macadamia
CASTLE
A PIECE OF HISTORY
1975 - present
A few months after taking over the Castle as the fourth owner it became obvious to me that this is not just another business. In fact I do not consider myself an owner, but rather a custodian for future generations. The Macadamia Castle is an important community asset and an absolute joy but it is also a serious responsibility. As only the fourth owner in 38 years, I know that this has not been a business that previous owners took lightly. They were in no rush to move on.

These thoughts encouraged me to do some more research on the previous owners and the history of the Castle. What a fascinating journey that proved to be.

One glorious late summers day in 2012 we finally managed to get all the owners of the Macadamia Castle together for a good chat. Many laughs were shared as we discussed how little things had changed since the Castle opened in 1975.

It made me realise that the daily challenges I face at the Castle are nothing new and that ever since we opened, the bureaucracy has struggled to accept our place as an important Northern Rivers icon. I guess that is understandable, after all there is probably no rulebook that tells the various officials how to deal with an English-style castle based around the theme of the macadamia nut but operating as a cafe retail store and animal park.

I thoroughly enjoyed meeting Allan and Joyce Howard who had the original concept of the Castle and were its custodians for the first 14 years. Theirs was a magnificent vision and despite much scepticism from all quarters they managed to put the Castle on a solid footing and ensure its ultimate survival. Patrick and Pam Madigan followed, and by all accounts had a pretty tough time dealing with new animal keeping regulations, while at the same time being forced to finance extensive roadworks when the RTA realigned the Pacific Highway. They skilfully managed their way through that challenge. Jerome Hensen took over in 1997 and massively improved the animal park and retail operations. My hat goes off to all of these previous owners. I would certainly like to express my gratitude on behalf of the community for what they all achieved.

The Castle today is a thriving and exciting venture. We employ over 50 staff including various trainees, long-term unemployed, students and a core staff, many of who have spent well over 10 years working at the Castle. We see over 300,000 visitors per year, from all over Australia and the world. It is a great joy for our staff to personally share with our visitors the delights of the Northern Rivers including our animals, plants and delicious local food.

Unfortunately the Castle is again under threat, this time by a proposed bypass, which will remove us from the major Sydney to Brisbane Road. We have strongly argued for an exit close by and for the RTA to provide us with signage so that people find it easy to continue to enjoy not only the Macadamia Castle, but also the other treasures of our unique area. As I write, the future is unclear but I take inspiration from the previous Castle owners and know that they would not have given up. My personal goal is to make sure the Castle sees its 50th birthday in better shape than ever.

I hope you enjoy reading the history and look forward to seeing you at the Castle again soon.

*Tony Gilding*
1975 - 1989  
FIRST OWNERS  
ALLAN & JOYCE HOWARD

1989 - 1996  
SECOND OWNERS  
PATRICK & PAM MADIGAN

1996 - 2007  
THIRD OWNER  
JEROME HENSEN

2007 - Present  
FOURTH & CURRENT OWNER  
TONY GILDING
it is the 24th of December 1974...

After years of planning and hard work, Allan Howard is putting the finishing touches on the Knockrow Castle, before its official opening in about a week.

Full of pride that his vision is about to become a reality, he is applying a final coat of lacquer to the large front door, pitching in with his own hands, as he has done throughout the entire process.

A black limousine pulls quietly into the empty car park and a man in a dark suit emerges from the back seat. Allan has never seen this stranger before, and he does not introduce himself.

Instead, the man says, ‘What do you think you’re doing? Who gave you permission to build here?’

Allan explains his three-year long struggle, and the series of bureaucratic hoops and hurdles that he has jumped through to finally get the go-ahead.

The man says ‘Well, I don’t care what kind of approvals you’ve got, I’m from the Department of Main Roads, and this Castle will never open.’

With that he walks back to his waiting limo, gets in, and without another word drives off into the distance...
In the late sixties Allan and his wife Joyce decided to leave Melbourne because of the gloomy weather, and they purchased the Ballina Motel in 1969, officially moving their family of three boys up there in 1970. The population of Ballina at that time was just over 3000.

Running a small road-side motel was the couple’s first real experience in the tourist industry and with three young boys it was tough. But it was during their time there that the seeds for Knockrow Castle were planted and began to grow.

Says Allan, ‘We used to feel so sad during those summer holiday periods when it was wet and the people would be stuck in the motel rooms or caravan park with nothing to do. I said to myself well damn it, I’ve got to do something about this.

‘As a child I’d always been fascinated by castles and knights in armour, and I suppose that’s how we decided on a castle. Joyce and I both agreed that a castle would be a great idea for tourists especially when the weather was wet.’

