

History of Growing Turf in the Hawkesbury

The Hawkesbury has been referred to as the breadbasket of the Sydney region for over two hundred years. Vegetables, citrus and stone fruit were taken to Sydney by steamers down the Hawkesbury River. In recent decades, repeated disastrous floods have prompted farmers to change crops, for example, citrus to vegetables and vegetables to turf.

The fertile floodplains of the Hawkesbury River and its tributaries are home to Australia's largest turf industry, comprising one-quarter of national production. The timeline below lists some major events and people involved in the growth of the local sod (or instant) turf industry.



Timeline

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| 1919 | Kikuyu grass imported into Australia. |
| 1920 | 30th January 1920, rooted stolons of kikuyu sown at Hawkesbury Agricultural College, Richmond. |
| 1930 | Charlie Courtney and John Polley received miners' rights for five shillings a year to cut couch turf at Long Neck Lagoon. |
| 1930 | Gordon Johnston and Frank Turnbull cut turf at Broadwater, Cattai. Turf was cut using long battens that were laid on the ground. An axe was used to cut along the battens that were 12" apart. A spade was then used to cut under the turf. At one time Gordon had 16 men cutting with spades. |
| 1937 | Turf was cut by spade at Sir Phillip Charley's property at Richmond (behind RAAF base). |
| 1939 – 1945 | Turf industry in decline because of the war. |

- 1948 Lloyd (Puddin) Brown and his sons Neil and Barry cut couch turf at Mackenzie's Creek on the Pitt Town Road and Longneck Lagoon. Charlie Courtney started to cut turf on Frost's dairy "Linwood" on the Pitt Town Road.
- 1952 Victa lawn mower invented.
- 1958 Chicka Courtney purchases Howard Cutter. It is a drag machine that does not work very well, so he only uses side blades to mark out one foot squares and still cuts underneath with a spade.
- 1959 Syd Colbran cultivates couch at Webbs Creek. Syd used a horse drawn mower and supplied turf to Warragamba Dam.
- 1961 Ryan 12" turf cutter introduced. Paddock turf begins to be moved in greater quantities. *"Mechanisation killed the turf industry as it meant more people could cut turf which lowered the price"* – Gordon Johnston, Cattai (since this comment was made the industry has grown enormously).
- 1964 Keith Miller grows and cuts couch turf at Sackville River flats.
- 1967–68 Early turf growers include Paul Scott at Cornwallis, Charlie Courtney at Pitt Town, Milton Scott at Colo river, Alan Smith at Dargle and the Martin brothers at Roberts Creek.
- 1970 Kevin Rozzoli, then a Windsor Council alderman, successfully lobbies for turf growing to be re-classified as agriculture. This is a very significant change in the Hawkesbury district, for example, land tax no longer applies to these farms. Elsewhere in NSW, turf growing was still classed as an extractive industry requiring development consent.
- 1970 – 72 John Tebbutt (great-grandson of the famous astronomer from Windsor), Keith Kennedy, Terry Allen and Keith Layt all started turf farms. The Apaps grew turf at Freemans Reach. Keith Miller purchases land to grow turf at Freemans Reach.
- 1973 Attempts by John Tebbutt to grow common buffalo fail due to floods and contamination by couch.
- 1974 Greenleas Park Couch introduced to the Hawkesbury. This very popular grass was bred by Rod Riley at Greenleas Park Bowling Club.
- 1975 John Brann and Peter Sardyga (Lowlands Turf), Sam Grech and turf consultant Peter McMaugh establish farms along Cornwallis Road.
- 1978 First cut of cultivated buffalo turf harvested by John Tebbutt at the Peninsula in Windsor.

- 1980 Cultivated buffalo grass grown by Doug MacDonald and John Tebbutt at Yarramundi Lane – where floods were not as bad.
- 1980 Brouwer turf harvester arrives in the Hawkesbury.
- 1982 Large areas of “common” buffalo established. Joe Galea starts J & B Buffalo.
- 1984 Winter Green couch sold by Peter McMaugh.
- 1985 A meeting was convened at Hawkesbury Agricultural College to form the Turf Growers Association of NSW. Inaugural President Bob Firth.
- Subsequent presidents include Terry Allen, Peter McMaugh, John Tebbutt, Neale Tweedie, Norm Bartholomew and Greg Miller.
- 1985 Big expansion of turf farms in the Freemans Reach area by Bill Galea, John Galea, the Muscat family, Ernie Chambers and the Saliba family. Other turf growers to enter the industry were the May family at Pitt Town, John Gardiner at Richmond, the Vellas at Richmond, Arthur Parkes and Allan Melville: all were formerly vegetable growers.
- 1987 Plant Variety Rights (PVR) Act gazetted by Commonwealth government. This Act protected the interests of plant breeders. It resulted in a lot more varieties of turf being bred for the industry.
- 1989 John Brann builds “tailgator”. This machine, attached to the back of a truck, allows pallets of cut turf to be loaded and unloaded on site.
- 1990 In the early 1990s the Ridge family closed their dairy to start a turf farm.
- 1990 Charles Courtney sells the first soft leaf buffalo.
- 1991 ST85 soft leaf buffalo bred by Hugh Whiting.
- 1992 Joe Vella builds the first sod planter. This made establishing turf areas easier and a lot less expensive.
- 1993 Shademaster buffalo selected by John Tebbutt at Brent Redman’s Maitland Turf Farm. It better tolerated flooding. The name Shademaster was suggested by Don Burke when he saw its shade tolerance at John Tebbutt’s home in Windsor.
- Hawkesbury turf growers’ close ranks and support growers in other districts by lobbying the Department of Planning and Environment to change the ruling on turf growing from an extractive to an agricultural industry.
- It was subsequently gazetted that turf growing in all of New South Wales was agriculture.

- 1994 Plant Breeders Rights Act 1994 replaces PVR Act 1987.
- 1998 Sir Walter soft leaf buffalo selected by Brent Redman of Buchanan's Turf, Maitland.
- 2000 The feared collapse of the local turf industry following the boom of the Sydney Olympics does not eventuate. Construction and demand for turf continue at a brisk pace. However, the drought, beginning in 2002, and subsequent water restrictions, do greatly reduce demand. Water availability poses perhaps the major challenge faced by the industry today.

The present day Turf production is one of the Hawkesbury's largest industries and employers. Sixty separate businesses grow turf on 1625 hectares (4065 acres) and directly employ 240 full-time equivalent workers (NSW Agriculture survey, late 2002). The wholesale value of turf grown would exceed \$70 m p.a.

The Hawkesbury turf industry grows a wide variety of specialised grasses then delivers them to Australia's largest city, the Illawarra, Central Coast, Hunter and even interstate and overseas.

The industry has evolved greatly from the days when kikuyu was cut from old dairy pasture using spades. Nowadays, a highly mechanised and precise industry grows acclimatised grasses on flood-prone land.

For as long as Australians prefer the comfort, beauty and many other benefits of turf, the future of the Hawkesbury turf industry looks bright indeed.

Compiled by Keith Miller, Ted Books, Hugh Allan and Ashley Senn with information from many former and current turf growers including Keith Miller, Terry Allan, Charlie Courtney, John Tebbutt, Allan Melville, Gordon Johnston, John Gardiner, Brian May, other members of the Turf Growers Association of NSW; and staff of NSW DPI (formerly NSW Agriculture).

