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Darley's jewel in the Victorian crown

Darley Australia's purchase of Woodlands Stud has grabbed the headlines while Darley Victoria has quietly put its stamp on an historic racing property. SARAH PEATLING reports.

As you arrive at the magnificent property near Seymour in north-east Victoria, you are greeted by rich green pasture and post and rail fencing lined by huge age-old gum trees, but there's an even richer history to be found by any thoroughbred lover as you make your way along the peaceful sweeping drive to the homestead.

Stretching over 1200 acres of both natural and beautifully manicured landscape, this is the home of Darley Victoria and base to six stallions throughout the 2008 breeding

season – Reset (\$33,000), Hard Spun (\$33,000), Dubai Destination (\$22,000), Any Given Saturday (\$22,000), Consolidator (\$13,750) and Gonski (\$7700).

Previously known as Northwood Park, this is where Barry and Midge Griffiths farmed the land for almost three decades and originally where A.G. Hunter stood a string of successful sires from 1903. Windbag, the great galloper who went on to sire champion miler Chatham, is buried here.





Above from left: Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, John Ferguson, Olly Tait and Henry Plumtre.

Darley Australia had been in talks for up to four years with the Griffiths' before the family finally decided to sell a majority of their property to the world's biggest racing and breeding empire in April 2006.

With Darley having grown at such a rapid rate both internationally and in the Hunter Valley, the company saw an opportunity to set up in Victoria, as Stud Director Henry Plumtre explained.

"We talked about a number of properties, however this one was the jewel in the crown. We inherited a place which had been sparingly run, with fresh ground, good undulation and natural water sources. Another thing which was priceless was that it is covered with trees, many of them that AG Hunter would have planted, some of them up to 100 years old. It's a priceless commodity."

The senior communication channels at Darley Australia are relatively simple. Victorian-based Plumtre, who has spent decades working as a highly respected bloodstock consultant and stud manager in the UK, Europe, Asia and Australia, reports to General Manager Olly Tait, who reports to Chief Bloodstock Advisor John Ferguson. Ferguson communicates with Darley's

owner, HRH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, on a variety of topics, decisions and issues that need to be discussed. Not many decisions are made without Ferguson.

An instinctive horseman with a deep passion for endurance riding, Sheikh Mohammed visited Australia in 1998 to watch Faithful Son run seventh in the Melbourne Cup. With his commitments as the Ruler of Dubai, it is difficult for the Sheikh to leave Dubai these days, however Plumtre pointed out that he has a solid backup team in Tait and Ferguson (to name but two) and is closely involved in what's happening in Australia. The recent mega-million dollar purchase of the Ingham bloodstock empire Woodlands Stud is a prime example.

"Sheikh Mohammed holds Australian racing in a very high regard. The fact that people are largely interested or involved, to him is a very good thing," said Plumtre.

"One of the great things about being in the Darley team is that while there's not an open cheque book, Sheikh Mohammed is a man who likes to be hospitable and provide the best possible facilities without segregating the market, so we're allowed to put



a lot of thought into developing these facilities. We did the best that we could at Aberdeen and the set up in Victoria is similar to Aberdeen although smaller," added Plumptre.

Since officially opening in August 2006, Darley Victoria facilities have developed significantly and now include a high-peak ceiling first-class stallion barn with six spacious boxes, post and rail fencing across a majority of the farm, two covering sheds coated with rubber shavings, stallion paddocks, a four-horse walker, and mate up paddocks for mares, foals and yearlings which sees the stock rotate around the farm in an anti-clockwise direction, starting from the pre-foaling, foaling and post-foaling units. As the foals get bigger and the mares move further into their pregnancy, they move further out to more spacious grounds in the rectangular shaped property. The highly respected Dr Angus McKinnon and his team from Goulburn Valley Equine Hospital act as resident vets for Darley.

"There's plenty of acreage for the horses here," said Plumptre. "Breeding horses in Australia is not about what they get out of the ground, it's about development and giving them space. The Kiwis and Irish get it out of the ground and generally most of their farms operate on 250 acres. Australia doesn't have the climate for that sort of farming, so the asset is space. Our whole breed is geared towards early development.

"Our fencing has been a long process and millions have gone into it, however fencing is an investment and not far off a good irrigation system in terms of adding value to the land."

With spelling and pre training costs rising, Darley is about to complete a spelling complex of its own which will incorporate some of the best landscape and shade on the place.

Facilities for humankind include a dreamy view of the Australian landscape wherever you look, a five bedroom fully renovated homestead with verandah and swimming pool for guests and clients, a newly built staff office, dining area and kitchen where three-course meals are prepared daily for staff by an in-house chef.

Matt Hill, who has spent numerous years working at Darley's UK stud base Dalham Hall, will join the Seymour property this season as Head Farm Manager with experienced stud master David Collison as second-in-charge. Successful syndicator Andrew Makiv will join Darley Victoria in nominations while Katy Moore and Adam Brayshaw make up the rest of the Victorian-based sales team.

Like so many other studs, the equine influenza outbreak unfortunately prevented Darley from standing its full roster in Victoria last year, however there was one beneficiary on the farm who made the most out of the epidemic. Stakes winning son of Danehill, Gonski, enjoyed 205 mares last season, covering up to four per day. Hopefully, his progeny will progress successfully to the track as winning two and three year olds in coming years.

The amount of invested capital that a leading international figure such as Sheikh Mohammed has ploughed into the Australian thoroughbred industry in recent years speaks volume for the current and future direction of this industry. ■