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2025
HUNTER
MANUFACTURING
AWARDS



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Connecting & informing business people



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From the Editor



This issue includes the annual special feature on Manufacturing in the Hunter, including coverage of the recent 2025 Hunter Manufacturing Awards. See page 18.

Manufacturing has a rich history in the Hunter and remains an important economic driver of the region.

Many people, including seemingly most politicians, do not understand just how important it is to the economic prosperity and security of the Hunter and the entire nation. The importance of a strong manufacturing sector cannot be overestimated.

Although technology is revolutionising manufacturing, it remains a huge direct employer of labour. It is an excellent trainer, helping to create a skilled local workforce and maintaining valuable skills.

Manufacturing is also an important exporter for the nation. The implementation of modern manufacturing is helping to overcome some of the issues of high domestic labour costs when competing in the global marketplace. Local manufacturers continually show how innovative they are, coming up with unique solutions for the marketplace.

Manufacturing has a huge economic multiplier effect, one of the highest of all industries and estimated to be as high as five, meaning that the indirect benefits are huge. You may not consider yourself to be in the manufacturing industry, but your business or job may very well have manufacturing to thank for its very existence.

Events in the last few years have highlighted Australia's dependence on international supply chains and the risk that these are impacted by economic or political decisions and upheavals in other countries. From Covid to wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and trade wars, the world feels more unsettled today than it has in decades.

A strong and diverse manufacturing base in Australia helps the nation to be more self-reliant and less exposed to these impacts that we have little control over. The unsettled global environment has also highlighted the importance of a strong defence sector, and how vital it is to have a supportive local manufacturing sector to protect against possible disruption in global supply chains.

It should be a priority for all of us to help promote and support a healthy and growing manufacturing sector for our future prosperity and security

Garry Hardie
Publisher and Editor

ON THIS MONTH'S COVER

Two of the major winners from the **2025 Hunter Manufacturing Awards** - Brain Industries, winner of the Manufacturer of the Year for Less Than 50 Employees and AGRANA Fruit Australia, winner of the Manufacturer of the Year for 50 Employees or More. See page 24 for further information.

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MORAY & AGNEW LAUNCHES REFLECT RECONCILIATION ACTION PLAN

Moray & Agnew Lawyers has implemented its recently launched Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) for 2025-26, reaffirming the firm's commitment to justice, equity and meaningful reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The RAP outlines the firm's commitment to deepening understanding and respect for Indigenous culture and communities, improving socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations, and actively promoting reconciliation. These goals will be achieved by fostering stronger relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations, and by supporting Indigenous entrepreneurship and business development.

As part of the RAP, Moray & Agnew commissioned a bespoke artwork titled 'Yanha yapaneyepuk' ('walk together' in Yorta Yorta language) by Bayadherra, an Aboriginal-owned art business founded by Yorta Yorta siblings Luke and Siena Tieri. The artwork symbolises the beginning of Moray & Agnew's reconciliation journey, representing collaboration, connection and shared progress with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Moray & Agnew is proud of its community initiatives nationwide. In the Hunter

region, the firm partnered with the University of Newcastle's School of Law and Justice in 2021 to establish 'The Moray & Agnew Indigenous Shaping Futures Scholarship in Law'. This transformative scholarship provides annual financial support to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander law student facing challenging personal circumstances, helping them succeed academically through assistance with expenses such as accommodation, textbooks and equipment, day-to-day living, travel costs and work placements.

Yanha yapaneyepuk



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NIGHT TOURS FOR CORPORATE PARTIES ON LAKE MACQUARIE

Showtime Kayaking is giving businesses a fresh way to celebrate with private night kayaking tours, perfect for Christmas parties, end-of-year events, team-building activities, and staff reward outings. From November 2025, companies across the Hunter region can book 2- to 3-hour private tours on Lake Macquarie (departing from Naru Beach), fully tailored to their group's needs. Options include pizzas or seafood platters, transport via minibus, decorations, and photography packages, creating a unique and memorable corporate experience.

