

# JEWEL OF THE LAKE

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**44**







# ASHBURTON – LIVING THE DREAM

**“It’s like being on permanent holiday”, a comment you might expect to hear from a resident of Queenstown, maybe Wanaka or perhaps Pauanui, but not from someone living at Lake Hood, Ashburton.**

Story by Tony Haycock. Photos by Allan Dick





**YOU KNOW THE PLACE.** The small town you skirt through the outskirts of an hour after leaving Christchurch and halfway to Timaru. Too soon for a coffee stop and the car was refuelled in Christchurch so you drive past without thinking anything of it. Maybe the sign on the southern side of town point to “Lake Hood Aquatic Area” may have piqued your curiosity but probably that was one of those, “I wonder what that is” moments as you drive on through. Time to be brutally honest here. As a North Islander now living in the South, that is exactly what I have done myself. Until now...

There once was a time (a bloody long time ago!) when if a community wanted to add some sort of amenity to improve the lot of the locals, a committee would be formed, money raised, work done and the project completed. A simple process which involved the seemingly lost art of hard work and dedication to a greater good. These days things are different. For any great idea there always seems to be any number of knockers who will immediately pipe up and give a thousand reasons why not. Then the resource consent process throws up another set of hurdles to overcome. Then if things are still on track, the dedicated knockers, be they the “not in my back yard” the “I have had never had any fun in my miserable life and now I will make sure you don’t either” or the “but the rare Lesser Spotted Patagonian Ring Tailed Weasel once was spotted under a toi toi bush nearby” brigades, not the types to put their own

narrow views aside in order to look at the greater picture, then make every effort to force their minority view onto the rest of us in one of those weird twists which prove the futility of democracy is still practiced here.

There had been talk around Ashburton since 1977 about the concept of having a lake nearby, but nothing happened until 1987 when helicopter pilot and mad-keen windsurfer, English born Ken Kingsbury, came up with the notion that a man-made lake should be created so Ashburton’s rowers, water-skiers and windsurfers had somewhere local to pursue their sports. It happened that others in the town shared this vision and the first steps were made which culminated in the opening of Lake Hood in 2002. In the intervening years there were of course many regulatory obstacles to overcome, plus funding. This was not a money-making project, dreamt up and funded by a property developer, but a true community effort on a massive scale. When New Zealand Today met with the team working on the lake extension (more of that later), Chairman of the Ashburton Aquatic Park Charitable Trust, David West, who I had to promise not to call “The Father of the Lake” as he was referred to by the team, pointed out to me that 100 000 hours of voluntary work had gone into the Lake Hood project. To use his words, “the whole of Ashburton built it.”

David is one of the sadly disappearing breed of Kiwis who, when confronted with a task or a problem, doesn’t run away, find excuses

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If you are going to The Lakehouse for a bite to eat,  
don't by-pass the garlic bread !

or just pretends it doesn't happen. As our Editor pointed out to me just as I was about to go south to meet David, his unique approach to shorten his daily commute to his office summed up his attitude. David lives on the banks of the Ashburton River. His office is also on the banks of the Ashburton River. But not the same bank! This would necessitate a 40 minute drive upstream, across the bridge, then back down the other side to get to work. There had to be an easier way. Enter the trusty Toyota Hi-Lux 4wd ute. Given some extra ground clearance, a bit more power and the ability to operate while near submerged and viola! Problem solved. Why go over the river when you can go through it? I am told some of the locals were concerned for his sanity/safety when the doors had to be removed to allow the water to run through the vehicle. Clearly the sort of person who gets things done and isn't hidebound by convention.

The initial funding target was \$4.3million. To give an idea of the local support, one individual gave \$50 000.00. The local council loaned the final \$1.5 million, with one of the conditions being that two councillors joined the initial five people on the Trust board. After the usual issues with consents finally overcome, the actual digging of the lake began in 2001 and local MP Jenny Shipley cut the ribbon to open the lake on 28 April 2002. Yet this was just the beginning. Now there was a lake but more was to come.