Allan had also decided that the ideal location for the Castle was on the left hand side of the highway heading north to Brisbane, and he found the ideal piece of dirt situated almost in the centre of a triangle whose points were Ballina, Byron and Lismore. The couple purchased the land in 1973, but it was to be three years before anything could be built there. They endured several rounds of development applications and subsequent amendments that they had to submit to Council.
until they finally received approval for a much humbler version of a Castle than they had first conceived.

‘In the beginning we had a great vision for the building, which was going to be modelled on what we’d seen of real castles in Europe. Originally it was going to be a three-storey building with a moat and draw bridge.’

‘I don’t want to be negative, but we had a lot of problems getting our plans approved,’ says Allan. (‘Though we did get our moat, which is now gone.’)

The Police Department and the Department of Main Roads both objected to Allan’s original plans. The Council, too, imposed a series of conditions that led to the reduction in the height of the building from three to one storey.

‘You see in those days the Castle was actually level with the highway. The highway has been built up in the intervening years, but back then it was much lower. And that wouldn’t have been a problem if the Castle had been three storeys as we had originally intended. Still, we went ahead,’ says Joyce.

‘We named it Knockrow Castle. There was no confusion – we thought about calling it Howard Castle but we decided it was too personal,’ she says.

The first thing Allan did was to convert the cow shed behind the Castle site into a family home. It was an ideal location from which he could undertake construction of his childhood dream.

‘I worked as a labourer on the Castle and we opened it in three stages. As money became available we would commence the next stage. We built the putting course, because we needed something for the kids to do. So we basically had donkey rides and putt putt, combined with handbag and souvenir sales,’ he says.

‘We built the putt putt course in about 1977, and it’s still there today, as good as it was back then, so we’re proud of that.’

In 1978 Allan headed off to Europe to buy ‘castle paraphernalia’ such as swords and suits of armour.
He travelled first to England and then to Toledo Spain, which in those days was considered the sword capital of the world, and home to some of the finest sword replica makers.

‘The swords were absolutely magnificent and I brought several back to sell them at the Castle,’ says Allan.

The larger-than-life knight was always part of Allan’s plan. He had it meticulously designed and drafted by local Ken McDonald, who designed the six metre giant, and then gave the drawings to local to surfboard builder Bob McTavish who made flat fibreglass sheets as well as the head and skirt.

Says Joyce, ‘We really wanted the knight to be an icon – something that would attract people. After all it was twice as big as the Big Banana.’

Council required building plans for the knight, which included very deep foundations – about 8 feet deep by about 10 feet wide – compared to the Castle’s foundations which were only two feet deep. The council also required engineering specifications.

‘We had a big crane we brought in to put it up and we had a big hook on the end of the crane to lift it up. So we got it up there and it was hanging a few feet off the ground waiting to go onto the foundation and someone from the Ballina Council pulled up and said “you can’t put that there”’.

‘He said, “We didn’t inspect the footings”’.

‘But he did inspect the footings, it’s just that he hadn’t actually inspected the steel that went into it. He had approved it – everything.’

‘He said “You can’t do that there, you’ll have to stop that now.” So we stopped and left the knight dangling in mid air. Then he went away and the man who was driving the crane said to me “Well what am I supposed to do now?” And I said “Put it down right there on its footings where it is supposed to go.”’
'We all knew exactly what had gone into the building of the knight. We knew the lengths we had gone to – the engineer, the builder, the concreter knew what was in there. The guy from council knew me and he’d inspected everything we’d done along the way. Yet still he felt he had to do that at that stage of the process. It was typical of everything we went through along the way.'

The business

The Howard’s started off their business with the clear intention of selling only local goods. They invited people to use the Castle as a retail outlet and local artisans dropped things in – a bit of leather here, a piece of ceramics there – but it was difficult to find, and just as hard to sell.

‘You’ve got to understand that the 70s was really a very different time and we were in a traditional farming area,’ he says.

‘People seemed to think that we were going to make a huge profit off their work. For the first year what we made out of the Castle was negligible. Would you believe our biggest seller was bananas? People would come there just for bananas.’

‘We had this guy from Sydney who used to drop in and see us, and he used to say Allan you’ve got to sell teaspoons, tea towels and all these souvenirs. And I would say no way, no way. But in the end I caved. I felt I had to try something new. And lo and behold from there on in we started to make some money. It wasn’t what I wanted to do, but in those days everyone collected tea towels, or spoons. They weren’t made in Australia and I was disappointed, but in the end it probably saved us.’

Says Joyce, ‘We sold opals, car seat covers, souvenirs, Mexican handbags, leather hats, and pottery. The most unusual things we sold were four painted pink elephant feet that Allan bought on a trip to what was still Rhodesia back then.’