David Garden, managing director of Showtime Kayaking, believes that corporate groups are increasingly seeking memorable, experiential events rather than conventional work parties in traditional venues.

"We wanted to give businesses something fresh and exciting. Instead of the same private function room as last year, a bespoke group kayak tour lets staff reconnect with nature, enjoy the outdoors, and celebrate together in a unique setting. You tell us your vision, and we'll help craft it," said Garden.

"Because we know Lake Macquarie intimately, we can pace tours for mixed-age groups, choose sheltered routes, and coordinate catering and transport. It's more than just a paddle, it's a complete event!"



HIA HUNTER HOUSING AWARDS

Butler Building won the pinnacle award at the 2025 HIA Hunter Housing and Kitchen & Bathrooms Awards, being presented the HIA Hunter Home of the Year award for a project described as 'nothing short of a masterpiece'.

The Awards were announced on 18 October in front of a capacity audience of industry leaders and peers from across the Central Coast, Hunter and Mid Coast regions.

The Awards acknowledged the talent of designers, builders, contractors, suppliers and manufacturers who plan and construct quality new homes, townhouses, renovations, kitchens, bathrooms and outdoor projects.

Judged by industry professionals, the best of the regions residential building industry were selected as winners in 37 separate categories.

Against strong competition the judges said the "HIA Hunter Home of the Year balances innovation, artistry, and exceptional craftsmanship at every turn. From its striking use of cutting-edge materials to its flawless detailing. The result is more than a home – it's a work of art. A showpiece of design innovation, material mastery, and timeless appeal, setting the benchmark for contemporary living".

The winning home known as 'Taurean Dream' took out seven individual awards on the night for Butler Building including Renovation/Addition Project of the Year, Bathroom of the Year and Outdoor Project of the Year. The luxury home also took out a

further five awards for two other companies - Mali White Design and Cutting Edge Joinery.

HIA Hunter Executive Director Craig Jennion congratulated Butler Building and all Hunter Award winners and finalists.

"HIA members are dedicated to achieving the very best workmanship and standards in every project they undertake. HIA's Awards provide a tremendous opportunity for our members to showcase their projects and highlight building and design excellence," he said.

The winners of the prestigious HIA Professional Builder awards were Walkom Constructions for Professional Small Builder / Renovator, Hudson Homes for Professional Medium Builder / Renovator, and Eden Brae Homes for Professional Major Builder. James Shepherd was a worthy Apprentice of the Year, while Max Wylie walked away with the award for Emerging Builder.

Other notable winners included Construct Central Coast for the Custom Built Home of the Year, Hunter Homes for Display Home of the Year, RCM Projects for Spec Home of the Year, Stroud Homes Central Coast for Project Home of the Year and Ort & Co Building for Townhouse of the Year.

In the Kitchen and Bathroom categories Cutting Edge Joinery took out Kitchen of the Year and Butler Building Bathroom of the Year award. Cutting Edge Joinery also took out the Cabinetmaker/ Kitchen Manufacturer of the Year award.

Mr Jennion congratulated all 2025 entrants.

"HIA is delighted with the exceptional quality of entries and level of competition this year. In a year that has thrown up many challenges all winners and finalists should be proud to have reached the pinnacle of excellence as demonstrated in these awards," he said.

Overall winners in major categories will now represent the HIA Hunter region at the HIA-CSR Australian Housing Awards in 2026 to compete for national titles against winners from other HIA.

STATE-OF-THE-ART WASTE TRANSFER STATION DESIGN LOCKED FOR MAITLAND

Plans for a \$21.8 million waste transfer station in Maitland are taking shape, as Maitland City Council looks to ensure the long-term viability of its waste facility before landfill airspace is exhausted.

Landfill airspace at the Maitland Resource Recovery Facility (Mount Vincent Road, East Maitland) is projected to reach capacity in 2028, and in preparation Maitland Council is moving forward with detailed designs for a new waste transfer station and sorting infrastructure.

