

Coming clean



Graeme Thacker's School Certificate subjects didn't indicate a career in water technology. They leant more to the arts than the sciences. Nevertheless, he has enjoyed a long and successful career in the industry, most notably as the founder of water and wastewater treatment equipment firm Filtec.

BY MARY SEARLE BELL.

Graeme Thacker (pictured) grew up in Taranaki, attending Spotswood College before getting his first job as a technician with the New Zealand Post Office.

After 10 years he embarked on a completely different career – that of a flying instructor. He resigned his job to take full time flying lessons, achieving his flight instructor's certificate in 1974, and began working at Rex Flying School.

However, just two years later, he joined Niven Industries, a mechanical firm that had a contract to build the Waikanae Water Treatment Plant. When the plant was commissioned, he was offered a job as a service engineer, looking after hundreds of plants – mainly chlorinators – from Taupo south. In 1977, he was promoted to supervisor.

In 1983, while Graeme oversaw his many water treatment plants, the company went through a significant change. Publicly listed company Steel & Tube was in growth mode and purchased several well-known companies including Niven Industries. It also purchased MacEwan Machinery from Fletcher Building, bundling the two into its new water treatment division, of which Graeme became sales manager.

However, an even bigger change was on the horizon, thanks to the sharemarket crash of 1987.

“Steel & Tube decided to get back to its core business and decided to sell MacEwans,” says Graeme. “But everyone else had the same idea and no one would buy it.”

Steel & Tube's solution was to offer the division managers to buy their divisions, and Graeme was keen.

“I went around the family to see how I could fund it,” says Graeme. “I had some money in a superannuation scheme and an aunt agreed to buy shares.”

Colleague Craig Freeman, who had come to Steel & Tube with MacEwan Machinery, also became a shareholder of the new company. And in October 1992, Filtration Technology, better known as Filtec, was launched.

“In our first year of trading we had a turnover of \$3.1 million,” says Graeme. “At the time I thought, that's one dollar for every person in the country, if our turnover can keep up with the population growth we'll be right.”

“But in 2012 when I sold out of the business our turnover was \$13.3 million – we didn’t do too badly,” he says with a chuckle.

Working at his side was his wife Rick.

“I did the tech, she did all the paperwork – she ran that side of the business for 15 years or so.”

Graeme sold his portion of the business to Matt Ewen and David Rouse, but within a few months Matt bought out David’s shareholding.

Graeme says Matt had worked for him for five years before buying him out.

“He was being groomed to take over,” he says. “He would have been CEO if he hadn’t got the money together to buy the place.”

As for Graeme, he was 65 years old and becoming a bit risk adverse.

“I was shit scared of OSH,” he says. “How long before they lock some CEO away because of an idiot that works for him?”

Confident the company is in safe hands with Matt and Craig, Graeme and Rick have retired to Omokora on the outskirts of Tauranga. Graeme now spends his time driving a school bus when needed and helping on the match committee of his bowling club. He’s also maintained his work as a ‘bush lawyer’.

“I’ve always been one to go through everything with a fine tooth comb,” he says. “And when you’re retired and sitting

around waiting for the weeds to grow, you’ve got the time.”

While working, he was heavily involved with various water associations – he says he was plucked out of the audience at a NZWWA conference in the 70s and elected to the committee. He served for many years but says when the association (now Water New Zealand) moved to Wellington its focus became political, and his roots were technical, so he opted out.

And while he “really enjoyed” his time with that particular association, his heart belongs to WIOG – the Water Industry Operations Group, which he still helps out as much as he can.

A life member of Water New Zealand and a recipient of the Association Medal, Graeme is also life member of WIOG, the Water Environment Federation (USA), and the American Water Works Association.

Graeme travelled to the US every year to seek out new products for the Filtec range, and in doing so would alternate between the two US associations’ conferences. It eventuated that he was on the spot to sign the Memorandum of Understanding between the New Zealand association and AWWA one year.

However, for Graeme, travel to the States has a particular difficulty. “It takes three goes at US Customs to get a fingerprint off me,” he says.

“They can usually get one off my thumb eventually, but that’s what you get for working with chemicals for years!” **WNZ**