

# Pleystowe's a long and

By **OWEN JACQUES**

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THE historic Pleystowe Mill will close this year as soon as the sugar crush is finished but Mackay Sugar chairman of directors Eddie Westcott said it was far from a quick and easy decision.

"It was incredibly hard," Mr Westcott said.

"We'd been agonising over it for three or four years."

He outlined why it was Pleystowe that faced closure rather than the others, saying that Marian handled the most cane, Racecourse had the refinery and if Farleigh Mill was to close, cane would have to be transported over the Pioneer River.

"We'd need to spend millions on capital works to do that," he said.

Mackay Sugar estimated this year's crush would be 5.5 million tonnes, allowing the season to finish in early November. Once the season is over, so is Pleystowe's milling.

✱ "If we have an emergency next year, we could get it running again but after that we'll need equipment from it for the other mills."



Cane farmer and harvesting contractor Peter Muscat works near the Pleystowe Mill and has always sent his cane there.

PHOTO: PETER HOLT 310708/183

Canegrowers' deputy chair Ted Bussey said he understood the mill needed to close for economic reasons but feared that an extended season could spell disaster for farmers.

"The season is too short now for harvesting contractors," Mr Bussey said.

He elaborated, saying that if farmers harvested early or late, they would risk lower sugar content in the crop, or potentially devastating wet weather.

Mr Westcott shared that fear, but said they had no choice.

"I understand it, I'm a farmer too," he said.

"But if we waited (delayed the closure of Pleystowe mill), we would go broke before we could get three mills running sustainably."

"This decision is driven by cane supply and cane supply alone."

✱ He said, ideally, Mackay Sugar and Proserpine Co-operative would merge so four mills would be joined together again, but that wasn't a factor in this closure.

"If we waited until it was too late, it would be too late."



# mill closure proved agonising decision

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An aerial shot of Mackay Sugar's Pleystowe Mill that will shut at the end of this year's crushing season as a result of a struggling sugar industry and a loss of cane farms to development.

PHOTO: PETER HOIT



# It's a sad but inevitable event for area's farmers

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FARMERS yesterday accepted the closure of Pleystowe Mill as sad but inevitable.

Some questioned the closing of that particular mill but all agreed that it was necessary and less than surprising.

Peter Muscat has grown and harvested cane for more than 26 years in the Pleystowe area and when the mill was closed for a season a few years ago, he

found it "weird".

Now it's permanent.

Speaking from the cabin of his harvester, Mr Muscat said he knew at least one mill would close down.

"It's something that Mackay Sugar had to do," he said.

"When they shut North Eton (in 1988), that was a big deal for us."

Mr Muscat said he wouldn't be surprised if more mills closed in coming years because more and more cane growing land was being lost as farmers

left the land.

"It all depends on how much country we lose.

"You're going to get more farmers struggling.

"They'll end up with two mills if we lose any more land.

"It's a tough game to be in," he said.

Charlie McLennan had been in this "tough game" since he was 14.

He's now 72.

He said the news of Pleystowe's closure left him "a bit disheartened".

Even though he had sent

his cane to the mill for 58 years, there was no nostalgia for him.

"Well, it won't make a difference to me," Mr McLennan said. "I don't care where it goes to."

The farmer from the "old brigade" said he thought Mackay Sugar was closing the wrong mill but admitted that it could have something to do with mill rivalry.

"Whether they're closing the right mill, that's the thing."

He said farmers were grappling with a record

high Australian dollar, and a falling sugar price and were still recovering from breakouts of orange rust in 2000 and the current onslaught of the airborne cane disease, smut.

In the past 12 months, he said, the cost of diesel had doubled and the cost of fertiliser had gone up 300%.

"When we bought our first diesel tractor, diesel was two shillings a gallon.

"The tractor cost £1500. That was a lot of money in those days," Mr McLennan said.

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## It's a proud history

THE Pleystowe Mill began its first crush on September 6, 1869. The first season yielded 143 tons of sugar and 6000 gallons (27,276 litres) of rum.

South Sea Islanders employed by the Pleystowe company were catered for, as the plantation was credited in 1883 as having supplied the best accommodation in the district in a series of detached buildings.

In 1910, Pleystowe crushed 53,539 tons of cane to produce 5940 tons of sugar.

In 1988 six Mackay district mills merged and formed the company Mackay Sugar Co-operative Association Limited which consisted of Racecourse, Farleigh, Marian, North Eton, Cattle Creek and the previously CSR-

owned Pleystowe Mill.

In 1991 Pleystowe crushed 883,969 tonnes of cane to produce 136,151 tonnes.

In 2002 the Pleystowe mill was left in mothballs following poor crop estimates that would be crushed by the three remaining mills.

However, later in the season Mackay Sugar decided to fire up the mill as a "juice mill" only after crop estimates were revised higher.

The mill was mothballed again in 2003 after another poor season.

On Thursday Mackay Sugar confirmed the permanent closure of the 136-year-old mill, diverting cane to Farleigh, Marian and Racecourse mills.

■ Facts from Mackay Historical Society