

The Calypso Bay marina and boardwalk between Brisbane and the Gold Coast is one of two AS400,000-plus jobs recently completed by OSA



INWOOD IMAGES

AN ACT OF FAITH

By Tony Neilson

There was a time when his calling was the word of God and his chosen vocation was as a minister of the church. “I did the training but I didn’t feel I was suited to the ministry,” he says from behind a wall of job sheets, drawings and computer gear in his cramped office at the Outdoor Structures Australia (OSA) site on the outskirts of Gatton, about 100 km due west of Brisbane.

The fertile black soils of the surrounding countryside are the basis of a rich farming and cropping economy, and very much a part of the Queensland Bible Belt. But the dust on the Outdoor Structures site is rust-red – a perfect match for the fresh stacks of spotted gum on which Stubbersfield has pinned his future fortune.

At one end of the yard are the remnants of times past: abandoned buildings and equipment from the original sawmill established by his builder father 50 years earlier. “He was dissatisfied with the quality of the wood he was getting. But the timber resource in our area had been heavily depleted by a woodchip industry, and we eventually had to close the milling operation,” says the son with his trademark worried look and heavy sigh.

It was the mid-80s when Stubbersfield the younger swapped the reflective calm of the ministry for the noise and stress of a hardwood sawmiller in a family business struggling to foot it in a narrow and increasingly competitive sector.

In 1997, he took the biggest leap of faith in his life – going into business for himself: “We started with \$24,000, a planer on lease, about \$90,000 in stock and some land leased from the family. We have since changed the company name [from Gatton Sawmilling to Outdoor Structures Australia], rebuilt the treatment plant to modern environmental standards, added a kiln, new planer, out-feed and storage shed.”

More importantly for the man who gave up the chance of a more cloistered and scholarly existence for the financial and commercial worries of a timber business, prospects improved steadily as Stubbersfield moulded OSA into a marketing-focused and innovative producer of wooden decking, boardwalks, bridges, cladding, flooring and landscaping products.

Last year the company won a Queensland Department of Primary Industries (Forestry) innovation award, substantially for its LifePlus® timber decking system developed for domestic and light commercial applications.

LifePlus, features a unique, warp-reducing groove and ripple profile on the underside of the deck boards, designed to reduce distortion of the boards, extend the life of the decking and subframe, and make it easier to clean. Special finishing apparently makes the exposed face less slippery and the



TED STUBBERSFIELD

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sides are tapered. The system is patented in Australia, registered in Australia, New Zealand and the United States, and awaiting registration in Britain.

LifePlus, is being franchised through Timber Innovations, a company operated by Stubbersfield and his brother James. OSA is a licensed manufacturer along with two other Australian hardwood producers. The product

may also be adapted to softwood species like radiata pine and marketed as EcoPlus.

Not that pine is on Ted’s shortlist of favourite timbers. You only need to visit his big house on one of the highest points in Gatton to realise that. It is a traditional (“not pseudo”) Queenslander, with “classical symmetry” and a 30-m verandah. It is a statement in Australian hardwoods: ironbark verandah, crows ash and brushbox internal floors, seasoned blackbutt framing and spotted gum external cladding. His beloved spotted gum (“We specialise in it because it has unique properties that we need for our fully weather-exposed structures”) also features in the interior finishing, along with ash and silky oak.

“There is no pine anywhere. Even the mouldings are hardwood. I wanted to use the very best of what we produced over the years at the business. Some of the timber took years to accumulate.”

The Stubbersfield house is called ‘Elim’ – the oasis in the wilderness where the Bible says the children of Israel stayed on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. “Elim had 12 wells and 70 palm trees, but all we could manage was seven palms,” he observes with the hint of a smile from beneath his beeted brow.

Elim was also meant to have been a symbol of easier times for the family. “Life up to that time had been hard and we looked for a time of rest. But in reality, life got harder ... I actually wanted to call the house ‘Ebenezer’, meaning *thus far God has helped me*, but my dear wife balked at that. But it really is the story of my life – hard but conscious of being helped.”

But things must be improving because the old 9 m x 3 m demountable structure (similar in shape and personality to a shipping container) that has served as the company’s HQ for so many years, is about to be replaced!

“We’ve bitten the bullet and started work on a new office ... timber of course; showcasing the type of work we do,” he says with a hint of pride. Perhaps the sack cloth and ashes can finally be discarded?

And what about the beautiful little black Alfa Romeo Spyder sports car being bombarded with red dust in the yard outside? “I was suffering from stress and the workplace health doctor told me to make some positive lifestyle changes. I thought it was about time I overcame my fear of spiders – so I bought one.”

These days, the former workaholic says he takes a whole day off every week and goes driving with a mate... presumably to blow away the cobwebs? ■