Next was the residential development. Now came the chance to live the dream. Why live in land-locked suburbia when you could have

## **WHY LIVE IN LAND-LOCKED SUBURBIA WHEN YOU COULD HAVE A CANAL OR LAKEFRONT HOME, COMPLETE WITH YOUR OWN PRIVATE JETTY TO GIVE DIRECT ACCESS TO THE SPARKLING WATERS AT YOUR FRONT DOOR?**

a canal or lakefront home, complete with your own private jetty to give direct access to the sparkling waters at your front door? And yes, the waters do sparkle. Environment Canterbury (ECAN), as part of the Canterbury district council on a local basis and NIWA from central government, have taken a keen interest in the new man-made freshwater lake. Constant monitoring of water quality was a condition of ECAN giving resource consent for the lake. It seems likely that Lake Hood will be the baseline by which other residential/recreational manmade waterway projects will be judged. Currently there are 90 houses completed, with more to come and

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To date, six stages of this incredible development have been sold, providing a vibrant sense of community in a neighbourhood defined by relaxed outdoor living.



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the majority of sections sold. Families are loving the healthy outdoor lifestyle and older farming couples enjoy the rural outlook rather than the shock of moving to a totally urban environment. Of course there is nothing like talking to a local to really get the feel for a place. Looking for the traditional family of mum, dad and 2.4 kids seemed easy enough but the last 0.4 of a kid was an issue so we settled for three as a nice round number and at the suggestion of lake extension project manager Gary Casey, we took a five minute (probably less than five minutes but I wasn't counting) drive back into central Ashburton to the workplace of Lake Hood resident and his neighbour, Carol Jopson. With husband Alister and three teenage offspring, the Jopson's have lived in Ashburton for the past 17 years, the last five at Lake Hood.

So, the obvious question. Why? The Jopsons were wanting a change from town life. The options considered were to buy a bach or a new home. They had bought a boat already and Lake Hood gave them the best of both worlds. As I had discovered, five minutes drive gets you to the middle of town. A house on a canal with it's own jetty so no need to park up the boat. It is always in the river, ready and waiting for action. Who needs a bach when this is at your doorstep? Swimming and boating from your own lawn is getting close to the ultimate lifestyle. It was Carol who described living there as, "Like being on permanent holiday."

As a working mother, Carol never felt guilty about leaving the children at home over school holidays while she was at work. In her words, the Lake Hood community is "an easy place for kids to hang". Over the years, some of the activities may have changed. Building a ramp to launch bicycle with rope attached and rider into the canal turned to windsurfing. Now

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## FAMILIES ARE LOVING THE HEALTHY OUTDOOR LIFESTYLE AND OLDER FARMING COUPLES ENJOY THE RURAL OUTLOOK RATHER THAN THE SHOCK OF MOVING TO A TOTALLY URBAN ENVIRONMENT

the diving board on the end of the jetty is the magnet for the local teenage population. All part of the outdoor lifestyle which leads to a healthy upbringing.

As what may be a complete aside, or equally may be a direct result of the move to Lake Hood and not being tied to a Playstation, 17 year old Matt Jobson was one day into something which if you believe everything you see or read, Kiwi teenagers are no longer capable of. When training for the local High School Duathlon, some of the boys decided they needed a bigger challenge. In the way that only teenage boys can be, when the suggestion that "we bike to Invercargill" (a mere 500km) was met with a, "bet you can't!" the dare was on. So it was that the day before I arrived, Matt, with mates Ben Connor and Joe Langley on the bikes, with back up crew of Andrew Robertson and James Smith set off for a five day ride to the bottom of the island. Not an indulgent bit of fun, the boys decided that this should be a charitable effort and they decided that the Prostate Cancer Foundation would be the cause they will champion on their ride. I wish them all the luck in world!

