FORGING AHEAD

Words by Katie White

Jason Tidmarsh has a strong commitment to the NZ rural sector, plus supporting NZ suppliers

Staying true to its early principles has proved a winning formula for a Matamata business with farming at its core. While the business focus has evolved and grown, the heart of it remains authentically dedicated to providing clever engineering solutions to everyday problems, with a key focus on the New Zealand farming sector.

Owner Jason Tidmarsh has evolved the business with a series of expansions, but one thing that has remained the same is his determined commitment to sourcing materials in New Zealand wherever possible.

A recent rebrand has seen a name change from Pearson Engineering to Kaimai Steel to better reflect the diversity of services provided.

The highly spec'd engineering facility is capable of everything from one-off fabrication to contract manufacturing and assembly, including blasting and painting. Kaimai Steel started out in 1970 as Pearson Engineering, playing a vital part in the agricultural industry throughout this time. From its early days specialising in front end loaders, more recently the business has developed a comprehensive range of tractor implements.

While producing its wide range of agricultural equipment is still a focal point, Kaimai Steel's specialist workshop is best suited to the production of steel products up to 500kg.

Heavy-duty tip trailer for a civil contractor

An eight cubic metre custom bucket under construction for a local quarry operator

Rural history

Pearson Engineering is a name well known around the Waikato (and beyond), with the Matamata-based business designing and manufacturing farm implements since 1970.

This was the year that local farmer Robbie Pearson came across the design for a farmer-built loader and decided to make one for his dad. The design was a success and Pearson Engineering was founded after neighbours' demand for the product began to rise.

The company has continued going from strength to strength over the next five decades, continuing to innovate for the benefit of New Zealand farmers.

Robbie's practical designs set Pearson Engineering apart and proved popular with farmers and contractors around New Zealand. The business also notched up the award-winning and innovative Quick-Tach Loader, which won a merit award at National Agricultural Fieldays® and is still the forerunner of today's models.

As the workshop expanded to include other farm implements, grader blades, and slurry handling equipment, so did the technology and innovation. When Robbie retired after 39 years in the business, current owner Jason Tidmarsh bought the business, bringing his own strong background in both farming and engineering and remaining faithful to the Pearson legacy.

Today, with Jason at the helm, the evolution to Kaimai Steel marks its significant progress and ushers in a new era of engineering capabilities, while continuing to deliver the same high-quality products and services that buyers have come to expect from Pearson Engineering.

"Kaimai Steel will continue to do that and

Hopper frame ready for assembly

more," says Jason. "The Pearson name is built on reliability and strength, and we want to keep that going.

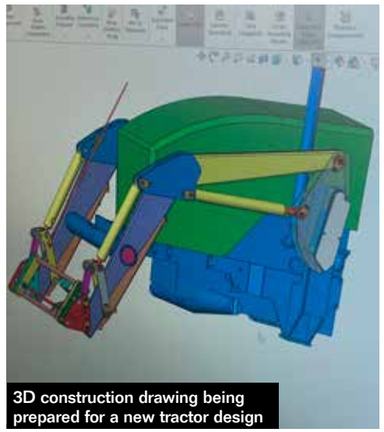
"We believe that when you're buying a piece of Pearson and now Kaimai Steel gear, you're not buying it for yourself, you're buying it for your kids. That's our go-to when creating a new design because it should outlast you."

Early background

Both Jason's parents share a passion and skill for engineering, which Jason naturally fell into after completing his apprenticeship as an electrician and shifting down south, began his study towards a Diploma in Agriculture.

Back home in Matamata, Jason spent a decade running another engineering company before the opportunity to buy Pearson Engineering arose. As much as he'd tried to deny it, he realised this industry was his calling.

"This is the only thing that really spins my wheels. I like seeing how raw materials such as steel are innovatively engineered into products



3D construction drawing being prepared for a new tractor design

that are used to move all manner of materials around the farm or on the job site. I also like empowering our staff to design solutions and create these products; those are my drivers."

Paying it forward

Jason has made a point of heavily investing in apprenticeships throughout his tenure. Today, Kaimai Steel's apprentices have continued to work with the business after completing their hours.

"An apprentice here does everything through the whole workshop, from programming the machine centre to working the robot or learning how to weld, cut, blast, and paint. When they finish here, they've got really good skills."

He says having great staff work in all areas creates a better culture of appreciation within the company.

"It makes a better product when you have staff doing the job they love. In the end, you get a better finish because they're given the opportunity to thrive."

Honouring the legacy

"We're still heavily invested in the Pearson name – that's our big business. However,

2.4m Mighty grader blade

2.1m bucket grab

1.6m silage grab

1.8m heavy-duty grapple

Pinnacle outdoor fire

we've got the facilities and the capacity to do other engineering work as well, so we created a name that umbrellas the whole lot. Kaimai Steel is the manufacturer of all Pearson products and more."

