



# A tractor driver's lot – 1949 style

By Ian M. Johnston

## THE WAY IT WAS – AND IS

The day to day adversaries facing modern farmers are little changed from those experienced by their grandfathers 60 years ago. The fickle patterns of the weather, the illogical gyrations of commodity prices, the inevitable escalations of input costs, the inconsistencies and often absurdities of government policies – these tribulations have been present to worry farmers for as far back as anyone can remember.

What has changed however is the degree of physical hard work and drudgery, which was part of the every day life-style of farmers up until around the early 1960s. By that time, bulk grain handling had replaced the mountains of three bushel wheat sacks, each sack having to be individually laboriously man-handled. The introduction of sophisticated diesel tractors rendered the inefficient kerosene and odd-ball single cylinder crude oil burning tractors obsolete. Bulk fuel had also by 1960 largely done away with the back-breaking and tedious 44 gallon drums.

By the 1970s broadacre tractors were double the horse power of their 1940s counterparts. Correspondingly larger im-



An immaculate restored LA Case, owned by Chris Broers, taking part in a street parade at Yass, NSW. (Photo IMJ)

plements meant that three times the area could be worked in a single day. Air conditioned cabins had arrived and CB radios enabled tractor drivers keep in touch with the outside world.

Mechanised farm technology continued

to develop at a bewildering rate, resulting in the computerised and laser guided farming procedures, which are accepted as normal today.

Whilst it would be a brave individual who dared suggest that modern day farmers enjoy an easy cushy existence, it is perhaps psychologically stimulating and good for the soul to draw a comparison and reflect upon what a farmer's routine would have been like sixty years ago – in 1949.

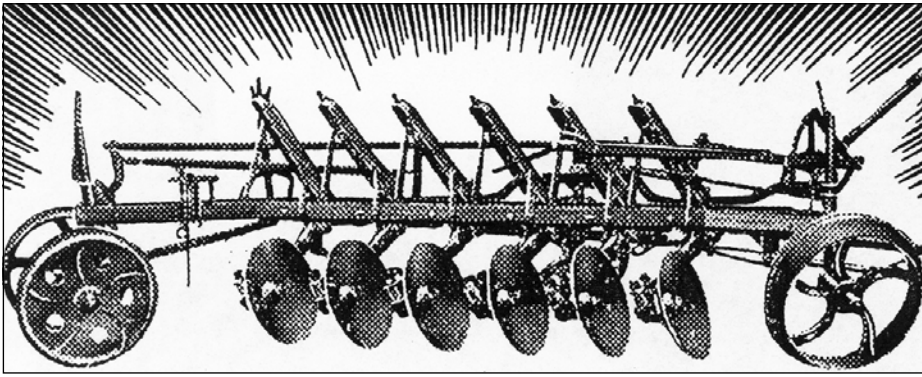
## 1949 – MEET BOB THE FARMER AND FRED THE FUEL CONTRACTOR

Bob unhitched the Shearer Majestic eight disc plough from the rear of the big Case LA 50 HP tractor, and headed the perspiring rumbling machine back in the direction of the homestead. It was only 4pm but Fred was due to arrive from town with a load of fuel and would need a hand with the drums.

Bob eased the hand clutch, bringing the Case to a halt under the pepper tree, near the row of empty 44 gallon drums. Before stopping the engine he had first to remember to switch the fuel taps from kero to petrol. After five minutes of idling, he estimated the petrol would have replaced the



An LA Case in its working clothes, owned by Gus Raymond, attracting much interest from spectators at The 2004 Rusty Iron Rally. Note the oil bath air cleaner reservoir, to the rear of the exhaust pipe. Adjacent, is the hot box which pre-heats the kerosene. (Photo IMJ)



**A Shearer "Majestic" Disc Plough. These popular ploughs of the 1940s and 50s could be fitted with either horse or tractor levers. They were equipped with 26" discs and available in sizes ranging from three to eight furrows. (IMJ Archives)**

kero in the carby, so it was o.k. to shove over the spark control and kill the engine.

If even a slight amount of kero remained in the carby the engine would refuse to start. Each morning it had to be initially fired-up on petrol, in order to preheat the kero in the manifold hot box before the petrol could be turned off and the kero introduced into the system. A lot of fiddling really, but at half the cost of drum petrol (which had soared to an outrageous one shilling and 10 pence ha'penny per gallon), and with the big engine gulping three gallons per hour, who could afford to run a tractor on petrol?