With all of this healthy outdoor activity, swimming, walking and cycling, the locals need a water hole to relax in and the visitors somewhere to sit back and take in the surroundings. Enter The Lake House restaurant, Café and Bar. As the name suggests, this is an eatery perched alongside and partly over the lake. Opened five years ago, The Lake House was purchased by expat Irish couple Mike and Angela Kelly. After 25 years in New Zealand and 15 in the South Island hospitality industry, Mike and Angela have finally been able to fulfill their longtime ambition of living and

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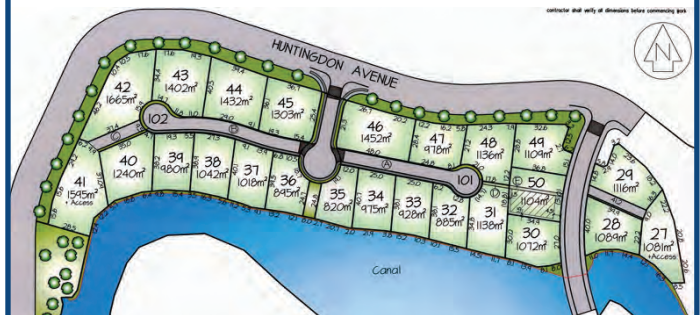
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#### How's this for the ultimate waterfront lifestyle?

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working in mid-Canterbury. Christchurch readers may know of the Bohemian Café, Kelly's and Piranha. All of these were either started or owned by the Kelly's and I certainly have fond memories of breakfasts at the Bohemian!

The reputation of The Lake House is now such that the initial problem of finding or attracting suitable quality chefs has disappeared. They now boast a team of five international chefs to ensure that the area may be semi rural, but the food, service and surroundings are as good as can be found in any city. With the added bonus of a backdrop of lake with the Southern Alps in the background, this is one of the country's true hidden gems.

Open 364 days, Mike and Angela are always happy to take groups but they never book out the entire restaurant or turn anyone away, so anyone walking in, be they locals from the lakeside or travellers making the 6km detour from SH1 looking for some quality food and drink, there will always be somewhere to sit and a proper mid Canterbury welcome.

This may sound like the end of the story but no, like all good things, it keeps evolving. The lake is increasingly popular for watersports. More people are looking at the area as an alternative to big city life (especially since the big city up the road got a bit wobbly lately). Maybe a bigger lake is needed. Then it turns out that neighbouring

farmers Willie and Jeanet Lefferink are looking at selling. And the clincher- the land is basically river gravel, which is a good base in case of seismic activity, but more importantly is a good base for roads and Ashburton Contracting Ltd are looking for a closer source of good quality river shingle to avoid the current problem of having to truck it 35km from Methven. Now everyone wins. The lake will eventually double in size, covering a similar area to Christchurch's Hagley Park with much more room for organised sports to operate alongside recreational lake users and Lake Hood residents. The value of the excavated gravel goes a long way to covering the cost of excavation and development. It will produce enough material to meet all of ACL's roading needs for the next 20 years. The added lake shore and canals gives much more space for residential development, without spoiling the uncrowded feel of the area, just an opportunity for more to enjoy one of the more underrated areas of New Zealand. An hour from Christchurch, an hour from Mt Hutt, so you can water ski and snow ski in the same morning. Not a bad way to live, or to visit.

**Congratulations to the winner of our Experience  
Mid Canterbury Prize in Issue 43, Ross Prentice of Napier.**

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The ANZAC Day commemorations at the Ashburton memorial. A scene copied around the country in towns small and large on 25 April.

Examples of early and modern architecture abound throughout the town, brightly decorated historic buildings contrast the modernistic clock tower and fountain waiting to enthrall any visitor who takes the time to turn off State Highway 1 and travel the main street of Ashburton.



The gardens rival Arrowtown for displays of autumnal beauty.



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Just because you are outside the big city, you don't have to forgo the finer things in life. The Somerset Grocer specialises in organic and boutique food and beverages.

REMEMBER THE GOOD OLD DAYS? When life was simple. When lunch in a provincial New Zealand town meant a greasy sausage roll eaten from a Formica table and a plastic placemat, followed by a cup of tea made with a tea bag filled with the sweepings from the teabag factory floor. I think we can now safely say those days have well and truly gone.

Colleague Craig and I were in Ashburton, and having left our meeting with Giles Beal, Chief Executive of the Ashburton Trust, we were a little peckish. Right next door was the Somerset Grocer. As one of the Trust's properties, we thought it best we go in and try it out. Don't for a minute think this was a free lunch so we have to say nice things either. My Panini and Earl Grey tea were financed purely from the change found in the gorse in the bottom of my back pocket. Damn they were good!