For many years local Scot Graham Adams rented a section of the Castle and sold Scottish souvenirs, including beautiful knitwear and kilts that were made in Scotland on order for locals.

Says Joyce, ‘Graham helped to establish the Scottish band for the area, and played the bagpipes at the Castle as the tourist coaches arrived and departed. It made every one very happy. Graham and Allan both wore kilts at this time.’

The animals

There was no animal park at the Castle when Allan and Joyce first built it. They did, however breed several donkeys over the years, and offered donkey rides to the children.

They also had their fair share of uninvited animal drop-ins.
Says Joyce, ‘We had a mice plague there. It was unbelievable. They swarm. They were in the store room where we had all our goods packed away and we had rat sack and they were frolicking in there, jumping in and out of the packets.’

‘Allan used to go over every night and we’d have all these traps set, and he’d go over and empty them and re-set them.’

‘And we had snakes. Once we had a friend from Ballina look after the Castle for us while we were away and when we got in the next day there was this big six-foot brown snake hanging on the fence. So we couldn’t get in fast enough to ring him and find out what had happened.’

‘Well, he said, it was like this: a family came in and said to me there’s a snake outside. So I went out there and I saw a brick and I went after the snake. Meanwhile the family came out the back door to watch and they were standing in a huddle on the veranda. But the snake decided to turn around and go back towards them, at which point they all panicked and the whole lot of them tried to get back in through the door at the same time. It was the funniest thing you’ve ever seen.’

the end

Thirteen years after opening the doors of the Knockrow Castle for the very first time –having brought up three princes of their own in the Castle grounds – Allan and Joyce decided to sell the business on. It was at that time that Ian MacDonald and Patrick and Pam Madigan just happened to be in the market for a Castle.
Local nurseryman Ken McDonald spent several years selling plants at the Knockrow Castle during Allan and Joyce’s reign, and it was during one of their many chats that he and Allan hatched the idea of building a larger-than-life knight to stand sentry at the entrance to the car park.

Not only was Ken handy with a welder and a bit of steel pipe, he was also quite an ingenious designer and so he set about creating the plans for the knight based upon a suit of armour that was on display in the Castle at the time.

‘I just measured everything and drew it up and then multiplied it by three,’ he says.

Working out of a shed that was on Castle grounds, Ken set about putting his giant knight together. He used pieces of three-inch steel pipe for the frame, and combined them with malleable flat steel strips to create the shape of the knight’s body. The sword (to the rear) and lance (at the front) were crucial props that kept the knight balanced on narrow cement foundations.

‘First thing I did was build a big rotating spit, just like you’d use to cook a pig on a spit. That way I could build the knight’s frame onto it and rotate it around as I applied the fibreglass.’

‘I knew I’d need a good fibreglasser, so naturally the first person I thought of was Bob.’

Bob McTavish was a Lennox Head local and surfboard shaper, who had just opened an aviation fibreglass business. There wasn’t much about fibreglass he didn’t know and he was able to choose just the right materials for Ken’s rather unusual job.

For the body Bob provided Ken with numerous flat pieces of white aviation fibreglass, which Ken then cut to fit and riveted onto the frame. For the skirt he found a coarse fibreglass gauze that fell just like material, dyed the resin red and frayed the edges.

‘For the head,’ says Bob, ‘we went shopping in Ballina to find just the right sized beach ball, inflated it and coated it with resin. When it set we deflated it and kept on adding more and more layers for strength.’

In his on-site workshop, Ken put everything together, and in late 1985 after around three months work, he had an impressive 6.5 metre knight ready to be erected in front of Knockrow Castle. Local artist Mark Waller put the finishing touches on with a big red cross on the chest.

‘It was supposed to be St George, you see,’ says Ken, ‘and I’ve always had this dream of building a dragon to lie down at his feet.’
He started his career as a young man with Telecom, where he undertook engineering studies that eventually qualified him to be a Senior Technical Officer.

He put that training to very good use, and in the eighties he teamed up with marketing specialist Ian Marshall (who is now deceased) and started Direct Alarm Supplies, a company that designed house alarms and other kinds of electronic timing systems. Together they made the business into a very successful enterprise, winning a small business award in 1985 and securing several large and lucrative overseas export contracts.

Patrick’s wife Pam was an employee at Direct Alarm Supplies, who on the recommendation of a friend had started work in the office on a temporary contract for a few weeks. Two years later she was still there and then one day, to everyone’s surprise, Patrick came out from his workshop and announced their engagement. The couple were married in 1988.

