

SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE

Australia's long drought and the pressures of a 'feast or famine' agricultural livelihood prompted Robert Campbell, a farm boy from north Queensland, to safeguard his future in the heavy haulage industry.

Words and photographs by Mark Pearce



In 1999, at the young age of 15, Robert Campbell left his Queensland home just south of Mackay and found employment as a farm-hand, picking cotton for a family operation in the central Queensland township of Emerald.

While learning the usual slings and arrows of the trade, Robert's entrepreneurial streak emerged and he began to broaden his skills with contract work, irrigation, farming and harvesting. When the millennium drought hit, he acknowledged the widespread decline in agriculture in the region and re-set his short-term goals to work the mines.

When the rivers started to run again, Robert returned for another spell in cotton, aiming to secure long-term employment prospects in the industry which he had become familiar with for almost a decade.

With a solid network of contacts and resources, Robert started his business Southern Cross Contract Farming in 2010, purchasing his first Drake low loader to conveniently move cotton pickers and tractors around farmlands. Work was plentiful but when another drought hit, almost by accident Robert landed himself full-time in the heavy haulage transport industry.



Robert Campbell,
Managing Director,
Southern Cross Heavy
Haulage. (Supplied by
Southern Cross Heavy
Haulage)



The 14 metre Drake quad-axle drop deck low loader ready to cart a 980 CAT loader from Southern Cross Heavy Haulage depot - Stapleton, Queensland to Western Australia.

SOUTHERN CROSS HEAVY HAULAGE • QLD

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"Agriculture was pretty good to me, I enjoyed it. Things were going good, but then we went straight back into another savage drought," Robert explains.

"I'd been working on southern farms in the Riverina because south west Queensland and northern New South Wales went dry, but then the Riverina dried up. We all scratched our heads and said what are we going to do here?"

"We had our truck and trailer and so we just diverted funds that we would have spent in the farming business and stacked them into the transport side to begin Southern Cross Heavy Haulage. Business started to flourish, and we kept going with it."

Robert hadn't caught much sleep in his last years of harvesting cotton so it was a welcome relief when his business turned a steady profit, starting around 2017 when Southern Cross invested heavily in a technology and equipment-based protocols to provide a good and reliable service for their customers.

With the benefit of a few international transactions trading cotton-pickers to China, the Southern Cross cashflow was reinforced

and in the space of 18 months, the company went from one truck and trailer to seven trucks and five heavy-duty pieces of trailing equipment.

As the managing director of Southern Cross, located at the Stapleton depot just south of Brisbane, Robert espouses their latest technology purchase; a 14-metre quad-axle drop-deck low loader, custom built by The Drake Group, with a fistful of features never before engineered by the heavy haulage trailer manufacturer.

"The mini quad from Drake was a year of planning and by the time we received that trailer in September 2019 there had been a lot of work gone into it."



"It's brilliantly versatile. For instance, we hauled a 35-tonne digger into central New South Wales and on the return trip, we loaded hay on it. That ordinarily couldn't happen. You would normally have to put a dolly under a float, throw the dolly up and come home empty," Robert says.

Robert is an "ideas man" who doesn't cut corners and likes to push boundaries, and is always on the lookout for more efficiency. As the entire combination stretches out to only 19 metres, Robert requested to lift the two front axles to eradicate wind drag and scrubbing tyres on an empty load – and the Drake engineers approved his wish.

The engineers also removed the oscillating plate on the skid plate which has assisted with weight reduction. Moreover, it has allowed further height, preparing the top deck for multi-loads.

For multi-load usage, Drake has maximised the deck space, moving the container pins all the way to the head of the rig and allocating room for a 20-foot container at the front and a small loader or utility vehicle on the back.

Along with the container stands, levelling plates permit the user to load a building on the

weights, the operator has the option to control the digital scales via smartphone using blue tooth technology, when walking the machine onto the trailer.

The deck, which securely widens to 3.7 meters, sits on top of 19-inch alloys, granting BPW 8 stud 275PCD 19.5" drum brake fixed axles with OT heavy duty underslung suspension, to carry a 35-tonne payload, grossing in at 60-tonnes.

"We never spoke about any other brand of axle. It was always going to BPW and it wasn't up for negotiation," Robert states.

"Since I've had this business, everything that Drake has built has got BPW on it. It's a known quality and a safe bet. The other thing is, when it comes to re-sale it opens up the market if you want to consolidate and move your assets on."

More importantly from Robert's standpoint, the light-weight combination has the potential to pull high-value freight at a very low economy rate. With cheaper operating costs than previous buys, it also rivals quad-axle floats when it comes to fuel efficiency.

"The running costs are basically like a drop-deck. We hauled a D8 to the Pilbara, and we

put a spanner on that for 600,000 km, which is a big difference compared to other brands.

"The saying I've got is: 'the poor man buys twice!' And it's true – if you can't spend the money today it will cost you more tomorrow."

Since the company's rampant growth, Robert is employing seven staff to keep three depots and his small fleet of seven trucks and five trailers running efficiently. And with its heavy haulage evolution, it's no coincidence that Southern Cross has a fairly large spread of work.

Robert has his drivers carting everything from civil equipment to underground mines, to forestry and agricultural machinery, big rigs for auction dealers, marine equipment, as well as shipping freight.

The Southern Cross strategy is to move into more trailer investments next financial year and Robert is optimistic with the future of both his new Drake low loader and the heavy haulage industry at large.

"The iron ore in the Pilbara is kicking hard at the moment. And we are all hanging on with Adani and its flow on effects. The biggest thing for the economy in general is we just

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ROBERT CAMPBELL, MANAGING DIRECTOR, SOUTHERN CROSS HEAVY HAULAGE.



Above left: Loading a Container on the Drake built low loader on BPW 8 stud 275PCD 19.5" drum brake fixed axles with OT heavy duty underslung suspension. (Supplied by Southern Cross heavy Haulage)

top deck while a longer building can also fit effectively, if its height is not oversize.

Ramps flip onto the deck, yet the versatile design was plotted with ramp props, allowing a building to sit on the bottom deck. And by poking ramps straight out the back of the trailer, which extends its deck length to 14 meters, the operator can overhang another building on the back end. Balancing out the rig to alter correct axle

had a fuel economy across the Nullarbor of 1.75km to the litre, which for heavy haulage is out of this world. We had it on one of our other trucks and we were doing 1.3km. And when we carted a loader to Kununurra it averaged slightly better at 1.85km. It's like nothing else really... we just keep it rolling.

"We've spent the extra money and put the BPW axles and suspension under it. Okay, it's more expensive today but we probably won't

need some rain, because ultimately when the farmers have got money, everyone has got money.

"It's early days with this new trailer but the numbers coming out at the moment are quite encouraging and I've already been talking with Drake about another one. In reality though, my kids will be able to use this trailer because it will still be running around in 25 years without a doubt."