

Early Davies Laboratory – University Links

Prof Bob Lawn, James Cook University and CSIRO Plant Industry

My first contact with Davies Laboratory was in early 1964, before the new laboratory was officially opened. I was one of five first-year agricultural science students from the then Townsville College of the University of Queensland. The others were **Alan Garside**, **Phil Anning**, **Tom Fitzgerald** and **Tony Abbott** (no, not that one!). In those days all the 'non-Arts' students, whether studying science, agricultural science, veterinary science, engineering or medicine, shared a core set of first year science subjects. The one subject that set us 'Aggies' apart from the rest was *Introductory Agriculture*, a new course delivered by CSIRO staff in what was probably the first CSIRO-University collaboration in Townsville.

Introductory Agriculture was coordinated by the late **Les Edye**, an agrostologist who was the first Office-in-Charge of Davies Laboratory. Les presented a series of lectures on the daunting issues facing rural development in the tropics. Inevitably, the focus was on the beef industry, and the vital importance of improving the feed base for livestock grazing the extensive native pastures of northern Australia. The key issue was the poor quality of feed during the long dry season, and the consequent serious livestock weight loss. There was great excitement afoot about the potential impact that newly introduced tropical legumes might make, especially those related to 'Townsville lucerne' which had already had early success. Legumes were to be the key focus because they fixed their own nitrogen, and retained relatively high protein well into the dry. They complemented the bulk dry matter produced by the quickly growing tropical grasses, which were satisfactory as an energy source, but were very low in protein.

Some of the time, Les came out to the Pimlico Campus (now the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE) to give his lectures. On other occasions, we made our way out past the meatworks bridge on Bowen Road toward the Oonoonba racetrack, before turning right past the army base and into the bush at the base of Mt Stuart. The road was not great, and it seemed forever before we arrived at the then brand new Davies Laboratory. Further along that track, we were told, was where the new university was going to be located. On a few occasions, we clambered into a truck and were taken out to the new pastoral research station "Lansdown".

Les's lectures were complemented from time to time by practical sessions given by his handful of scientific colleagues, either at Davies Laboratory or around experimental sites at Lansdown. A very young **Dr Don Cameron**, in shorts and long white socks, showed us around his hillplot experiment where he was undertaking initial evaluations of diverse *Stylosanthes* introductions from South America. On another occasion, **Dr Peter Gillard**, with strong South African brogue, talked to us about the challenge of establishing stylo species in native spear grass pastures, and the helpful role grazing pressure could play. **Joe Ritson** had us "help" with one of the periodic weighings of heifers that were part of a large grazing trial he was running at Lansdown. The *Introductory Agriculture* course ceased when 1st year agricultural science students went straight to UQ.

My second contact with Davies Laboratory was during the 1967 University of Queensland fourth-year 'Northern Tour'. In those days, the fourth-year students spent about two and a half weeks on a Brisbane-Rockhampton-Longreach-Mt Isa-Townsville-Cairns-Brisbane train trip, visiting key research and industry operations along the way. Staff numbers had grown in the intervening three years, and Davies Laboratory already had become a major stopover for the Northern Tour. The results had started to flow and the scientists had lots of interesting stories to tell about their work. Davies Laboratory continued to be a key 'Northern Tour' stopover until the tours ended about three decades later. Meanwhile, when I returned to the north as a professor at James Cook University in 1994, Les Edye delighted in reminding me of my beginnings as one of his first students.