In the late 80s Patrick and Ian sold their company to Hills Hoists Industries and decided to take the courageous step of heading north and starting a business in an area they knew little about – macadamias. They bought a macadamia farm and Ian moved up to run the farm, while Patrick stayed in Sydney to finish a contract for Hills Hoists Industries.

It was Patrick’s idea to establish a road-side retail outlet where they could sell their macadamias.
'I knew that Knockrow Castle was on the market after the Brisbane World Expo excitement had subsided, and I felt that it would be an ideal place to sell and roast the macadamia nuts that we were harvesting from the farm,’ he says.

So, Patrick Madigan, and partner Ian Marshall bought Knockrow Castle from Allan and Joyce Howard in 1989.

But the partnership was not to last. In about 1990 it was dissolved: Ian went back to being a macadamia farmer, and Pam and Patrick found themselves the new King and Queen of the Castle.

Landing on the roadside at Knockrow was a shock to Patrick and Pam who had both spent most of their working lives in an office environment and had little experience in retail, tourism or animal parks.

‘Suddenly here I was’, says Patrick, ‘mowing, tree culling, feeding and animal handling. There was always something to do and we never seemed to get a break. I had this 4 wheel drive that I used to move heavy equipment, truck loads of earth, rocks, gravel, trees, hay and sometimes animals. It was full on.’

‘We’d get up every day at around 5.30. I’d have to buy all the food for the animals, because some of them were very fussy eaters. I’d buy all the greens and the vegies, and then I’d go and buy day old-bread, which was a supplementary feed for just about every animal including the kangaroos’

‘We also used to make up little 50c bags so that people could feed the ducks and peacocks and chickens. Very often I’d load everything into the van, and then head off to the rural buying place to buy all kinds of seeds and grain and feed pellets – every animal had to have a wide variety of diet choice, for example some birds had to have cakes made with eggs as a supplement.’

‘Meanwhile Pam would clean up at home, and then head out and get everything for the kitchen. Mavis from Lennox Head used to make all our slices and Pam would collect them every
morning. Scones had to be made by the bucket loads and there was lots of grocery shopping that had to be done for the kitchen.’

‘We opened the doors at 9am and closed at 5 but we’d be there until about 8 in the evening, cleaning up. And that was 7 days a week.’

Says Pam, ‘I remember one day a lady came in and I was so excited I said to her, we’re going on holiday tomorrow. And she said, oh how lovely, where are you going? And I said, we’re having half a day in Port Macquarie! That was a really big deal to us.’

The business

When they bought the Castle Patrick and Ian renamed it, ‘Macadamia Land’ because they wanted to sell macadamias, but it was still Knockrow Castle to the locals.

‘We set it up as a free entry park and we made our money on the macadamias and the souvenirs’. Says Pam, ‘We didn’t want to charge people, and that’s what really brought it up in popularity.’

‘One day a guy came up to me and said, hey lady you’re crazy for making this free, you ought to charge. Then a few hours later, as he was leaving he came up and said, you’re not crazy after all, I’ve just spent $100 in there.’

Pam and Patrick renovated the barn on the south side of the Castle into accommodation with a loft bedroom for daughter Narelle Johnson who had moved up from Sydney to help with the business. The couple put Narelle in charge of the kitchen.

‘This arrangement worked really well. She used to do all the cooking including making the scones. Sometimes a tourist bus would arrive and we’d have to serve a coach load of 30 or 40 people with Devonshire Tea in a space of 20 minutes,’ says Pam.

‘We stocked local items ceramics, jewellery, souvenirs, cowhides, sheep skins. For a while we sold palms from the nursery next door.’

Patrick did all the dry roasting of the macadamias in a little tiny oven. He says, ‘I wouldn’t let anyone through the Castle without pouncing on them and selling them a bag of nuts.’

Over the years he developed a theory that the men liked the oil roasted and the women liked the dry roasted, so he made up a two pack at a special price.

During the time that Patrick and Ian owned the Castle, they undertook significant upgrade and renovation including the establishment of the animal park, the construction of new...
toilet blocks incorporating disabled access, reconstruction of the kitchen and café and tiling and painting of the entire castle in and out.

The original Development Application with Council to develop the animal park was lodged in 1989 by Ian and Patrick. To their surprise, as part of the application approval, Council required a responsibility to widen their section of the Pacific Highway to allow traffic deceleration and turning lanes.

After the partnership was dissolved it became Patrick and Pam’s responsibility to carry out this work.

‘It was an enormous job and it was going to cost us approximately half a million,’ says Pam, ‘but lucky for us, a local earth moving contractor John Morgan offered to do the job at cost price as there was a financial squeeze at that time and he said he wanted to keep all his men in work.’

