



Driven by generations



What began as a humble tyre shop in Ashburton is now a South Island-wide success story. Meet the family and people behind Neumanns Tyres as it celebrates 80 years in business. Read more, pages 12-14.

by Daryl Holden

The smell of hot rubber and steam hung thick in the upstairs loft of an Ashburton auction mart in 1945.

It was there that Len Neumann, having used his £87 life savings, opened a small tyre-repair venture, a business that this year celebrates its 80th anniversary.

And most mornings in that upstairs loft followed the same ritual. Tyres were dragged up the spiral staircase, one after another, to the bulky second-hand steam vulcaniser, a heavy press that used heat and pressure to fuse fresh rubber onto old, worn casings to give tyres a second life.

There were also days when Len and his first employee, 15-year-old Don Hayes and latterly Bruce Watson, pedalled through town with tyres strapped to their bicycles. The heavy casings, those hollow shells of worn-out tyres waiting to be rebuilt, swung and banged against the wheels, making every ride a wobbly, awkward slog.

It was exhausting work, but in an era of fuel rationing, tyres in any condition were too valuable to waste. Each casing was another chance to keep the doors of the fledgling business open where rent was £1 a week for Neumann, who had moved from Christchurch where he married Ashburton girl Kath Green.

Setting up Neumanns Tyre Services business was the easy part, but making it pay in post war Ashburton when you were new to town was not so straight forward.

Vehicles were serviced on the footpath outside, while upstairs tyres were stripped, patched and rebuilt. With almost no specialised equipment, just the steam vulcaniser, sandbags to weigh things down, and a pair of long steel levers to pry tyres on and off rims, Len pieced together a living with little more than grit and ingenuity.

But from that precarious start has grown the impressive family business that is Neumanns Tyres, a company that today spans 17 South Island shops from Invercargill to

FROM PAGE 1



Where it all began, the original Neumanns Tyre Service shop in Ashburton, a local landmark that set the foundation for the family business to grow across the South Island.

Motueka and still carries on its Ashburton frontage the name Len staked on that £87 gamble.

When Len eventually stepped back as an owner, his sons Alan and Ian picked up the tools and the ledgers 40 years ago. They had grown up in the business, watching their father's long hours in the workshop, learning the rhythm of customers arriving at the door, and absorbing the value he placed on service and community.

Under their watch, the company grew from one site in Ashburton into a network of shops supplying farms, fleets and families across the South Island. And they still call them shops, not branches or sites in an apt description that says much about the family's outlook: straightforward, grounded, and never too far from the shed where it all began.

Just as important have been their wives, Christine and Judy,

whose behind-the-scenes support has been a constant strength in the Neumanns story. And now a third generation has joined them in Alan's son Vinnie and Ian's daughter Emma, who have spent more than a decade working in the business.

For them, the shop floor is as familiar as the family kitchen, and the company name isn't just painted above the doors. It's written into their own story.

Together, they carry forward the Neumann way of doing things - being practical, service-minded, and firmly tied to the communities they serve. Now, 80 years on, the steam and the spiral staircase may have long gone, but the spirit remains.

What began with Len Neumann wobbling through town on his bicycle has become a business that keeps thousands of others on the road. And in that word that they still use - yes, shops - you can hear the echo of where it all began.



Brothers in arms: Alan, left, and Ian Neumann outside the Ashburton base of the family tyre business they've steered for four decades.



The Neumann faces behind the tread. Pictured, from left, are Vinnie, Alan, Ian and Emma Hintz (née Neumann). They're the family team keeping Mid Canterbury and South Islanders on the road at Neumanns Tyres. This year, it celebrates 80 years in business..

People at the core



For Alan and Ian Neumann, the secret to 80 years in business isn't just tyres. It's trust, loyalty, and staff, who are as much a part of the family as the name on the door. Now, the next generation is ready to take the reins.

by Daryl Holden

There's no boardroom table at Neumanns Tyres in Ashburton. Decisions aren't passed by vote or rubber-stamped with signatures.