What was the Ashburton Licensing Trust began in 1949 with a government loan to purchase the Devon Tavern. As a licensing Trust then, as now, the role was to provide a responsible supply of alcohol, food and accommodation to residents and visitors to Ashburton. From this, a share of profits goes back into the local community by way of donations and grants. With changes to the law in 2005, the Trust lost its monopoly which certainly caused some fairly major difficulties, but as Giles told us, the plus side is that the Trust had to up its game to complete and provide a quality product. This explains why Craig and I are sitting at a gourmet deli/café eating really great food in very modern and funky surroundings, with a huge range of those delightful items for your pantry that you didn't know you needed until you saw them on the shelf.

Giles is typical of the people who are turning the vibe and reputation from the "Ash Vegas" of the not too distant past to a vibrant community. An Englishman married to a Kiwi, working in Queenstown with a background as an accountant in the hospitality

## GILES IS TYPICAL OF THE PEOPLE WHO ARE TURNING THE VIBE AND REPUTATION FROM THE "ASH VEGAS" OF THE NOT TOO DISTANT PAST TO A VIBRANT COMMUNITY

industry, he was lighting the fire in their Arrowtown house when he spotted an interesting job in the newspaper he was about to cremate- Chief Executive of the Ashburton Licensing Trust. You can imagine the reply he got when he enquired of his wife if she might contemplate moving from Arrowtown to Ashburton! Undaunted he applied anyway, had a good look around the town and now they are so happy in Ashburton that if it ever became necessary, Giles would commute 80km each way to Christchurch rather than move from mid-Canterbury.

The Somerset Grocer is just one of the 13 hospitality outlets and associated businesses owned and run by the Trust. Giles believes it takes three simple components to attract people to a successful bar/restaurant; music, lighting and staff. Get these right, recognise when they need to change and things should work – the lunchtime crowd are looking for a different atmosphere to those wanting dinner, and the late night crowd are naturally an entirely different thing again. It seems that this must be working, with sales at the Trust's outlets up 40% on pre-earthquake figures.

With a turnover of \$18 million in the past year, Giles has been able to enjoy what he calls the most fulfilling part of his job, directing the profits from the Trust back into the community which provided

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## Innovation park puts stake in ground at Ashburton's Business Estate

**A new \$30 million agri-business innovation park is to be established in the 123-hectare Ashburton Business Estate, on the edge of the Mid Canterbury town.**

**The Canterbury Agri-business Innovation Park is an initiative of Grow Mid Canterbury and the Ashburton District Council, in partnership with Eden AgriCapital.**

The project aims at increasing the commercialisation and sale of agri-technology systems by grouping together a range of complementary companies, and enabling synergies to boost innovation and create new export markets.

It is the outcome of research carried out in Canterbury over 18 months to identify the scale of agri-business innovation and the issues affecting its commercialisation, according to Grow Mid Canterbury chief executive Rob Brawley.

Mr Brawley says a specialised Agri-business Innovation Park will help to position Canterbury as a key producer of value added agricultural products, at a time when demand for those products is set to soar.

ABE marketing agents Noel Gilchrist, Gary Seear and Brent Bailey of Colliers International in Christchurch are talking with several other parties eyeing ABE, and say that easy access to road, rail, sea and air transport networks are key attractions.

Ashburton Business Estate, zoned B9, is bounded by North Park and Company Rds, the Main South Railway Line and Works Rd in north east Ashburton. Stage One, comprising 54 hectares, has sites ranging from 1300m<sup>2</sup> available to own or lease back.

"This development offers low land prices, as well as low water and rates costs. It is providing much needed commercial and industrial land. Proposals to relocate the Ashburton rail shunting yard from the middle of town to within the park, will provide excellent rail access to the ports of Timaru and Lyttelton."

The Canterbury Agri-business Innovation Park is predicted to provide a significant boost to the region's economy, attracting investment and business to the region while creating high paying, value added jobs in the export market.

This is one of a number of initiatives the Ashburton District Council is undertaking to ensure the Mid Canterbury District and Canterbury region continue to be an engine of growth, and a thriving hub for business and investment.

