

Cattle supremo
Gillian Leeds is a
woman who gets on
with the job. Lindsay
Hayes reports

Cattle producer Gillian Leeds has clocked up a commendable list of achievements that would make most people gasp.

Yet she sees nothing extraordinary in single-handedly running one of the nation's leading beef studs, raising a family on her own, and enthusiastically promoting the cattle breed she loves.

The multi-skilled grandmother is the principal of Broome Shorthorns, which she has run single-handedly for most of the past 30 years.

The 1100ha property of mostly native pasture fronts Yanko Creek, north of Jerilderie, in the Riverina.

Gillian has raised a family, turned out a string of show champions and broken new ground for women livestock producers.

Broome is her childhood home. Her late father, Clive Brownless, established Broome Shorthorns in the 1930s.

She grew up with cattle and, apart from a brief stint as a nanny in Melbourne, worked with the cattle until her marriage to Murray Leeds. She then moved to Queensland.

"When Murray died in 1976, I came back, with three kids all under eight, and I took over the herd from my father," Gillian says.

She was well equipped for the challenge.

"Dad always taught us all to be self-reliant," she says.

At the time, she did not think juggling the property and family commitments was anything out of the ordinary but, on reflection, sometimes wonders how she did it.

"I had to put three children through school, so I simply got on with it," she says.

"I could do most things on the property. I could get the fencing done myself and I put out the silage with the tractor."

Until recently, horses and dogs were her co-workers.

"I always rode a horse. I would wean the calves in the paddock and the dogs would hold them," she says.

The dogs were her "men".

She got them as pups and trained them.

"I did all the tattooing and

marking myself," she says.

Apart from the occasional visit



Well-equipped: Gillian Leeds takes a break with a workmate, George. Gillian trains all her own dogs.

Gillian's solo mission is a champion effort

from a vet, the pregnancy tester or performance scanner, Broome was a one-woman enterprise.

"I think the hardest part was bringing up my children on my own," Gillian says.

Her main focus is the production of commercial bulls. Semen sales are an integral and growing part of the business.

The 80 bull calves turned off each year are progeny of Broome's 230 stud cows, artificially inseminated using a bull imported from the US and semen from Canada.

Encouraged by the late Alwyn Lucas, a Corowa beef and Poll Shorthorn producer, Gillian entered the show ring to promote her cattle.

She says it was hard work to break into the then male-only preserve.

"The men didn't like a woman showing cattle initially, but attitudes have completely changed," she says.

Gillian has bred three Dubbo show champions. Dubbo is recognised as the world's biggest Shorthorn show.

She was the first woman to judge Shorthorns at a royal show (Adelaide in 1994) and has since judged at royal shows in most states.

Her efforts at Broome and off-farm accomplishments — including most successful cattle exhibitor at the Melbourne Royal Show in 1996 — have led to two nominations for the Australian Rural Woman of the

Year Awards and nomination for a NSW Premier's senior achievement award.

Gillian's solo run ended three years ago, when her eldest son, David, returned home with his wife, Terri, and young family to join the farm partnership.

Broome is self-sufficient for feed, producing sorghum for silage, oatens hay and clover hay.

"We irrigate 162ha for cattle feed from Yanko Creek. The rest is all natural pasture," Gillian says.

She says she did not want personal recognition.

Her main interest was to act as an ambassador for Shorthorns.

She flies the flag at every opportunity at a local level and as a director of the national breed society.

"I've always loved Shorthorns and I'd like to get them back to where they were," she says.

Gillian is now able to share the workload with David, and hopes to have the time to win more converts to the Shorthorn cause.

"They are a very old breed and there is an historic link of interest to our family," she says.

"I am a descendant of the original founder of Shorthorns in England."

For the record, Shorthorns — formerly known as Durham cattle — arrived in Australia a decade after the First Fleet.