Instead, ideas are tossed around in the smoko room or on the shop floor. That's how it's always been, a family business that grew up by doing things together, talking things through, and relying on trust. Now, 80 years later, that rhythm still holds and owners, brothers Alan and Ian Neumann, couldn't be prouder.

They've been in charge for 40 years, having taken control of the tyre service business from parents Len and Kath Neumann, who founded the company in 1945.

Alan, now 71, has given 55 years to the business but insists he's "only a kid." He laughs at his own joke, but behind it sits the quiet pride of a man seeing the family business continue to flourish.

Though he may be semiretired, Alan grins when he talks about the future. "My ambition is to

be here when the business turns 100. I won't be working, but I would like to be here. I might just come along for a bit of cake."

Perhaps that's the kind of line you'd expect from a man who has already outlasted more than one rough patch. Eight years ago, he spent three months in an Auckland hospital after underdoing a liver transplant in what he calls "just a hiccup."

"I take a couple of pills now and no alcohol. But the liver specialist did a hell of a good job on me."

Time also has a way of forcing change, even in a business that prides itself on continuity. Alan says one of the reasons he will soon step back is that he can't hear properly.

"This cochlear ear implant doesn't work very well," he admits. "I've had it three or four years. That's why I had to pull off all the boards I was on. I couldn't hear around the table."

But what matters more to him now is what he sees around him about 170 staff across 17 shops, including 39 in Ashburton, and a third generation of Neumanns

coming through in his son Vinnie and Ian's daughter Emma, who are company shareholders.

"I'm pretty proud we're still here," Alan says. And I'm sure we've got another good 20 years at least because Vinnie and Emma are both young."

He points to the ongoing support of the Mid Canterbury community and the pivots across the district as the biggest driver of growth, the dairy boom lifting their tyre business.

"Irrigation and dairy farming have been huge for us. The growth of Ruralco has been good for us too. We've been their supplier."

Then his tone softens. "But really, it always comes back to people. You've got to look after your people, your staff. That's the most important thing."

That's a common theme, with 67-year-old Ian Neumann further emphasising the importance of their staff.

"It's the staff that have been the big part of the success," he says.

"We try to look after them, as it is hard to replace experience."

That loyalty cuts both ways, with many being long-serving employees, like Bruce Bensdorp, who completes 50 years' service in November or his brother Richard, who has clocked up 43 years. And you can't forget Maxine Muckle, a 40-year company devotee this year. Others have also served well past 20 years in a business where staff longevity, and caring for their people, is clearly a key pillar to their growth, and they're well-known names in Geoff, Ben, Legs, Jo and Tarsh.

But loyalty can make loss harder. In 2021, David Huria, a much-respected Neumann's employee, and a husband, father, and grandfather, was killed in a motorcycle crash when he was at the Brass Monkey rally in Central Otago.

Alan will never forget having to inform staff of the tragedy.

"One of the hardest things I had to do was get on the phone on that Sunday and ring everybody to say we had lost him," Alan said.

"That really rocked us. He was a big, strong man and had been here 20 years."

Even now, the weight of that loss sits heavy. Huria's photo still hangs in the Ashburton office reception area, a reminder that Neumanns is a workplace built on people, not just tyres.

And for Ian, in the business for 51 years, knows that caring for their people also means ensuring the company keeps pace.

"Our growth has meant we have stayed competitive in the

industry," he said.

"With that growth, the big clients that are based South Island wide, will deal with you. Whereas, if we were only in Ashburton, we probably wouldn't have had the business we got. The growth was necessary to maintain those bigger clients."

That same pragmatism shows in the technology advancement.

"The technology part of the business, from the computer aspect and the office side of it, has just been amazing with the changes, as well as tyres themselves," Ian said.

"The progress of the tyre to the magnificent product it is now has also been something."