The Mid Canterbury district is home to the most productive irrigated farmland in New Zealand, and is a vital hub for dairying and mixed cropped farming. The area has the most flat, arable land in New Zealand, is home to 50% of New Zealand's arable industry and 70% of the country's small seed industry.

Another recent addition to the Ashburton Business Estate is Electricity Ashburton Ltd, whose decision to move to the major industrial subdivision could not have come at a better time.

The electricity network is developing a 2.65ha site at ABE that will house its 100 staff in three buildings covering administration, a workshop, a stores building and open yard storage.

General manager Gordon Guthrie says the locally owned co-operative was originally attracted by the ability to house all its operations on one large site, as it is currently split between a town location and industrial area. Its workshop and administration centre is currently located in the heart of big box retail while the storage facility is in an older industrial area.

"The retail area has grown up around us and we don't need to be here. We liked Ashburton Business Estate because it allowed us to be on one site, it has excellent transport access and it's a safe site on the outskirts of town.

"We really feel as though our decision has been vindicated after seeing what happened in Christchurch following the earthquakes. We also reviewed our plans and are now building to Category 4, to ensure that we can operate in a major civil emergency."

Electricity Ashburton expects building to be complete by October with its shift to ABE earmarked before Christmas.

It will be the second resident in Ashburton Business Estate, following Canterbury Longrun Roofing. Established in 1969, LongRun manufactures steel roofing, cladding and accessories for the building trade.



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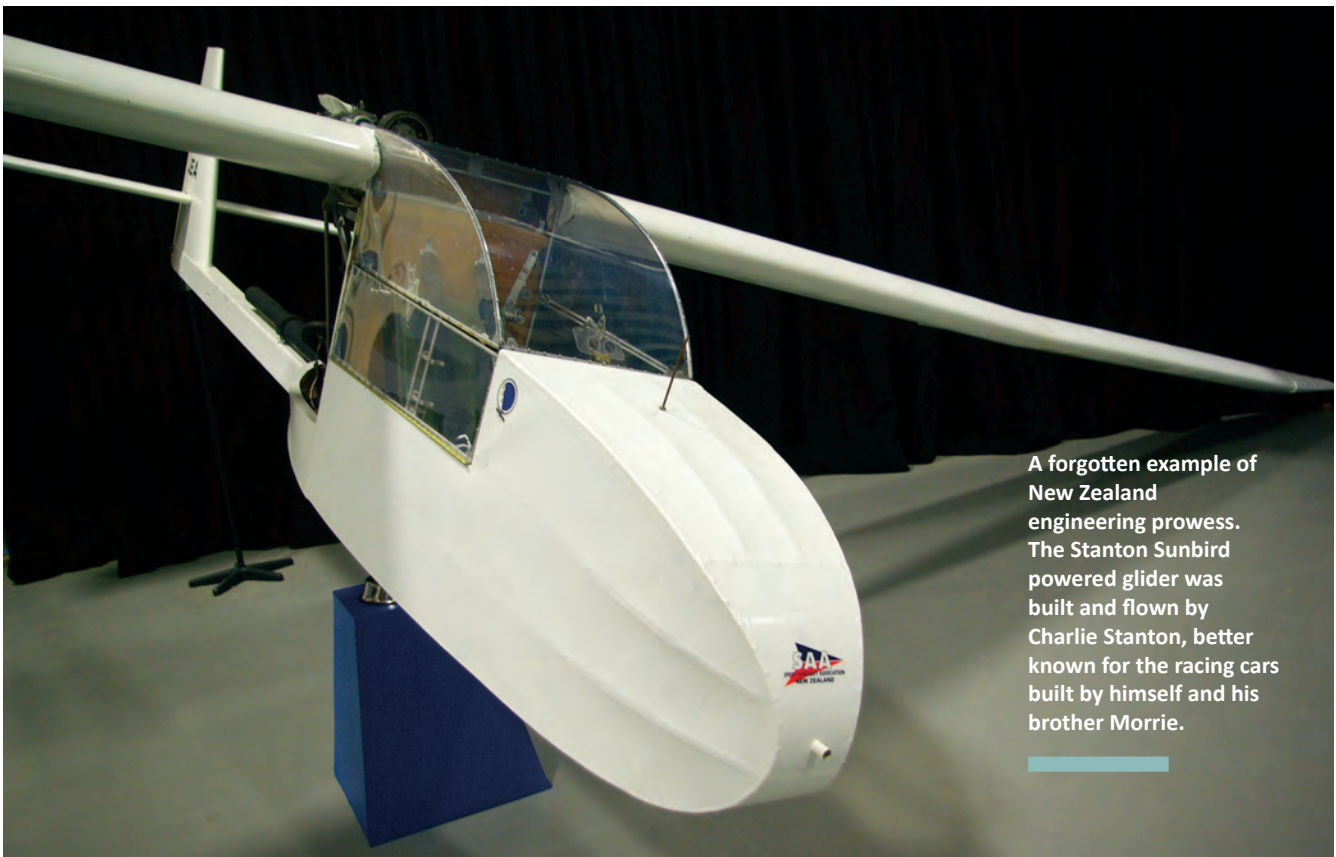


