

Succession stories in the citrus industry



The Button family's Island View Farm spans 400 ha with approximately 120 ha of citrus and a beef division comprising 200 breeding cows. By Gloria Weare (adapted from Louise Brodie)



The rolling hills of southern KwaZulu-Natal were beautifully described by Alan Paton in the opening lines of his novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*: "There is a lovely road which runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it."

It has been 70 years since this famous novel was published but this remains a fitting description of the magnificent landscape where Peter and Jenny Button live with their family, south of Ixopo in their beautiful homestead at Island View Farm near Umzimkhulu. The Button family has deep roots in the region as Peter's family has been living and farming in the area since 1860. Peter was one of five siblings and grew up on his parents' farm near Umzimkhulu.

Peter and his son Paul Button manage the farm together. The Button family were the first farmers to plant and export citrus from southern KwaZulu-Natal (then known as Natal). As citrus had been produced at his parents' farm, located only about 4 km away across the river from Island View Farm, they knew that citrus grew well in the area.

Paul is responsible for citrus and Peter for the beef division on the farm. They work closely together and discuss the citrus management on an on-going basis. The farm produces navels, lemons and more recently mandarins.

"Our son Paul is married to Holly and they live on the farm with their two daughters. Our daughter Robyn is married to Cliff Gilson, who works for the timber industry in our area. They live in a home adjoining ours here on the farm and have two young sons. Our third child Jane, lives and works in Cape Town," says Peter.

"Our children were always very involved with the farm and the farming lifestyle, but



The Button family

we never pushed them to join the family business," says Jenny. Robyn agrees and added: "For people with our farming background and history, it is the norm to want to be involved in farming, especially if you've grown up the way we did."

"I knew from an early age that I wanted to farm," says Paul. "I enjoy farming, with all its challenges and my father and I manage the farm very well as a team. Paul was at school at Michaelhouse and then attended Saasveld Agricultural College at George. He completed his BTech degree in Agricultural Management in 2011. This included a year's practical work experience at Crookes Brothers in Grabouw, Western Cape. Paul joined the farming business in 2012.

"We suggested that he should go into the agricultural field and learn the theory. This turned out to be a good decision

as today he knows a lot more than I do," says Peter with a laugh. As the wife and mother of the two farmers, Jen pointed out that for the family business to work and preserve the relationship between the family members, good communication is absolutely vital for sustained success.

"In order to secure succession, a farmer needs both resilience and good luck," stressed Peter. "It helps to have the right crops at the right time. We spread our risk by farming with citrus as well as beef cattle and cash crops." Peter added that when Paul joined the business, he arrived with new ideas and positive energy. The citrus development has grown considerably since Paul joined the business. "Paul and I work well together and I would like to remain involved in the farm for a few more years," says Peter.

The Button family were the first farmers to plant and export citrus from southern KwaZulu-Natal (then known as Natal).

Nhlakanipo Mkize (Head of Irrigation), Zama Ngcobo (Junior Manager), Paul Button (Senior Manager), Peter Button (Director), Siziphiwe Chia (Chemicals and Store)



We do not allow the uncertainty around land ownership to stop us from continuing to develop our farming business.

"As a mixed farming business we were not really focussing on anything in particular. It made sense for us to consolidate and focus on producing citrus, and as a result we have significantly expanded our citrus productions since then."

Peter explained that other farmers in the area had also started planting citrus some years ago and this has led them to the formation of a company, Carisbrooke Valley Citrus, a communal packhouse consisting of eight grower members. The area has subsequently been subject to a number of

land claims and some of the farmers have sold their farms to the government. This has seen a change in the area, and subsequently some of the citrus orchards are no longer productive and the resultant reduction in volumes has had a negative impact on the Carisbrooke packhouse.

Island View has 40 permanent staff members and provides regular skills development training for its staff members. This is done mostly through training courses offered at the Carisbrooke Valley Citrus (CVC) packhouse, which is the hub for training in the area.

"I am actively involved in the Harry Gwala Agri (Pty), a non-profit company which is supported collectively by four local farmers' associations in the Southern KwaZulu-Natal region (Ingwe, Highflats-Ixopo, Mount Currie and Zwartberg)," explains Peter. "As commercial farmers, we assist emerging farmers to start and grow their businesses through mentorship and other support structures." The local FET College in Umzimkhulu has an intake of 60 agricultural students every six months. Once these students have completed their theory, they have to do 18 months of practicals

as part of their qualification, and finding an agricultural business that will provide them with this opportunity is difficult. Harry Gwala Agri (HGA) has received sponsorship to assist these students and helps to place them on commercial farms for this important part of their studies. Hopefully through HGA and CGA Grower Development Company we can get the land claimed orchards productive again."

As part of environmental stewardship Peter and Paul take care of the environment and implement sustainable farming practices. The farm also participates in the Ground Hornbill awareness project which is managed by the University of KZN. Island View includes a considerable amount of natural veld that supports local wildlife. Unfortunately they have a problem with poaching and stock theft.

"Paul is the fifth generation of our family to be farming in this area," says Peter. "History is important to us and we hope to continue farming here. Although we are concerned about the future, we do not allow the uncertainty around land ownership to stop us from continuing to develop our farming business." 🍋

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Mr. Duncan Napier: (082) 772 2207

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