‘If it wasn’t for John and the cooperation of the Ballina Council at that time, we could not have gone through with it. John is now deceased but we believe that because of his generosity he is part of the reason the Castle is still there and when we see the Morgan trucks on the road we feel that his spirit is still with us.’

the animals

When Patrick and Ian took over the Castle there was no animal park. In fact the area behind the Castle was an empty patch of dirt and grass.

It was Ian Marshall who came up with the idea of including some animals in the list of attractions. He approached Terry Stroud a wildlife carer registered with the Parks and Wildlife Authority who was well known in the area for his work in animal rescue, and asked him if he would bring his animals over to the Castle. Terry agreed to move his animal rescue operations across from South Ballina to Knockrow, where he continued to...
work with Patrick and Pam until he was forced to retire due to ill health.

Under Ian’s watch, major works were undertaken behind the Castle to accommodate the animals and this included around 4 acres of landscaping and about $200k worth of fencing.

It was after state elections of 1991 that new regulations were introduced with regard separation of parks and wildlife responsibilities for the keeping of captive animals in New South Wales and the creation of the Zoo and Exhibitors board. After Terry and Ian had left the Castle Patrick was required to obtain a license that allowed him to keep and display animals to the public.

But that was not the only animal keeping papers Patrick obtained. He was also required to undertake a course in kangaroo handling at Macquarie University.

“We were housing a large number of kangaroos. The Zoo Board was newly established as a separate body from the Parks and Wildlife and new requirements were set to separate wildlife from captive animals. So I went along to this kangaroo handling course, and because I already had some kangaroos, and most of these people didn’t even know a thing about them, they were firing all these questions at me. It was very funny. All of a sudden I was a kangaroo expert,” he says.

When Terry Stroud retired Patrick and Pam employed a young local boy called Jason Purdy, who stayed on and worked tirelessly for several years at the Castle maintaining the grounds and caring for the animals. Patrick and Pam said ‘We are very grateful to Jason whose dedicated hard working efforts contributed to the survival of the park’.

And there were plenty of special animals over the years. In particular Patrick remembers the Wombat, who had a habit of escaping from her enclosure and making her way into the ladies toilet. ‘One morning we came in and the place was devastated, there were holes everywhere, mud all over the place. She’d got into the ladies and bent all the bars, got mud up the walls, just absolutely wrecked the joint,’ says Pam.

Says Patrick, ‘When I’d feed her I’d have to put gumboots on because she’d always be trying to bite my feet.’

And then there was the goat who had apparently taken a dislike to Patrick. ‘The goat would always want to fight me,’ he says. ‘Whenever he would see me he would come running towards me, but over the time I learnt how to tackle him and wrestle him to the ground so I could make an escape. One day I wrestled him down but I ended up facing the wrong way and somehow he stood up and I was on his back, and he took off across the paddock with me on board. I managed to jump off, but it must have looked funny.’

In the early days Ian and Patrick gave the knight a paint job, and later Patrick and Pam were asked by a neighbour to move him to provide commercial access to his property. This move was quite a feat involving some tricky engineering and a large excavator to pick the knight up by the head and walk him to his new position, which was actually closer to the highway. It also assisted in the construction of the turning lane from the highway.

After so many years of 12 to 14 hour days, Pam and Patrick decided to hang up their suits of armour and sell the Castle, and in 1996 a man called Jerome Hensen paid them a visit.
Jerome was born in the Netherlands and came to Australia in 1986. In the early part of his career he worked mainly as a retailer in men’s wear in a business established by his grandfather. Just before he bought the Castle he managed a tourist resort on the Gold Coast with his partner Jeannie Martin.

Jerome and Jeannie owned a townhouse in Lennox Head and they decided that they wanted to live in the area. They agreed that once they got out of resort management, they would buy their own business, but this time it would not entail working with the public, living on site, or working seven days a week. They were considering moving back into textiles and fabrics.

Then Jerome picked up a book of unique businesses and properties for sale and in it he found the Castle.

‘I went there during the day and spoke to Patrick who said yes this is for sale, and I thought to myself, This is it. So I rang Jeannie and I said I’ve found it. She said what is it and I told her and she hung up the phone. She did that three times before I could actually explain it to her,’ he says.

‘Of course it was everything that we had agreed we would not do, but I could see the enormous potential there.’

From the start Jerome felt it was important to change the external façade of the Castle.

‘By their nature castles are built to defend and intended to keep people out – they have narrow windows to peer out of,
turrets to shoot arrows from and small doors to restrict access. So I felt that was the biggest issue. We would have a lot of people drive by, but they wouldn’t come inside,’ he says.