As part of the revitalisation of the social scene, the Ashburton Trust have made great use of character buildings in the town centre to create a vibrant atmosphere.

the money in the first place. The major project at the moment is a multi-sport stadium for the town. Including a cycling velodrome and an indoor pool, this will be another major boost to the sports people of the district, just as the creation of Lake Hood was. With a predicted influx of people moving to the district as the Christchurch rebuild gets up to speed, these facilities are just what are needed. With the shortage of accommodation in Christchurch getting worse by the day, Ashburton is in a perfect position. The talk at the moment is a large number involved in the rebuild process (which we all hope will start before we are too old to actually see it) will be living in the town and there will be a regular rail service to get the workers to and from Christchurch daily. The issue the Trust, along

with many other businesses and service providers are having to consider is that this population boost is not permanent and the last thing they want is another Twizel, when the workers move on after the job is completed and what is left is left to struggle. This time the town's business leaders are prepared and are planning ahead so this will benefit the district.

The Ashburton Aviation Museum is another to benefit from a Trust grant. It may come as a surprise to many that Ashburton has an airfield, let alone a museum to go with it. It may be a bigger surprise again to learn that the museum houses one of the best collections of jet fighters that you will see anywhere! Lots of aeroplanes mean a big hanger or two, and Trust money has helped here. As a WWII



A forgotten example of New Zealand engineering prowess. The Stanton Sunbird powered glider was built and flown by Charlie Stanton, better known for the racing cars built by himself and his brother Morrie.

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A sad remnant of the days when New Zealand had an Air Force strike wing. Released from its latex protective coating, this former RNZAF A4K Skyhawk sits proudly in the centre of the main hangar.

RNZAF training base, 1192 pilots learnt to fly here, starting in DH82 Tiger Moth biplanes and moving on the North American Harvard. From here the pilots moved on to advanced training schools to handle fighters or bombers and transport aircraft. Originally set up to record this history, the museum is now one of the best aviation museums you will see anywhere.

In the last 12 months 8000 visitors have passed through the doors of the museum. These are pretty impressive numbers, bearing in mind that as is common with many establishments like this, all the workers are there on a purely voluntary basis. With an entry fee of only \$5.00 per adult and no charge for children, this is certainly not an expensive way to spend a few hours and a very interesting outing at that. What boy, big or small doesn't like looking at jet fighters?

Taking pride of place in the first hanger is the Harrier "Jump" jet. This is the only example in the Southern Hemisphere. I have very distinct memories of what is probably the only time these unique planes flew in New Zealand. Just after the Falklands war, a British aircraft carrier was in port (I can't remember if this was Auckland or Wellington) and two Sea Harriers gave a short demonstration at Ohakea. My recollection is a little vague as I was a schoolboy at the time, but it was announced over the local (Palmerston North) radio station that these two aircraft would be putting on a demonstration that afternoon. Half of the population of the North Island turned up! These two grey painted Harriers, dwarfed by the RNZAF Skyhawks taxied out, hovered, flew backwards and generally did things which no normal jet aircraft could contemplate.