The real bad news about kero was that it was an abrasive fuel and a portion tended to remain unburnt, which found its way past the piston rings then ended up polluting the oil in the sump. It was necessary to let the engine cool down and settle overnight, during which time the errant kero would rise to the top of the oil and could be drawn off and replaced with an equal amount of fresh oil.

Bob remembered his father telling him that in 1915 he used to drive a Rumely Oil Pull which, as the name somewhat cryptically indicated, used oil in its radiator as a coolant. This enabled the giant twin cylinder engine to run at the extraordinarily high temperature of 160°C – without boiling! So the Rumely was possibly the only tractor that could efficiently burn 100 per cent of its kero fuel.

Fred's imminent arrival was announced by a rapidly expanding cloud of dust, enveloping his old Bedford as it bounced along the gravel road leading from town. The truck veered from one side to the other as Fred grimly endeavoured to avoid the worst of the pot holes, some of which were "Deep enough for a feller to lose a bullock in" he complained later back in the pub.

Bob watched as the Bedford pulled up at the front gate. Fred stiffly clambered

down, opened the gate, pulled himself back into the driving seat and inched the truck through, before again alighting in order to drag the leaning gate closed.

Eventually the hard done-by vehicle pulled up alongside the Case and the empty drums. Fred staggered from his seat and made his way to the front bumper bar, from which hung a locust splattered water-bag. He took a long much needed swig before wiping his mouth with a rag he produced from his rear pocket, retained normally for wiping the dipstick of his truck engine, then turned to the waiting Bob and gasped "Ower yer goan mate."

"Yer, oright I spose" was the rejoinder. "Ower you, me boy?" The rotund and per-

spiring Fred would never see 60 again!

"Bloody 'ot mate" Fred replied, sweat pouring from his florid face. "An' I fetched a paper for yous."

Fred handed Bob a three day old edition of The Sun. After all, no townie visiting a property ever arrived without a copy of the current newspaper. It was just plain bush etiquette and Fred was a stickler for etiquette.

Bob jammed the paper in a fork of the pepper tree for later, then wheeled up a worn out tractor tyre and placed it on the ground at the rear of the truck. Somehow Fred managed to scramble up onto the tail of the tabletop and proceeded to struggle with the first of the thirty C.O.R. Power Kerosene drums. (A full 44 gallon drum weighed around a not inconsiderable 230 kilos.)

Accompanied by grunts and mutterings he pulled it back onto the edge of its rim and waltzed it to the tail, where he deftly tipped it off so that it landed on its side, its fall cushioned by the tractor tyre.

It was Bob's task to first roll the drum into its position adjacent to the tractor, before grasping the rim and up-ending it to commence a new line. The amount of effort required to up-end a full 44 gallon drum was generally a task for two individuals. But Bob had by necessity been doing it

...26▷

**Use**  **British**  
**POWER KEROSENE**  
**- MORE ACRES WITH EVERY DRUM**



Refined by a special process to conserve the high power content of the paraffin base crude from which it is produced, C.O.R. Power Kerosene ensures full engine power, freedom from "knocking," and maximum fuel economy—is the Modern Tractor Fuel now used by tens of thousands of primary producers throughout the Commonwealth to get more acres from every drum.

Marketed by  
**THE COMMONWEALTH OIL REFINERIES LIMITED**  
(Commonwealth Government and Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Ltd.)

Available in 44 Gallon Drums from C.O.R. Agents in all Rural Areas  
C23/2732

**A 1949 advertisement for power kerosene. (IMJ Archives)**

on his own for years. A curved spine and constant bouts of severe sciatica were testimony to this fact.

It took nearly an hour for the two men to complete the task of unloading the 30 drums and then hoist the empty ones up onto the tabletop. Even with two men, lifting the empties up onto the high truck required a considerable effort.

Bob signed the delivery docket with a sweaty shaking hand, making sure the carbon paper was in place and mindful of the fact that he was three months behind in paying his accounts. With a bit of luck a wheat cheque would come in, within the next six months – with a bit of luck!