‘We found an artist and graphic designer called Geoff Williams and started to work with him in 1998 on the name change and vital new designs for signage. I also commissioned him to come up with an idea to make the Castle friendlier. Geoff came up with the very elegant and colourful figures that now brighten up the façade and I remember him standing on scaffolding in the heat of summer with a wet towel over his head doing the initial sketching and then colouring in. Over all my time at the Macadamia Castle he did all design work and I say he was crucial to its success.’

‘When we bought it people referred to it as both Knockrow Castle and Macadamia Land. We felt that it was confusing.’

‘We changed the name in November 1998 to The Macadamia Castle and it was unbelievable what a difference it made, because from that day on we had an amazing increase in turnover. At first I thought it might be a fluke, but after two weeks, then six weeks, consistently every day we had a 60% turnover increase.’

‘For two years the business grew by large amounts – 60% and then 50%, the next year 27%. It became like a steam train, we had a full car park and the cash register was ringing.’

In December 1999 Jeannie and Jerome split and Jeannie left the Castle. Jerome stayed on for another eight years.

The animals

Like all Kings of the Castle Jerome held a zookeepers licence, which is issued by the Department of Agriculture and a requirement for anyone who has more than 30 species of animal on display.

But from the start Jeannie was very interested in the animals and took most of the responsibility for the park, while Jerome looked after the retail side of things.

They created the baby animal park, put in the chick house and the snake house. They bred chicks and rats and mice and took in rescued tawny frogmouths that had been hit on the road. They introduced five or six different breeds of rabbit, emus and Parma wallabies. And of course they had a wombat.
Says Jerome, ‘I remember the day that one of my employees, drove down to Symbiose Park in Sydney to pick the wombat up. We stayed behind and prepared a new viewing area enclosure with thick perspex, but the next morning she was gone – she had crashed right through the perspex! After an anxious search she was found in the female toilet. So we timbered planks in front of the new perspex and unbelievably she was missing again the next morning. We knew where to look and again found her in the female toilets. This time we used thicker planks and on the third night we managed to contain her.’

‘At one stage, without any planning on our part, we had over 200 chooks in the park. It was just too many. There were tribes and power plays going on and a lot of scratching going on everywhere making the walking paths untidy. In the visitor book someone had even written “Kill the chooks”.

At that time Sue Johnson had just started her new position as manager Animal Park. She came very well credentialed, as she had worked at Hurstville Zoo in Victoria as a zookeeper.

She said to me the chooks are starting to look bad. They have deformed nails, bad skin, with scabs on them. But, we realised it was not their health, it was their interbreeding. One of the breeds was an odd looking species from Hungary that had no feathers on their joints or neck. We had so many different kinds of chooks and they were all breeding with each other. Before we knew it we had the United Nations in there.’

‘Anyway we decided we had to thin them out, but until then I had never realised how smart chooks are. For months I used to go in at night, catch them and put them in hessian bags till morning when they would be taken to live on a neighbouring farm. But it didn’t take long for the remaining chooks to identify me as the bogey man and as soon as they heard me come in through the gate they would start with the squawking and the clucking and they would run and even fly away from me.’

‘I tell you, to get the last 20 chooks out of that park was incredibly difficult – they were hiding in the most inventive places.’

In September 2000 there was an incident at the rabbit enclosure that would see Jerome in court, being sued for $750,000 in compensation. A toddler had been bitten in the top end of the finger by a bunny after being left on his own by his parents in front of the rabbit display. The boy was treated briefly in Ballina hospital and the family continued their holiday, but weeks later Jerome received documents that said he was being sued for compensation – initially for $25,000 but then later for $750,000.

Five years later in court the boy’s father would describe the rabbits as ‘dangerous looking animals’ but Jerome’s story was one of both injustice and good luck.

Says Jerome, ‘The story broke in 2003 and was first published in The Northern Star. and the whole day my phone rang hot. The story featured the next Sunday on A Current Affair as another example of an outrageous damages claim for public liability. The music of Jaws was played while the camera stayed focused on an anxious looking bunny.’

‘In the end although the claimant won the case, they were awarded only $11,000. The cost to me was $1000 being the excess on my policy with HIH.’

The business

‘When we first saw the place it was like a bazaar. Patrick liked to get the lowest price by buying 12 dozen of everything. So a lot of items came in lots of 144 but he found it difficult to sell everything. When we did a stock take we found a room with over 4000 tea towels.’

‘When we took over Jeannie and I didn’t want to take on the mainly China-made souvenirs because we intended to sell
Australian and locally made products. So Patrick said, give me more time to sell them and we agreed on three extra months for settlement.'

‘That was a huge mistake on my behalf because in those three months questions started to arise for us. I particularly had second thoughts that we had taken on something bigger than Ben Hur!’