The museum's example, produced in 1974 at a cost of £22 million, arrived in Ashburton in 2005. My guide and owner of a stunning

## I HAVE SEEN FAR LESS IMPRESSIVE MUSEUMS OVERSEAS, BOTH IN TERMS OF PRESENTATION AND CONTENT AND YOU CAN BE SURE THAT FIVE BUCKS WOULDN'T EVEN BEGIN TO GET YOU THROUGH THE DOOR

red Jaguar E-type which I have raced against (I assume he still has it – we were too involved in aircraft talk to get around to the more mundane land-bound transport) was Graeme Stockdale who told the story of how the ejector seat of the harrier had been decommissioned, but the explosive charges in the base of the canopy, which are there to remove it before the pilot's head goes through it if he does have to eject, were still in place. The airforce had to be called in before something went wrong and the museum ended up with a slightly less than complete aeroplane and a canopy shaped hole in the hanger roof.

I also had an interest in the Airtruk, a rather inelegant 1960's Australian built topdressing plane. The example in the museum was flown by my uncle, Ashley Haycock, in the Wairarapa in the 1970s so it was great to see a small part of my family history such a long way from home. These aircraft were based on a New

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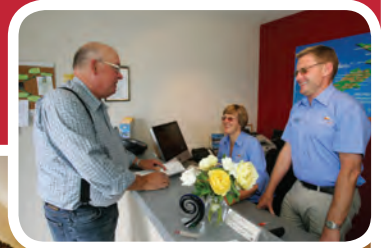
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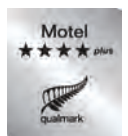
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Top to bottom:

**Graeme Stockdale, a keen car and aviation enthusiast is caught mid-stream explaining the finer points of the skyhawk.**

**The De Havilland Vampire was the first jet aircraft to be purchased in numbers by the RNZAF.**

**It may not be pretty, but the Transavia Airtruk has a special fascination for the author as his uncle flew this actual example in the lower North Island.**



Zealand design from the early 1960s using Harvard parts. 110 Airtruks were built and it is believed this is the only complete example in the country.

Moving across to the newer, larger hanger, we find much more of the real big boys' toys stuff. A Gloster Meteor, representing the first jet to fly in New Zealand, a pair of De Havilland Vampires, which were the first jets to be purchased and operated by the RNZAF and the latest acquisition, an A4 Skyhawk. Also in the pipeline are a Strikemaster and an Aermacchi which will complete their set of New Zealand jet fighters and trainers. Also finding a home in the main hanger is The Southern DC3 Trust's pride and joy, obviously, a DC3. Having lost it's home at Wigram, the Ashburton Museum has made room for this genuine USAF WWII veteran, which is still seen in the skies over Canterbury and beyond and has been flown by aviation enthusiast Richie McCaw, who as well as playing rugby, is patron of the Trust.

Bang for buck, you are going to have to go an awfully long way to beat what you get for your \$5.00 here. I have seen far less impressive museums overseas, both in terms of presentation and content and you can be sure that five bucks wouldn't even begin to get you through the door. We need to celebrate places like this, and the volunteers who give up so much of their time to share their passion with us. Our country would be a much poorer place and much of our history would be lost without them.

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NOW, HERE'S A QUESTION FOR YOU - What type of farming just outside Ashburton is very rapidly heading toward being world-leading in the study of and possible future survival of a species?

The Canterbury Plains have long been known for cropping and dairy farming but it is not these. Deer? No. Try llamas, the pick-up truck of South America. In their homelands they are a pack animal, used to carry goods throughout the Andes. On the outskirts of town in a historic homestead is Keith Payne. Born in Britain. Raised in Canada. After moving around the world he settled in Australia before finally moving to settle in Ashburton and as is so often the way, his llamas, and the work he is now doing, pretty much evolved by accident.

Keith's late wife decided to get into wool spinning and after some research on llamas, found out the wool has no lanolin, which makes it perfect for people with allergies, and the fibre is hollow with air in the centre which gives excellent insulation properties. From my own experience, of all of the things I have carried home from various jaunts around the globe, it is the llama wool blanket from Ecuador which gets the most use. As a matter of fact, right now it is cold and wet outside. I have moved from computer in the conservatory to a laptop in the lounge with the pellet fire on. It is very pleasant in here but where is the world's greatest finder of warm, comfortable places?