Maitland City Council Acting Manager Environment and Sustainability Michelle Lindsay said the upgrade would allow residential waste "to be sorted into waste streams and transported offsite to appropriate recycling or disposal endpoints."

"In addition to allowing the facility to remain open after landfill airspace expires, these works during stage three will improve resource recovery, reduce reliance on landfill, and deliver a modern, more efficient waste management facility that ensures the site can continue to serve Maitland well into the future," she said.

"The transfer facility will also bring us closer to our landfill diversion target of 80% by 2030, by helping us recover more resources and recyclable material before waste leaves the site."

The recent introduction of a Food Organics and Garden Organics (FOGO) service in 2025 is also bringing Maitland City Council closer to achieving its 2030 landfill diversion target.

Detailed design and construction on stage three will run throughout 2025/26, running in parallel with determining infrastructure and funding options for a future fourth stage. Construction on stage three is expected to conclude in early 2028.



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TRIPLE WINS FOR ZEAL FUTURES

Zeal Futures took home three major honours at the 2025 Apprentice Employment Network (AEN) NSW & ACT Awards, held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Sydney in October.

The wins recognise Zeal Futures' commitment to supporting apprentices, trainees, and host employers across New South Wales, as well as the life-changing opportunities created through vocational education and training (VET).

Shoalhaven City Council won the Large Host Employer of the Year Award in recognition of their long-standing commitment to local training and employment pathways. Over the course of the partnership between Zeal Futures and Council, which spans more than 30 years, more than 350 apprentices and trainees have completed their qualifications, with a large proportion moving into permanent roles within Council.

Hunter-based Kasey Lewis won the Women in Trades Trainee/Apprentice of the Year Award in recognition of her determination, enthusiasm and ambassadorship for women in trades. Beginning her career in graphic design, Kasey found her true calling in the electrical trade, completing an electrical apprenticeship with Zeal Futures and Origin Energy.

The third winner was Shaani Monson, who won the Inclusion Trainee/Apprentice of the Year Award. Shaani completed a Mobile Plant apprenticeship hosted to Whitehaven Coal and consistently impressed with her hard work and commitment. Her achievements were also recognised earlier this year when she was named Apprentice of the Year at the New England Regional Training Awards.

Zeal Futures CEO Sharon Smith said the awards were a powerful reflection of the organisation's mission to help people and communities thrive.

Kasey Lewis winner of the Women in Trades Trainee/Apprentice of the Year Award



PROPERTY PURCHASE BY CITY OF NEWCASTLE

City of Newcastle has purchased a significant industrial property in Sandgate to augment its long-term financial plans.

The 8.64-hectare land holding is the first Newcastle property acquired under City of Newcastle's Future Fund, which was established to ensure it can meet the need for infrastructure and services across the city into the future.

Executive Director of Corporate Services and Chief Financial

Officer David Clarke said the Future Fund enables City of Newcastle to diversify its revenue base to cater for both the growing population and aging assets.

"Ensuring the long-term sustainability of almost \$3 billion worth of infrastructure we manage on behalf of the community is one of our key responsibilities," Mr Clarke said.

"As our infrastructure ages, the cost of maintaining and renewing these essential assets increases, which is why we proactively set aside funds each year to meet these future needs.

"Our Future Fund is a strategic initiative that enables us to invest our cash reserves into a diversified portfolio of property and commercial assets.

"This latest acquisition strengthens that portfolio and positions us to generate stable returns, protecting our financial position and ensuring we can continue to meet the needs of our growing community without putting extra pressure on rates."

The Rural Drive property includes two warehouses that have existing leases in place with a number of businesses, which will generate ongoing rental income for City of Newcastle.

Mr Clarke said City of Newcastle will also consider potential longer term uses for the site.

It is the third property purchased under the Future Fund, with previous acquisitions including a Bunnings warehouse in Taree and a Wollongong medical centre.



