother, Hugh, is the stock manager at Moanaroa. He lives there with his wife Kate and their two children.

Her parents, Dan and Barbara, founded Moanaroa Farming Company and also live at Moanaroa, which is located right on the coast at Akitio.

Fiona describes Dan as the big chief, the chief executive. "He keeps everyone in line."

Ware Ware: 1250ha breeding farm at Akitio, home of Ware Ware Romney stud

Moanaroa: 1550ha breeding farm at Akitio, home of Moanaroa Angus stud

Maku: 502ha summer safe finishing farm under the Puketoi Range, bought in 2008 to combat the dry and enable stock to be finished rather than relying on the store market

www.coastroadbackpackers.co.nz