Fred took his leave. Apart from going through the gate, his Bedford would not stop until it had traversed the punishing 80 miles to town and been parked around the corner from The Max Hotel – and its long public bar and ice cold schooners of dark bitter.

The next morning Bob had an early start, to make up for the lost ploughing time the day before. The Case was covered in heavy dew. Maybe he would be able to afford a tractor shed next year. Up to the bank manager really!

Now Bob commenced a well practiced routine.

The bung on top of the tractor's kero tank was undone and the nozzle of the fuel hose inserted. The hand pump, screwed into a kero drum, was supposed to deliver a quart each stroke – but it never did. It took ten minutes of wearisome pump pump pumping to put in the 30 gallons.

Because of the height of the top of the fuel tank from the ground, Bob couldn't see into the bung. Accordingly, the only way he knew the tank was full was when frothy kero started misting on his face – and in particular, in his eyes. Maybe this was why he felt he needed glasses. His eyes were often red and sore!

Then it was the turn of the petrol tank. More pumping, but only a gallon this time.

Bob then extracted a shifter from his hip pocket, reached down and proceeded to undo the lower of the two sump oil level plugs. Around a quart of the kero polluted oil flowed onto the ground. The plug was replaced and the upper level plug removed. A Plume quart oil bottle was filled from a Castrol XL drum and poured into the engine sump. When oil flowed out of the upper level plug orifice he knew the correct amount of drained oil had been replaced.

By now Bob's overalls and hands were



**Our 1949 farmer Bob would very much have liked to be able to afford a K.L.A.M. fuel drum stand. (IMJ Archives)**

decidedly yukky. But there was worse to come – and he hadn't even started the tractor yet!

The dreaded oil bath air cleaner had to be serviced. This involved unscrewing a steel bar which secured the oil bath reservoir and tipping out the dust charged oil. An old chisel was the tool he used to scrape out the gooey stuff clinging to the bottom of the container. Then yet another quart of engine oil was obtained and poured in, this time from a Purr Pull bottle. The reservoir was fitted back in position.

Bob glanced at his watch. Over half an hour had passed since he had first approached the tractor. But the muckiest job was still to be tackled.

He unscrewed the end of the grease gun and inserted it in the nearly empty bucket of grease. Stone the crows, he had forgotten to ask Fred to bring out a new bucket! Have to ring the mail lady on the party line and ask her to bring one out on Thursday – mail day. Hoped the phone would work – it never did if it rained.

By pulling the handle out, theoretically the grease was supposed to be sucked up and fill the gun without leaving pesky air locks. Well, he might be lucky today. No such luck. It refused to pump. Go through

the sticky procedure again.

Fred never worked out how many grease nipples were fitted to the LA Case. But he did know that some psycho design engineer back at Racine, Wisconsin, had located many of them in remote hidden corners requiring that he lie on his back under the tractor and hope that not too much grease ended up on his face or up his sleeve.

Job done! He was now enveloped in grease and other assorted putridity, which would have to remain all day. Never mind. Just get the beast started.

Switch on the petrol, set the magneto control and hit the starter. Strike me pink! The six volt battery was in need of a long slow charge. There was no way it was going to turn over the 403 cubic inch donk.

Nothing for it but to wind it over on the crank handle. Risky at the best of times, because if the advance/retard lever was set a wee bit too advanced, a man could break a wrist if the handle kicked back.

Thankfully for Bob, the engine fired on the third pull of the handle. This early morning routine had by now taken over an hour. About the same time it used to take him to catch, feed and harness a team of horses, he mused.

He pointed the big long nose of the Case in the direction of the cultivation, with the engine now switched over to kero, purring like a – er, Case. The tractor had no power steering, no hydraulics, no air conditioned cabin, no stereo radio, no upholstered comfort seat, no laser guiding and certainly no four wheel drive. It was hot, noisy and rough to ride. But Bob was perfectly content. It got the job done, was a heck of a better tractor than the Fordson next door and providing he got a good crop, it would be paid off by next year. ■

## IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

**Question:** This weird looking tractor actually performed brilliantly. But what on earth is its make?

**Clue:** This is kind of a cryptic clue. Note the timber (lumber) single chassis member. Think of which country would use timber for this purpose. If you get that right – then you have the name of the tractor.

**Degree of Difficulty:**  
Simple – eh?

**Answer:** See page 30.

