

BUSINESS SOUTH-EAST

Still strong after half a century

By Casey Neill

While repairing a grader blade, engineer John Berends asked the owner the machine's price tag.

John was surprised at the answer and said he could make it for half that.

"If you can do that you've got a good business," was the customer's response.

On Saturday 3 September, John Berends Implements celebrated its 50th anniversary with an open day at its Dandenong South factory.

General manager and John's son Derrick Berends said staff showed dealers their cutting, welding and spray painting handiwork at the event.

"I'm proud of the company, not just my dad, for having started it and got it to where it is," he said.

"But when you see where other companies are, a lot of other companies don't get to 50 years and still be strong and pushing ahead."

John Berends Implements manufactures tractor attachments that are sold throughout Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

"Our machinery is for cutting grass, ploughing paddocks, digging holes, grading roads, that sort of thing - pretty much anything that goes on the back for a tractor, we just about make here," Derrick said.

"We produce in volume. We don't make one-off machines."

His dad was a Dutch immigrant living in Narre Warren, surrounded by market gardens.

"He was a generally engineer. People would come to him to fix a machine or do some repairs," he said.

John saw a gap in the market for locally made products.

"He was dealing direct for a number of years," Derrick said.

"It took 10 or more years to get the business up and running to a point where he could start



Son and father team Derrick and John Berends at the open day. 158780

Picture: ROB CAREW

branching to other states.

"That's when we started appointing dealers.

"We have a dealer network throughout Australia.

"Their customers are farmers, mostly - farmers, councils, contractors."

John, 78, has now taken a backwards step but still stops by most days.

"You a rarely see him in the office. He'll put on the old overalls and get in there and do what's required," Derrick said.

"His philosophy was always to build strong, simple and at a fair price.

"Some of our machinery now is more advanced, but building it strong is the main thing.

"Farmers are tough on their machines.

"A lot of the imported machinery can be not suited to Australian conditions.

"They often have to be modified. They can often have problems.

"Ours has been built to local conditions.

"We test it ourselves, on the farm."

Derrick came on board in 1997, after studying agricultural science at La Trobe University and spending two years with a horticultural seed importer.

"The manager who was here working with my dad at the time was moving on," he said.

"I knew the customer base but I didn't know much about engineering.

"My job as the general manger here is really broad.

"I do a lot of the field days and shows around to display and exhibit our product, and visit dealers and try to push the product that way."

He manages about 20 employees, some who've been on board for more than 30 years.

Much like when the company started, Derrick said that only a few other companies manufactured farming implements in Australia.

"They were once Australian manufacturers but they're now importers," he said.

"They get parts in and assemble here, or take it out of the box.

"The last 10 years, particularly, there has been an influx of cheap products from China.

"In some regards it's done us a favour.

"It's put the focus back on why our product is so good in the first place.

"We just recently got accredited with the Australian Made logo.

"We decided that was an important aspect of our business."

He said the green and gold triangle particularly appealed to dealers with service and spare parts in mind.

"They know we've been here 50 years and we'll be here for a long time," he said.

P34
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BUSINESS — JOHN BERENDS IMPLEMENTS