And advancements are continuing, with their development of a potentially game-changing heavy vehicle tyre maintenance and safety system called Torque Alert. It was created in-house at Neumanns and is already adopted by three key transport company clients.

It is a digital system that instantly signals to a driver's in-cab screen, and to a tracking monitor at Neumanns, that a re-torquing is due, and it documents when it last took place and by who. Torquing is the process of tightening wheel nuts to the correct pressure, so that the wheel stays firmly in place. After a wheel has been fitted, the nuts must be checked and re-tightened, or re-torqued, once the truck has travelled a set distance, to make sure nothing has loosened on the road.



Tyre help on the move, the Neumanns Tyres fleet heads out across Mid Canterbury, providing service directly to its customers.



In the heart of Ashburton, Neumanns Tyres busy service bays keep everything from cars to tractors rolling smoothly.

“We’ve built technology that puts alerts on drivers’ screens, so they are aware when their retorque is due,” Ian said. “It’s an important health and safety thing.”

The next generation

Vinnie and Emma, being prepped to take the reins, have been in the business for over 15 years. But neither were handed titles, with both starting at the bottom to get a good feel for the operation.

Vinnie studied business in Dunedin but spent summers fitting tyres. He’s worked across a variety of their sites, including the re-tread factory in Christchurch, and is pleased to have been exposed to that.

“It gives you a good understanding of everything in the business from retail to serving people with car tyres to

commercial tyres and agricultural tyres,” Vinnie says.

“Getting that all-round grasp is important because all-rounders, people that can do everything, is what we want.”

Emma, who began on reception in Ashburton, who has also completed business and accounting studies, acknowledges the weight of continuing the generational family firm but remains assured in the support around her.

“We’re lucky we’ve got a lot of people in the business who help us make decisions,” she said.

“We don’t have a designated board. Things get tossed around. It’s a communal decision, and we respect the knowledge of the team.”

Both see value in continuing to reward their staff as the company has done by taking employees to tyre factory visits in China,

Vietnam, and Poland, experiences that have built shared memories, Vinnie says.

“Some of the guys had never been out of the country,” he says. “They still talk about it on the shop floor. It’s our way of rewarding loyalty.”

Emma adds that such trips were also a good learning opportunity.

“They know how to fit tyres, and they understand tyres, but they never really had to think about how they are made. So, it gives them a really good insight.”

And that theme of passing knowledge down runs through the business from the shop floor to the family itself.

And yes, that family line keeps rolling on. Between them, Alan and Ian have 11 young grandchildren.

“The next generation of tyre fitters,” Emma laughs.



Vinnie Neumann



Emma Hintz (nee Neumann)

Lost puppy to tyre legend

Bruce Bensdorp remembers exactly how it started.

In November 1975, as a 16-year-old just months out of school, he walked into Neumanns Tyre Services after hearing they were looking for a tyre fitter.

It was a Friday but by Monday, Bruce was on the payroll, having obviously impressing Len and Kath Neumann. But looking back, he wonders how.

“I saw a photo of myself a couple of years ago from when I first started,” Bruce says.

“Looking at it now, I don’t know if I would have employed me. I was pretty rough looking, but they must have seen something, maybe that lost puppy look.”

Lost “puppy” or not, that hire stuck because 50 years later Bruce is still with the company, now its longest-serving staff member. His brother Richard is not far behind, having clocked up 43 years but Bruce’s half-century of loyalty began from the humblest of starts.

“I didn’t know much about tyre fitting but I was keen,” Bruce, now 66, admits.

The early years were nothing if not physical.

“Back then it was all manual, heavy truck tyres, a few tools, and plenty of elbow grease. The machines now make it easier, but you do so many more tyres. Everything is bigger, faster, busier than it used to be.”

