Local tobacco making a comeback

The Dovedale tobacco team holding the dried product. From left Shirley Burnett, Kevin Burnett, Robert Hodgkinson and Ross Golding.

by Ruth Whittaker

"I've been growing tobacco since I was 15. It's in my blood, all I know and I love it."

Kevin and Shirley Burnett's farm at Dovedale has known only tobacco since about 1933, when Kevin's grandfather, William Burnett started growing it followed by his father, Percy.

Kevin said: "When Rothman's shut down, there was only one thing I could do - grow it on my own."

He has done just that and now after 12 hard months of getting all the details worked out, the new product is on the market.

The Dovedale business is the only one in New Zealand licensed to grow and dispose of tobacco.

Kevin said he left school when he was 14 and when he was 15 his father gave him a quota contract of his own. He had 35 hectares to grow on, most of it covered in scrub and blackberry, with one paddock which has now been used for tobacco for 50 years.

He said at one stage he almost went bankrupt when frost damaged the crop two years running. "But I still stuck to growing it."

Over the years Kevin has seen many changes in the industry. He said he remembers when 18 people were employed on the farm, nine of them working in the fields picking by hand and nine working in the shed.

Kevin said modern machinery such as picking machines and new kilns cut the number of workers in half.

He said it used to take a week to grade the tobacco for sale in comparison to a mere two to three hours now.

Kevin said irrigation played a big part in the output of tobacco. "Before we got irrigation we really struggled."

He said he has also gone through company changes, at first growing for Phillip Morris, then it closed its doors, transferring to WD and H.O Will's.

Kevin said when that company shut down it really knocked the stuffing out of him. To get back into the industry he leased about 14 acres of land in Motuoka with a Rothmans quota on it. He then grew on that land as well as on the Dovedale farm.

"The reason was to split the risk from frost, it was to cover my tail."

Kevin said the business expands they hope to include other local growers in the business.

Kevin said the business has the potential to employ many people in the long run.