Well, that lump in the llama blanket on the bed seems to closely resemble the dimensions of a small tabby cat!

The Incas relied on the llama for transporting goods and Incan warriors had their own war llamas to carry spare swords, spears, armour and provisions. When the Spanish arrived (all 168 of them), they had two objectives; gold and the conversion of up to

10 million Incas to Christianity. They got the gold by the simple act of taking the Incan ruler Atahualpa hostage. The ransom of a room full of gold was paid but the unfortunate Atahualpa was put to death anyway and Pizarro and his merry band set about subduing the Inca by ruining their economy. Venereal disease, smallpox and measles, all Spanish gifts to the locals were doing a good job of things, but it was the rounding up and slaughtering of a full 90% of the population of domesticated llama and alpaca which really did the damage. The Inca had now lost their main source of meat, wool and the only method of transporting goods they had.

I had to ask the obvious question. What is the difference between a llama and an alpaca? It is size. A llama is twice the size of an alpaca and the alpaca is a more timid animal than a llama. Both species are very curious and not aggressive. In South America, llamas were predominantly used as pack animals, and to a lesser degree, wool and meat. The alpaca, being smaller, wasn't as good as a beast of burden, so wool and meat is the main product. There is another animal in Keith's herd, one which I had never heard of; the guanaco. While llamas and alpacas are domesticated species, the guanaco isn't. They are basically a wild animal, and it is the guanaco from which the llama has developed.

Currently there are 30 000 alpaca in New Zealand, but only 2000 llama. It was when Keith decided to breed purebred llama that he discovered a problem. He couldn't find a pure male llama. After intense research and talking to experts around the world, it seems that this is an increasingly common issue. In South America, llamas are being cross-bred with alpaca to give a hybrid animal bigger and with more of the all important wool than a straight llama. At a recent international conference on the future of the breeds, scientists put

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forward the notion that soon both species will be endangered in their purebred form.

The Peruvian government, along with an American and Cardiff (!) university has funded a DNA testing programme to assist livestock breeders worldwide to check the bloodlines of their stock and hopefully ensure that purebred animals can be identified. Keith currently has samples from his herd being tested so he will know how his herds look. As well, he is investigating the results of using a male guanaco and female llama, with the genetics being so similar, the llama having descended from the guanaco. What started out as a few animals for wool, had taken on a whole new life.

While he doesn't like to be called a llama whisperer, he is certainly a llama trainer, and he has trained several of his animals for their traditional use as pack animals. Even the guanaco can be trained, but a guanaco takes four times longer than a llama to learn the same thing. I know some people like that! He has even trained a diminutive alpaca to pack, which must make for an interesting sight. Imagine a fully laden Shetland pony following a Clydesdale as a comparison. Keith's animals are used for packing hunting parties into the high country and incredibly, one of their talents is their ability to spot game. I am no hunter but it sounds like a pretty ideal setup to me. The beastie carries your gear up the hill. Same beastie then finds the deer you have been looking for. At the end of it all the same South American pickup truck carries your supply of fresh venison back down the hill.

Now you can imagine that having another animal tramping through the bush, cutting up the ground, pulling up the undergrowth and then depositing the leftovers of it's last meal behind it is not such a great idea. Except that the llama is such a low impact animal that even DOC have no problem with Keith's animals packing across land under their control. The soft pads on the bottom of



Keith tends to his 'boys'

A Guanaco close up.

their hooves give them maximum grip with minimal impact on the ground beneath them. When eating, they don't pull out the plant, instead their teeth actually cut off the bit of the plant they are eating, leaving the remainder happily growing. And what happens to the aforementioned plant having travelled the full internal length of a llama? When it re-emerges at the other end it is ejected in pellet form, lacking any sort of odour, and more importantly, lacking any plant seeds, so not spreading any unwanted weeds enroute.

I think it takes something pretty unusual to surprise me these days, but I have to say that of all the things I might find in Ashburton, a guy leading the effort to preserve South American animal species was not one of them. Who would have thought I would learn lots from a llama farmer!

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