The job has taught him how much the world on wheels had changed and in a career that has rolled through almost every corner of the company. He started tyre fitting in the car bay, shifted into fleet work, even part of a night shift trial to capture trucks passing through town after dark, and he later moved into vulcanising, the process of rebuilding worn tyres. He managed the Methven store for five years, and today, semi-retired, splits his time between the Ashburton and Darfield sites. “They don’t give me an official title,” he grins. “I just get on with it.”

But for Bruce, the work has always been about more than tyres. From the beginning, Len and his wife Kath looked after him like he was family. “They cooked us meals, looked after us. Len took me white baiting one afternoon. They were like another set of parents.”

That family spirit carried through to Alan and Ian Neumann, who Bruce has always respected as managers and friends. They played rugby and cricket together, went fishing, and he especially remembers being part of an annual Rangitata raft race where rafts were made out of old tyre tubes.

“It was at one of those raft races that I met my future wife Jillian,” he says. “So really, it’s been 50 years of work, but 50 years of life, too.”



Half a century on the job, Bruce Bensdorp started as a 16-year-old tyre fitter at Neumanns in 1975 and is now the company’s longest-serving staff member.



From “wee office girl” in 1985 to the glue that holds the team together today, Maxine Muckle has been at the heart of Neumanns Tyres for four decades.

‘Wee office girl’ - 40 years and counting

Maxine Muckle doesn’t have a flash job title, and she’s fine with that. “I just do a bit of everything,” she says humbly.

Alan and Ian describe her as a trusted advisor, their sounding board and the glue that holds the two brothers together. And what she also has is a remarkable record because for 40 years Maxine has been one of Neumanns Tyres most trusted constants, the diligent problem-solver, who’s watched the business grow from a single Ashburton workshop to a South Island-wide network.

And she’ll always remember when she started, way back in March 1985. Barely 18, she stepped into the role once filled

by founder Len Neumann’s wife, Kath.

“I was just the wee office girl, learning the ropes off Alan,” she recalls.

“Invoices were all handwritten, everything was sent off to the accountants by hand. Computers hadn’t arrived yet.”

When they did, life in the office changed overnight.

“It scared the shit out of me,” she laughs.

“Holy heck. It was a new thing altogether.”

But Maxine adapted, teaching herself the basics, leaning on the accountants when she needed to, and eventually mastering the systems that would drive a rapidly expanding company.

“It was a lot smaller and there was only one wee shop,” she said.

“Now it has all changed and technology is a big thing. It has just evolved.

Back in the 80s, Maxine and Alan Neumann shared the office administration and financial duties, while Ian Neumann managed the workshop.

“They complimented each other really well,” Maxine said.

“Now it’s a bigger beast, with branches, brands, and tyre sizes we’d never imagined back then.”

These days, Maxine still handles administration, finance, vehicles, insurances and much more for the group. She’s been there so long, so clearly important, that a status or designation would surely seem apt, but not for Maxine.

“I just work with everybody and problem-solve to a certain

degree.”

And that no-fuss approach has earned her respect across the business, and her loyalty in return.

“They’re a great company, with family values,” she says.

“When I had children, they were okay with me going to school things and to watch the kids do their thing. So, there was a bit of flexibility for that sort of thing. It’s always about some give and take because that’s how you keep good staff.”

Now she’s conscious of the next chapter. With Alan’s son Vinnie and Ian’s daughter Emma stepping up and Maxine, as always, will help make the transition run smoothly.

“I’ll keep the seat warm until they’re sorted and ready to carry on.”

And she’ll have much to carry

on with because life beyond the office has always been full-on, with family, social tennis and the strong community ties of her Steaveley home enough to keep her busy.

Sport has always been part of her story, having represented Mid Canterbury in both netball and tennis. But inside the office at Neumanns, it’s her efficiency that shines, though ask her if she can change a tyre and wait for the response.

“I’ll have to be honest and say no,” Maxine laughs.

“When I got my first car, my father showed me how to change a tyre and check the oil and all that sort of thing.

“But I have never had to do it, never had to change a tyre. I’ll leave it to the experts.”



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