‘I had never known depression and didn’t know how to spell the word! But I got depressed at the thought of the job ahead, and I relied heavily on Jeannie to make the most out of a bad and difficult start. She was not unaffected either and it was not until we introduced the name change and renewed the road signs that things really turned around.

‘In the end trading was so busy we had six points of sale, whereas in the beginning we only had two.’

‘I have a lot of very good memories of my staff. Georgia in the park and Helen in the office are still there. And I remember Julie, she’s an iconic figure in the Bangalow Hotel and she cooked hamburgers like no one else for five years in a row. When she wasn’t around we’d all panic, and when she finally left we had to take hamburgers off the menu.’

‘Four days later I got a phone call. The person said have you seen your knight. I said No. It was at five in the morning. Well, they said, you’d better get down there to the knight. When I got there I saw the knight standing on the highway in his usual place, but with a giant penis tied around his waste. These very funny students had made it out of chicken wire and papier mache and hung it on our knight. It was huge – to give you an idea, it only just fitted into one of our rubbish skips.’

It was during Jerome’s time at the Castle that the first plans for a Pacific Highway upgrade were put on the table. It was a threat to the lifeblood of the business.

After more then two years of studies three options were presented. Another year of consultations brought the final option down to one, which wasn’t very good news for the Castle. Having largely stayed out of meetings with the RTA during this whole planning process Jerome found himself finally drawn into a battle to save his business and the Castle.

As a result the RTA came up with a plan that would install a round-about on the corner of Ivy Lane on land that they owned. This was a marvellous solution that would save The Macadamia Castle.

Says Jerome, ‘I received detailed drawings from the RTA, all of which were stamped confidential and I was asked not to talk to anyone about it. To me it seemed a forgone conclusion that this round-a-bout would now go ahead and I started negotiations to sell the Macadamia Castle. Tony Gilding, the next owner, also took the RTA at their word, but since then they have reneged and he is still dealing with that to this day.’
When Tony joined Skansen it had been a small affair, but he worked closely with founder Manny Stul to build the business. When Manny became suddenly ill, Tony was put in charge, staying on to build Skansen into a successful enterprise, with a turnover of about $35million and a staff of over 100. He was inaugural Managing Director when Skansen was listed on the stock exchange.

Tony left Skansen when it was taken over by a bigger company, but he stayed on in the corporate world, working for several IT businesses and remaining very much a part of Sydney corporate life, until one day something changed.

‘I was living in Balmain and one day I drove up to the local Post Office and it took me 20 minutes to drive up there, 20 minutes to find a park, and 30 minutes waiting in line, when I was finally fronted by a rude staff member who told me that I couldn’t do what I wanted to do. I thought, it’s time to get out of here,’ he says.

Tony and his wife Rie were already very familiar with the North Coast, being regular Bluesfest goers. So they decided to sell their house in Sydney and to look for something up here.

‘We wrote a list of specifications of what we wanted and decided to look for a large block of land where we could build some holiday cottages. After a year or so of investigation we bought what we believed was the perfect block and then started the process of getting approval, which took about four years longer than I expected.’
Meanwhile, as Tony waited for approval for his holiday houses, he joined the Bangalow Wine Appreciation Society where he met the owner of the Macadamia Castle, Jerome Hensen. Jerome was toying with the idea of selling the Castle and invited Tony to come down and have a look.

‘Like so many North Coast residents I’d been past the Castle thousands of times but never really been inside, so I went down to have a chat with Jerome and I really liked the place, plus I could see that it was something that had potential.’

Tony says the Castle presented itself as a sound business decision. ‘I did a fair bit of cold hard business analysis which showed that the business was in very good shape and could support us without us having to work on the floor or behind the counter. Turnover was evenly spread across the four main areas of café, retail, fine food and animal park, which was a very good indicator, showing that no one part of the business was propping up the others. But the other really important thing was that we loved the business, and so did the staff (who had all been here for a long time) and the customers.’

‘The other thing I liked was the naivety of the place. Still do. I’ve been very careful not to change the farmyard, or the Castle façade. So much so that when we do a renovation we try and make it look a bit rustic and a bit lived in and a bit of a throw back to the old days. I think that there’s a real warmth in a farmyard, with chickens, goats, calves, and lambs. There’s something wholesome that triggers the warm emotions for people. Just like being on the set of Babe.’

After some months of negotiations, Tony and Rie concluded a deal with Jerome and in September 2007, they took over the Castle. Rie looked after fashion, decor and food, while Tony worked with the retail systems and the park. They put Helen
Simkins, one of the Castle’s longest-standing employees, in charge of staff.