The factory is open to people who have a concept drawn up, or simply an idea, that they need help bringing to life. Kaimai Steel also offers one-off builds for different businesses, from screw piles for a construction company to a range of work in the marine industry.

A small side project that has unexpectedly taken off is the expansion into outdoor fires. This came about as a way for the drawing office to start thinking about something outside of agriculture.

"It's important to prevent tunnel vision when repeatedly making the same implements."

Jason was open to anything they could come up with, and when his senior designer said he had some friends who were keen on an outdoor fire, it got the green light.

"He came up with four designs, and eventually we had them all burning at National Fieldays as an attraction. It was a bit of fun because we cooked our sausages on them, and they actually ended up selling really well and keep on being in demand."

Support local, support New Zealand-made

Kaimai Steel has invested heavily in growing its facilities over the years, bringing in manufacturing equipment, which allows everything to be made in-house.

"We start right from the plasma cutting, bring in the raw steel, and we make it to go out of here blasted, painted, assembled."

For Jason, another key focus is supporting other Kiwi companies.

"While we promote New Zealand-made, I want to make sure that we live it as well. All our decisions are made based on that."

Their RAMs, for example, are outsourced from two other manufacturers based in Auckland and Christchurch. Jason acknowledges that importing would be cheaper, but that doesn't stand by his homegrown philosophy.

Moving with the times

When redesigning products, keeping on top of trends and changes in the industry is paramount.

"Back in the '90s, a 100hp tractor was big, but now it's rare to buy one less than that. On average, a 160–180hp tractor is the type of gear farmers are buying now, and we have to make sure our range keeps up with that, so everything works to its full potential."

The company's grader blades are a great example of this. The Mighty range (with options from 2.1 to 2.4 metres wide) was successful for its strength, durability, and

Freshly made attachments entering the paint shop

Plasma cutter at work making profiles

WWW
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Pearson Quickhitch frames ready for blasting and painting

Kaimi Steel team member hard at work fabricating an attachment

reliability, but the introduction of the Mega range five years ago was a game changer.

"There's no point in pulling a small grader blade behind a big tractor," Jason says, so the Kaimai Steel team revamped Robbie's original Mighty blade with accuracy and power in mind. Ranging from 2.7 to 3.6 metres wide, the Mega blade is designed to perform heavy work with precision.

Upsizing

It makes sense that as advancing technologies wrap silage bales tighter, they become heavier. In response, the Kaimai Steel silage grabs have increased in size, while grapples, buckets, and clamps have been made stronger.

Jason says it's all about creating efficiency.

"For us, it's important to keep it [functionality] simple, to keep it robust, and eliminate the need for frequent maintenance. If we can reduce maintenance on our gear, then everyone's happy."

The company embarked on a full redevelopment of the wrap bale clamp five years ago to create an improved version of its two existing models. While the contractor range was very heavy-duty, it couldn't be equalised. The farmer range, on the other hand, was heavy-duty enough for everyday use and could be equalised.

"We didn't have the ultimate product, so we researched and developed one."

The 18 months it took to develop the improved wrap bale clamp prototype involved having a local contractor trial it for a season; let's say they had a hard time giving it up for routine damage checks and testing.

"It's amazing what you learn about an implement when you start from scratch. We're pretty proud of the outcome."

Kaimai Steel also redesigned its silage grab to enhance its holding capabilities, with size increasing from 1.5 to 1.6 metres wide and from 1.8 to 1.9 metres wide.

"We created a curve at the top to increase capacity and offer the RAMs protections. They used to sit on top of the frame with their chrome exposed, so they were susceptible to damage. Now they sit inside the frame and remain protected throughout the full range of motion."

The company also uses piping on hydraulics rather than just hosing, which provides a safe, solid house for the hosing and prevents unnecessary damage.

"It's another cost, but we see the benefit of doing the piping to keep the longevity of the equipment," Jason says. "We don't get as many spare replacements now."

Farmer focus

Keeping the needs of Kiwi farmers at the forefront of each design remains a core part of business at Kaimai Steel. The team is currently working on developments to enhance the latest loader.

"In Europe, they use a lot of telehandlers. Most often in New Zealand, we still try to do everything with a tractor, so that's how our loader is designed and built."

The Pearson-style digging loader is made to do what European loaders can't, for example: pulling out posts, hedge lines, or digging a hole. With the ability to perform the heavy-lifting tasks that are part of everyday business on our farms, it works in contrast to an imported materials handling loader, which is restricted to performing basic movements such as picking up and putting down.

Machines not fit for purpose lead to unnecessary damage and costly, time-consuming repairs – problems Kiwi farmers can prevent by buying local.

"When you buy New Zealand-made Pearson gear, it's not just the company who makes the products that benefits; there are many other Kiwi businesses that do." ■

Custom designed Hydro-excavator in production

Hydro-excavator undergoing final assembly