



Tom and Georgie McGuinness with their children Emilla, Poppy and Charlie, plus labrador Montie and Jungle the pony.

OUR LIFE IN THE COUNTRY

AFTER HEADING IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS, TOM AND GEORGIE MCGUINNESS FOUND EACH OTHER AGAIN, AND RETURNED TO RURAL NSW TO TAKE THEIR PLACE IN A WOOL-GROWING DYNASTY.

WORDS **CAROLINE WEBSTER** PHOTOGRAPHY **MICHAEL WEE**

“OUR HOME AND ITS GARDEN ARE FULL OF MEMORIES, LAUGHTER AND LOVE. IT’S SPECIAL.”

APART FROM BABY EDWARD, the McGuiness family has been on the go since dawn. Jungle the pony needs riding as Poppy is competing in the gymkhana next week. Charlie is helping get the dogs ready before he and Tom head off for a day of lamb marking. Emilla is keen to jump on the trampoline, then hunt for eggs for the coconut cake Georgie is planning for morning tea. You get the feeling that this is a typically hectic morning, but one that neither Tom nor Georgie would want to change.

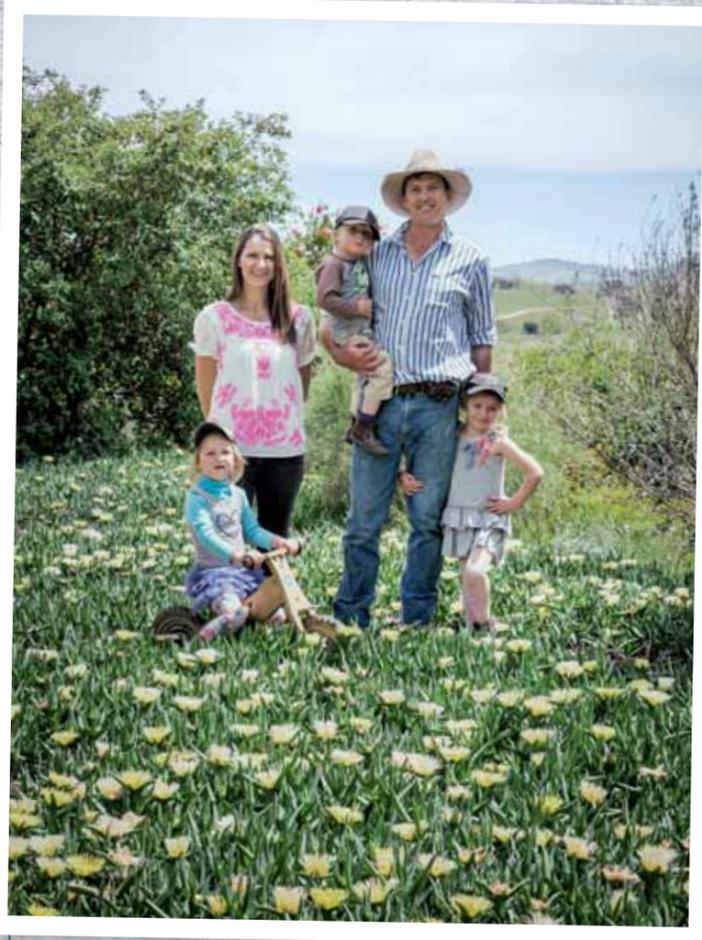
Situated in a granite-studded valley, 20 kilometres west of Wyangala Dam on the NSW Southern Tablelands, Bigga Station is home to Tom and Georgie McGuiness, and their four children: four-year-old Poppy; twins Charlie and Emilla, three; and two-month-old Edward.

Built around 1900, their house is a rambling brick homestead set in a 1.2 hectare garden. There are several sheds and outhouses, a six-stand shearing shed, two cottages and an extensive vegetable garden, so there’s always something to do.

Tom was raised at Bigga and Georgie grew up in the area. The pair have known each other since early childhood, although after finishing school both left in search of different careers. After completing an agricultural commerce degree in Orange, Tom intended to work off the farm for a few years. Georgie gained a degree in advertising and marketing, travelled overseas, then lived in Sydney where she worked for both the BBC and Macquarie Bank. It would be 11 years before they met again, marrying in 2007 and moving to Bigga Station not long after.

Wandering around their home and garden, you quickly see why the couple returned. The garden in particular provides much joy. Heirloom roses jostle for space with daisies, day lilies, geraniums and poppies. Towering lilacs, ceanothus, osmanthus and viburnum provide structure, and make the garden a great place to play hide-and-seek. Magnificent elm, ash and oak trees offer shade on a summer’s day, and large swathes of manicured lawn provide ample space for the children to race about.

Running a large Merino sheep holding has its challenges but on balance Tom and Georgie agree that life on Bigga Station is full and satisfying, and where they intend to stay.



tom I grew up on Bigga Station, and have memories of a great childhood playing and exploring with my sister, Kate. I knew I’d eventually end up back here but it happened earlier than I expected. After only five years away I found myself again getting involved in the business with Dad, so it made sense to return. In 1998, I moved into a cottage on the property, and Dad and I began to run the station together.