Rie added considerable style to the Castle but after a couple of years Rie and Tony parted ways and Tony continued to run the business.

Since taking over at the Castle, Tony has systematically worked through each sector of the business to implement improvements. One of the most ambitious of these projects was the work he undertook in the café.

‘When we bought the Castle the café was leased out, but on the second day that we were here the operators spat the dummy and left. They wanted to put up their prices, but I didn’t want them to. They said they wanted to give notice, and I said well what kind of notice, and they said, we’re leaving today. So I made a couple of panicked phone calls, including one to Edith Ferns who lives up the road and had written a cook book, who came in immediately to help. She’s retired now, but she got us through a tight spot.’

Tony also enlisted the help of Ben and Sarah Muso, who used to own Bayleaf, who came in for a month to help him put the menu together.

One of the first things Tony and his café staff did was to go through and calculate the food kilometres for all dishes on the menu, and as a result the distance travelled by each food item is now clearly marked. It was an enormous task, but has been very well received.

At the same time Tony has put a lot of work into promoting local growers and producers through the fine food part of the business. For some of these micro businesses the Castle is their largest retailer.

‘I see it as our role to be a living breathing tourist information business that supports other local businesses. We have become the largest customer for many of our suppliers. That’s because we believe that if you are on holiday or travelling through, then a fine food item is the best gift you can give. It will be shared, it will be used, it’s environmentally friendly, and it won’t go into landfill.’

‘What the Castle is all about is creating a local experience for people: so that they get to eat local food, see and understand local animals, and meet local keepers and staff who really understand the area.’

Tony’s commitment to the local environment and the sustainability of a business like this goes beyond local promotion and business success.

One of the great advantages of running a business that largely runs itself from day to day, is that he can spend time on his outside passions. He is currently President of Borneo Orang Utan Survival Foundation, on the board of Rainforest Rescue,
on the board of Ballina Regional College and Treasurer of the Ballina Greens.

**The animals**

The animal park remains central to the Castle business. Since his arrival Tony has renovated and installed a new park entry, and is now turning his attention to the park itself. He has recruited a professional park manager Nick Bourke straight from the Western Plains Zoo. Nick has qualifications that enable him to work with reptiles and is developing an ambitious program that includes the addition of crocodiles to the park family.

‘We’ve got a new big incubator coming,’ says Tony, ‘where we’ll have chicken eggs incubating and then later reptiles. We’ve also opened a kangaroo and emu feeding enclosure out the back, and employed a bird expert who is developing a Free Flight Show.’

But, according to Tony, one of the biggest highlights of the last 12 months was when Diesel the wombat came to live at the park.

‘We were approached by a woman who had been looking after a rescued wombat and who offered him to us. Of course we enthusiastically embraced the opportunity, and he has been a fantastic addition to the park, but he is a challenge because part of his digestive system hasn’t developed properly. He is on a very strict diet and we’ve had to build air-conditioned premises for him. But everyone loves Diesel and we love him, he’s just gorgeous. Even Elle McPherson came to see him.’

**The future**

When Allan Howard planned the Castle business way back in the 70s, he knew that its success would be founded upon its prime highway location. And he was right; for decades the
Pacific Highway has been the lifeblood of the Macadamia Castle, but that may be about to change. Despite the fact that when the highway upgrade was first put on the table nearly 20 years ago, Jerome Hensen went to enormous lengths to negotiate a dedicated exit from the new highway to service the Macadamia Castle and nearby businesses and properties, the RTA has since reneged on their agreement and scrapped the exit.

Says Tony, ‘When I bought the business the RTA made it very clear to me that there was going to be an exit from the highway just up the road. So I did my sums based on that. It was a dreadful shock a couple of years after we bought the business when the RTA rang me at 9.30 one evening to tell me that they’d changed their minds and that there would be no exit at Ivy Lane.’

‘They claimed that it was because of the objections of 50 residents, but I knew that it wouldn’t be long before I had many many more times that in favour of the exit. To date I’ve got 18,000 signatures in favour, and after four years of trying to get a meeting with the Roads Minister, I finally presented it to him the other day.’

‘It’s going to be a challenge and I’m sure we’ll rise to it. I wouldn’t like to say that it’s going to close the business down, but nor would I say that it will be a breeze. It’s a significant hit, but we’re developing plans around it. We’ve put together a plan called the Hinterland Way, which will turn the road that passes the Castle, Newrybar and Bangalow into a dedicated tourist route.’

‘My focus must now be to make the Macadamia Castle into more of a destination than spur-of-the-moment road-side stop off. That will mean pushing for signage and doing plenty of work behind the scenes to ensure that people remember us and want to keep coming back.’
the reunion
20TH FEBRUARY 2012