



# Land of Hope

A legendary grazing property in New South Wales has been reinvigorated with a new-generation farming enterprise.

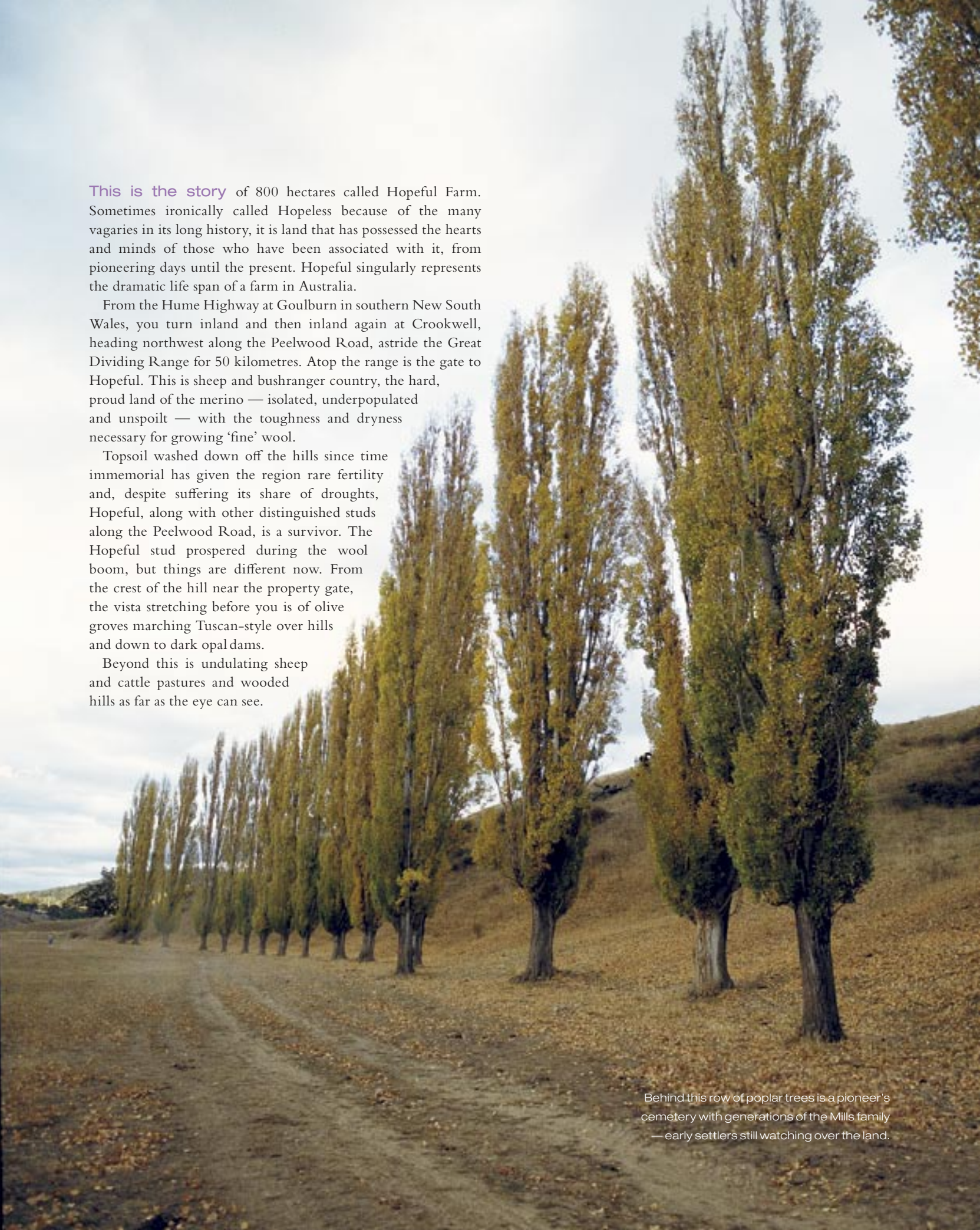
WORDS BY FRANNIE HOPKIRK. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE FILSHIE

This is the story of 800 hectares called Hopeful Farm. Sometimes ironically called Hopeless because of the many vagaries in its long history, it is land that has possessed the hearts and minds of those who have been associated with it, from pioneering days until the present. Hopeful singularly represents the dramatic life span of a farm in Australia.

From the Hume Highway at Goulburn in southern New South Wales, you turn inland and then inland again at Crookwell, heading northwest along the Peelwood Road, astride the Great Dividing Range for 50 kilometres. Atop the range is the gate to Hopeful. This is sheep and bushranger country, the hard, proud land of the merino — isolated, underpopulated and unspoilt — with the toughness and dryness necessary for growing 'fine' wool.

Topsoil washed down off the hills since time immemorial has given the region rare fertility and, despite suffering its share of droughts, Hopeful, along with other distinguished studs along the Peelwood Road, is a survivor. The Hopeful stud prospered during the wool boom, but things are different now. From the crest of the hill near the property gate, the vista stretching before you is of olive groves marching Tuscan-style over hills and down to dark opal dams.

Beyond this is undulating sheep and cattle pastures and wooded hills as far as the eye can see.



Behind this row of poplar trees is a pioneer's cemetery with generations of the Mills family — early settlers still watching over the land.



Hopeful signs of life. **Clockwise from above** Fresh herbs and tomatoes from the kitchen garden; olives ripening on the tree and harvested; marrows and dried sunflowers; olives ready for processing. Robert Armstrong has learned much about growing olives and making oil, is a regular judge at national and regional olive oil shows, and recently a *Choice* magazine study. Olevano olives and extra virgin olive oils from Hopeful are available through Nicholas Foods in Sydney.