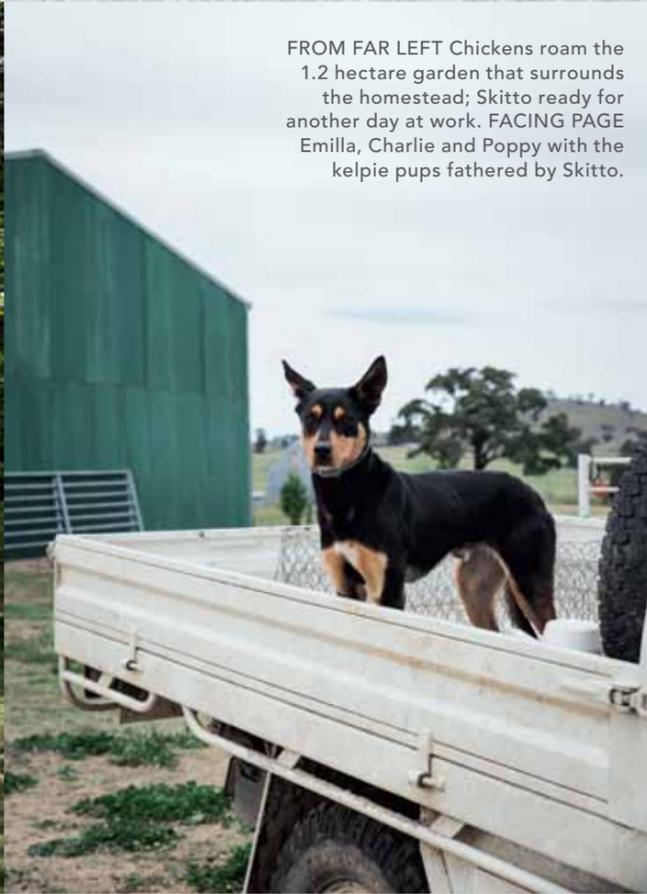
Life on the land in today’s financial climate can be tough, with diminishing returns, increasing costs, drought and the isolation... The district has an amazing community that relies heavily on the voluntary labour of the locals to keep it going. Sometimes I wish we were closer to a larger town and the opportunities that would provide, but it’s nice to have a sense of community away from the hustle and bustle of a larger population.

Georgie and I are incredibly lucky to live in a beautiful house that not only makes a great home for the children but also connects us to past generations. The first McGuiness — also a Tom — settled in the district in 1838 with his wife Sarah. They started with 400 hectares and a passion for the land. In 1848 more land was bought, and today Bigga Station is approximately 1900 hectares. >



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Bigga Station’s present homestead was built around 1900; Tom and kelpie Skitto round up a mob of Merinos; Maggie the labrador has a sneaky snooze; a mob heading to the shed for lamb marking; Poppy riding Jungle, with Tom and Charlie; all aboard — Charlie, Emilla and Poppy pose on Jungle. FACING PAGE Emilla, Georgie, Charlie, Tom and Poppy love life at Bigga Station.





FROM FAR LEFT Chickens roam the 1.2 hectare garden that surrounds the homestead; Skitto ready for another day at work. FACING PAGE Emilla, Charlie and Poppy with the kelpie pups fathered by Skitto.

Having a go and keeping positive is vital. Don't try and do it on your own, ask for help and surround yourself with positive, like-minded people. Managing family life, the farm and the business, and coping with droughts, floods and fire can be hard. It's important to remember that there are many others going through the same ordeal, so you are not alone.

I'm so lucky to share Bigga with Georgie — we moved to the main homestead in May this year. I love the way she quickly and calmly manages the chaos of four young children, and still finds time to organise everything else in our lives. She's great fun to be around and keeps me focused on what's important.

georgie Tom and I grew up in the same area, so I have always known him and his family. We didn't have much to do with each other as kids, but as we got older we became good friends and eventually became inseparable.

I always knew I would return to the country at some stage. I love the space, the quiet and all the animals you can have. Bigga is off the beaten track and quite isolated, so the people do have a real sense of community. Everyone is friendly and everyone looks out for each other. Initially, though, I found it took time to adjust after so long away. It can take a while to make new friends and I found having

patience for the things I missed was necessary. Things that people in the city take for granted, such as instant internet connection, online shopping and popping down to the local café for a coffee, just don't exist out here.

But most of these things are no longer important. I love Tom and the kids, as well as the opportunity to be outdoors, working with Tom. He is so calm and kind and friendly to everyone. He has the inspiring ability to see the positive in every person or situation. We live simply but it's very satisfying.

I inherited our beautiful garden from my mother-in-law, Jo, who is an incredible plantswoman. She started it from scratch. It's wonderful always having flowers to pick and being able to let the kids run free. Summer is my favourite season. I like the heat and the fact that the kids can roam around in next to nothing. There are beautiful places to sit in the shade where I can watch the children running under the sprinkler on a hot day. I wouldn't change a thing.

Family is the most important thing to Tom and me. Continuing to develop Bigga Station for our children and their children is what drives us both. We're always on the lookout for the next opportunity or new management technique, while loving the history of the place. Our home and its garden are full of memories, laughter and love. It's special. *



"CONTINUING TO DEVELOP BIGGA STATION FOR OUR CHILDREN AND THEIR CHILDREN IS WHAT DRIVES US BOTH."