

Family brand

Morrissey & Co have welcomed their fifth generation into the family blacksmithing business.

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The Morrissey family was at a dinner party together when someone had the thought that probably 95% of all cattle in Australia, especially in Queensland, would have come in contact with Morrissey-made gear at some stage. It's a wild guess, sure, but it seems to ring true for Australia's estimated herd of more than 25 million head.

For more than 150 years, a blacksmith called Morrissey has forged on the Western Downs of Queensland, and from its workshop in Jandowae, Morrissey & Co has remained at the global forefront of cattle-handling equipment. Each generation to take to the anvil has bettered the work and welfare of pastoralists and their livestock.

When **OUTBACK** visited the forge in 2005 (issue 44, p86), Sean and Christine Morrissey were at the helm. The couple were unsure if their children John, Tom and Sally would take an interest in returning to Jandowae and the family business – encouraging them to work and study elsewhere first.

In 2024, after attending university, working on Far North Queensland cattle stations and in corporate agriculture, Sally decided to join her brothers in the family business. Together, they are Morrissey & Co's fifth generation. "It's exciting now that we're all back together. I'm keen to grow and bring on new products and continue down the path of innovation," Sally says. "It was only working on stations near Mount Isa and the Gulf that you realise how many of our cradles are out there, and how many people use them every day. I don't think I really realised that when we were younger."

The generational count began in the 1870s when John Morrissey of Ireland immigrated to Australia. He became the blacksmith, farrier and wheelwright of Jimbour station – which then stretched from the Bunya Mountains to Dalby, Qld. Morrissey & Co was established by John and his son Daniel 'Danny' in 1910, and a decade later they began producing wooden calf cradles. Morrissey's calf cradles, and their handcrafted branding irons, remain the bread and butter of the business.

As they built a name for themselves over the ensuing years, the Morrisseys shipped gear as far as the USA, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. In Australia, orders have been made out to big names in

the cattle game – S. Kidman & Co, Consolidated Pastoral Company, Hancock Agriculture, NAPCo, AACo and Paraway. Even RM Williams submitted a testimonial: "I have used the Morrissey calf cradles for many years now ... I thoroughly recommend them for their quality and style."

In a remarkable discovery in 2024, the Morrisseys found out that in Bingara, NSW, one of their original wooden calf cradles remains in use, catching 300–400 calves each year.

It was Jack Morrissey who first brought a welder into the workshop. Jack, the third generation, had served as a World War II flight engineer and developed a steel calf cradle in the 1950s. Jack's son Sean added hydraulics in 2008.

Regulations change over time, but the Morrisseys are confident that their products will continue to serve a purpose. While crushes restrain standing cattle for castration, ear-marking, dehorning, vaccination or branding, cradles lay them down on their right or left side (because different states require brands on different sides).

"We've had great feedback with our hydraulic calf cradle just because it is so much safer, and it takes out that manual labour," Sally says. "I don't have the capability to swing off a weaner cradle all day, so having hydraulic options helps for a diverse workforce as well. A lot of the pastoral companies up north are seeing a lot more women come through."

The latest innovation from Morrissey & Co was launched at Beef2024: the world's first solar-powered hydraulic cattle crush. Greg Rolfe, of Rolfe Designs near Armidale, NSW, had developed the core solar panel and motor design. He approached the Morrisseys to help prototype and market the crush. The solar-powered crush removes the need for generators and air compressors making noise and stressing cattle. A remote control means it can be operated from up to 30m away.

"At Beef Week we were run off our feet with people coming in, having a look at it," says Tom Morrissey, who took a lead role in this process. "A lot of it is existing technology – we're just using it in ways that no-one else has."

Already, the team is working on updates to the crush, such as an attachable 3- or 5-way draft to work off the same solar mechanism.

Morrissey & Co has had room to work on these kinds of projects since a sudden boom in business was spurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. John, 32, the eldest



*John and Tom Morrissey with a Morrissey & Co cradle on the family's property near Jandowae, Qld.
TOP: John, Sally, Sean, Tom and Christine Morrissey stand by the coal forge.*



Morrissey & Co's world-first, solar-powered, hydraulic cattle crush was launched at Beef2024 in Rockhampton, Qld.

of the siblings and first to join full-time, explains. "Our business runs on weather," he says. Interest rates were low, cattle prices high and, he says, conditions were just right for many farmers to upgrade.

To keep up with demand, the Morrisseys opened new job positions and further modernised their manufacturing: computer-operated lathing and milling machines, laser cutters, gas burners, electric grinders, power hammers, 3D printing and some prefabricated components from an Australian-based foundry and steelworks.

But in the loud, modern bustle and noise of the Jandowae workshop, one corner remains virtually unchanged from the past. When John forges a branding iron, it's in the traditional way. After drawing the brand onto a steel plate with chalk, he beats the white-hot steel to shape with the ballpein hammer made by his great great-grandfather. Each branding iron comes finished with the dusty hints of coal from their last heat in the furnace. "There's that bit of a romantic touch," John says. "We just keep coming back to the old traditional way with the branding irons and I think that's keeping our sort of grassroots."

Although cattle branding is no longer mandated Australia-wide, these cryptic designs of numbers, letters and shapes – pressed into cattle hides – continue to be passed down in families like heirlooms and registered as unique identification marks.

As the fifth generation steps into the business (John and Tom in business operations and manufacturing, Sally and her partner Rhys in sales and marketing), their parents Christine and Sean continue to play an active role – albeit with more time to spend on other projects, like setting up demonstration equipment on their new acreage.

Morrissey & Co's staff numbers 25–30, with a 50/50 split of apprentices to tradesmen in the workshop, including the company's first female apprentice. There are approved plans for a new paint shed and workshop extension. "I'm hoping we should double in size at least by the time that Max is 18," John says, referring to his 2-year-old son – the first of the sixth generation. Of course, as was the case for John, Tom and Sally, it will be Max's decision whether he joins the longstanding family business.