Robert Armstrong (left) with Bette and David Badham at Hopeful. **Right** The old farmhouse has a new stone addition.



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David and Bette Badham found Hopeful nearly 40 years ago, when it was just 200 hectares called the Big Meadow. With a radiology practice in Sydney, David was known for many years as a ‘Pitt Street farmer’, but his passion for the land is his oxygen. For decades he has stocked, supervised and lived on the land as often as his medical practice would allow.

Bette Badham has long been the backbone of the operation. She presided over Hopeful during the halcyon days when musters were done on horseback, and picnics were down by the creek. Her knowledge and affinity with the land and its stock, particularly cattle, has played an important role in the working philosophy and decision-making of the property; Hopeful had long been an economic base for the area during difficult times, by employing locals in need of work.

Today David is retired from his Sydney practice, and he and Bette live at Glass Rock, an old stone cottage on the property — named after the translucent local slate from which it is built.

Like many farms in the region, indeed across Australia, Hopeful, has survived changing markets, drought and falling wool prices and is again enjoying a fruitful era. It has long since expanded to 800 hectares and continues its grazing tradition, running 150 Black Angus breeding cows with six bulls. The weaners are sold for grain-fattening and eventually Japanese tables. But the new

face and future of Hopeful is as a leader in organically grown olives and boutique cold-pressed olive oils for the table.

The changes have come about since the relationship between the Badhams and long-time family friend Robert Armstrong shifted gear into a business partnership in 1997.

Robert is an entrepreneur, the head of Sydney gourmet food company, Nicholas Foods, which supplies restaurants and retailers such as David Jones. He had long been keen to forge a fruitful and lucrative link to this land he has loved for decades and together with David nitted out a gutsy, four-year plan to grow olives organically on those parts of the farm where the pasture grew poorly — the drier, rockier parts.

He now occupies Hopeful’s original wattle and daub farmhouse, an 1850s charmer which he has added to with subtlety. Robert is a passionate cook and turned the original kitchen from a smoke-stained, windowless cave into a state-of-the-art, functional space with good natural light and room to move. It now opens onto a timber deck that overlooks the creek, willows and hills. The stone extension is so sensitive to the fabric of the house, it’s difficult to detect where the old structure ends and the new begins — although the kitchen’s stainless steel is a giveaway.

Robert is also passionate about growing food and he has created a bountiful potager where he grows as many types of herb and



Hopeful hills. **Right**  
Robert's potager. **Far right**  
A proud old row of poplars.

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edible flowers as conditions will allow. The kitchen staples are there too — potatoes (three different varieties), sweet corns, pumpkin, heritage beans, squash and melons. In a large orchard Robert grows heritage stone fruits, apples, pears, figs and nuts.

But Robert’s great success at Hopeful has been growing olives, although it has taken some years of trial and error. “The right systems must be put in place through experimentation, risk taking and study,” says Robert. “Profit is not the burning ambition here, but making sense of the land is. Plus, we’re aiming to meet an increasing demand in the market for natural, chemical-free food.”

He started with 300 trees, given to him by a local restaurant owner who had been too busy to cultivate them himself. “They were pot-bound when we got them and most died after we planted them,” says Robert. “It was partly our ignorance that killed them — we thought olive trees required very little water and that we didn’t need to irrigate. Of course, like any young thing olive trees need nurturing for a while, and plenty of water.”

That first failure spurred Robert on to learn as much as he could about growing olives. He took a course in Western Australia, and spent years travelling throughout the world’s olive regions — Italy, Spain, France and the US — to meet with established growers and study the growing, preserving and marketing of olives and olive oil. He employed a horticulturist to help develop best practice for the soil and to experiment with different cultivars to find those most appropriate for frost-tolerance, drought resistance and “our difficult terroire”.

Around 20,000 trees — mostly cultivars from Spain, France and southern Italy — have since been planted across the hills at Hopeful. They have arrested the mortality rate and the altitude and toughness of the land is now working in their favour.

“Where they’re planted is very high and very cold,” says Robert, “about the 900-metre mark. This is ideal for accentuating flavour

because of the long, slow ripening period of the fruit.”

Because they grow slowly, the trees are still juvenile by normal standards. This is only their third fruiting season, and while cropping has just increased to a viable commercial quantity, it’s the quality that wins awards for Hopeful’s Olevano olive oils.

The 2005 vintage Liberty Hill Extra Virgin Olive Oil — a pungent, herbaceous, piquant table oil — won gold medal at the Canberra Extra Virgin Olive Show. It’s the second award in three years running for Olevano. “All that’s needed with oil like this is a loaf of crusty bread for dipping and a glass of good red wine,” says Robert. “Like with good wine, good olive oil depends on good fruit, and we’re helped by our climate and altitude.”

Hopeful is again an economic beacon in the area. At harvest time groups of students come in from Charles Sturt University in Bathurst to pick the table olives, while locals from around the region come to pick the olives for pressing onto oil.

“Initially we were regarded as mad for doing this, but it’s very satisfying to have converted a sheep farm into a horticultural venture without using chemicals and enhancing the biodiversity in of this beautiful Abercrombie land,” says Robert.

Cutting through the steep valley at Hopeful is a permanent creek, the Cook’s Vale, leaving a trail of silver through the paddocks. High above it, behind a row of towering poplars, is the pioneer family cemetery. Two or three generations of the Mills family, one of the region’s original Irish settling clans are buried here, protected behind an iron fence. Most of them had been babies and children from times when dirt-poor families built shelters, rather than houses, against severe winters. Over the years hungry cattle had trampled the perimeter wire fence, disturbing the graves of this wee necropolis. A big old mother poplar had wrapped its strong roots around those buried, embracing them in the warm red earth... so the past remains part of the future. 🌿