

THE RON COCKS MEMORIAL AWARD

FOR OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP IN IRRIGATION

Brian Cameron

Ron Cocks Memorial Award Winner 2012

Retired farmer, author and inaugural irrigation association chairman Brian Cameron knows full well the trials and tribulations of irrigation development having spent more than four decades working tirelessly to transform the arid Mid Canterbury plains into the diverse food bowl of agriculture it is today.

Cameron's leadership, passion, drive and determination to tackle the challenges in securing water for irrigation has not gone unnoticed. IrrigationNZ honoured him with the organisation's Ron Cocks Memorial Award for outstanding leadership in irrigation as part of the IrrigationNZ 2012 conference.

"I am honoured and delighted to receive the award, yet very humbled. I believe that it's an award for all irrigation pioneers of the time," he said.

He remains modest about his achievements, but acknowledged he gained much satisfaction from his time and effort pioneering irrigation.

"It was a long hard 40-year slog. We took one step forward and two backwards. There was a tremendous amount of work going on behind the scenes."

Perhaps his greatest highlights were striking water on the farm at Pendarves despite hydrology experts strongly advising against the idea, and receiving the water-right for the Barhill Chertsey Scheme virtually unopposed by employing techniques (meetings, consultation and mediation) used with success by ECNZ to gain renewal for its use of the Lake Coleridge Power Station.

Initially community water management schemes were instigated by central government and largely treated as engineering projects with little or no recognition, or understanding of the on-farm requirements associated with irrigation.

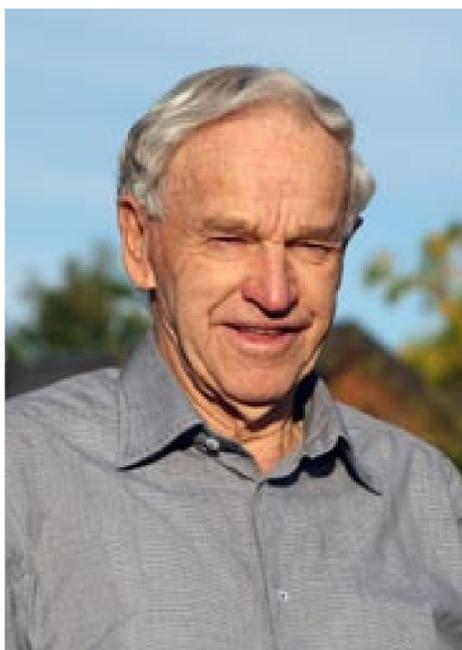
Cameron farmed through such times. An expert dryland farmer he had the vision that with water he could do much more. And he did, when in 1968 water turned his Pendarves farm into an oasis.

In 1968 the risks of not getting water were high, but the budgets were robust so Cameron forged ahead. That 150mm diameter six-inch bore was the start of Canterbury's dramatic transformation, and put Cameron in the history books as the first person in Canterbury to sink a deep bore.

For Cameron, the eventual sound of irrigation sprinklers clicking away and the sight of water disappearing into the parched ground remain vivid.

As do the days he spent pioneering the New Zealand Irrigation Association (NZIA). "It certainly took up time. My family can tell you that."

Cameron said a small group of passionate people, including



close friend, Bob Engelbrecht, had a vision of the potential of irrigation in Canterbury. They prepared a constitution for a national organisation and organised a two day conference in Ashburton in 1978.

"The conference was highly successful and adopted the suggested constitution. A committee was elected. Some of the key members were Government employees or had very busy jobs and declined the chairman's job. Almost by default I became chairman."

Cameron left the conference not so sure he was excited to be the inaugural chairman of the NZIA. "All of sudden we had something new, we had nothing to go by, we had a new organisation that needed drive and direction. There was a lot of soul searching."

Right from the beginning the NZIA's aim was not just to benefit Canterbury, but all of New Zealand. Interest was quickly forthcoming from Hawkes Bay and Otago.

"The mission was simple - to promote irrigation to farmers and lobby politicians." The early stages went well with conferences held biennially taking the association to Oamaru, Rangiora, Kerikeri and Alexandra until the rocky road set farmers back under "Rogernomics" in the late 1980's.

"A lot of farmers borrowed a lot of money to put in irrigation. Farmers were set back and that set back irrigation development for quite a few years and despite desperate attempts the association was forced into recess."

One of the biggest challenges of the early days was securing financial membership. "A lot of people saw the good in what we were doing but it was hard to commit them financially. There was a tremendous amount of voluntary work went on." But Cameron has no regrets as he recalls the association's revitalisation in 1993, and progress to the launch of Irrigation New Zealand in 2004.

"The general direction hasn't changed, but everything has moved up a peg or two. The organisation now is far more professional and more financial, and that had to happen for irrigation development to progress for the benefit of all of New Zealand. That was the simple goal right from our start," Cameron said.

In 2009 he released "Liquid Gold" a history of irrigation in Mid Canterbury, which chronicles the value to the district and the challenges faced by those whose vision it was that one day water would turn Mid Canterbury into the agricultural powerhouse it is today.