The NSW Government's Aviation Attraction Fund (AAF) will support a brand-new seasonal flight from Hobart to Newcastle, connecting the two cities directly for the first time.

On 2 December 2025, Jetstar will launch the seasonal route, which will operate three times a week from December to April, a link that will give Tasmanians direct access to NSW's second biggest city. The route will unlock access to new visitors for Newcastle and the Hunter, providing a boost for businesses and jobs throughout the region's visitor economy.

Destination NSW is working with Jetstar and Hobart Airport to help promote the service – the third new route this year to be launched through the AAF, which has already connected Newcastle with Denpasar, in Bali, and Perth in 2025.

The new service comes at a transformational time for Newcastle Airport with its new international terminal unlocking opportunities for the region.

It is also a transformational time for the NSW visitor economy amid the recently announced Visitor Economy Strategy 2035, which emphasises the need for investment in aviation capacity to achieve the government's major growth ambitions and that strategy's expenditure goals. The strategy sets out a new roadmap to generate \$91 billion in visitor expenditure by 2035, with a target of 8.5 million new airline seats, as well as 40,000 more hotel rooms and an additional 150,000 jobs.



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HUNTER COMMUNITY RALLIES TO RAISE RECORD AMOUNT FOR CHILDREN'S RESEARCH

The Hunter community has once again shown its generosity for local research at the Hunter Children's Research Foundation's annual Hunter Construction Group's Lunch for the Kids, raising a record \$78,000 for children's health research.

Its second year running, guests contributed and together raised thousands more than the previous year, enabling the charity organisation to fund five research grants at their Annual Awards Night at HMRI on 30 October 2025.

Presented by naming rights partner Hunter Construction Group and held at Spicers Guesthouse in Pokolbin on Friday 19 September, the event was a relaxed afternoon of fine food, local wine and coming together for good.

The highlight of the day was a heartfelt on-stage conversation between Professor Matt Dunn, one of Australia's leading childhood cancer researchers based now at Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI) and a past HCRF grant recipient and television host and children's health advocate, Johanna Griggs.

The event also featured a live art experience by renowned Melbourne artist, Angi Dlapu who brought one family's dream to life through art before the piece was auctioned. A second live art piece was bid on by guests, with Johanna herself taking a personal art piece home from the event.

Funds raised will go directly to children's health research projects through the HCRF grants program.

HCRF Committee



TOP MARKS FOR PORT OF NEWCASTLE IN GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY RATING

Port of Newcastle has reaffirmed its position as a global leader in sustainability, scoring 100% in the coveted Global Real Estate Sustainability Benchmark (GRESB), while maintaining its 5-star rating for a fifth consecutive year.

The Port was also ranked first in the world for its management score, which recognises its approach to governance and how it manages Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) risks and opportunities. Port of Newcastle CEO, Craig Carmody said the result was a phenomenal achievement.

"To receive the highest GRESB score of 100 is a testament to the efforts of our Port of Newcastle team to embed ESG best practice processes across the business and to make sustainability a part of not just our culture, but the broader port supply chain through stakeholder collaboration," Mr Carmody said.

"Port of Newcastle has set ambitious targets and KPIs for decarbonisation, diversity and inclusion, and safety, and we have been making efforts to improve our internal systems and increase the transparency of our reporting. To go from a score of 40 in

our first GRESB assessment in 2019 to a score of 100 six years later demonstrates our commitment to ESG and to ensuring our business remains safe, efficient, and sustainable.

"We have made no secret of our diversification strategy, which we believe is key to developing the port of the future. Central to this are our three strategic priorities – a Clean Energy Precinct, Renewables Terminal and Deepwater Container Terminal – which together will deliver generational change, providing employment opportunities and driving economic growth for the Hunter region and the state.

"As a global trade gateway, the Port has also welcomed initial shipments of an expected 30,000 wind farm components, which will be the cornerstone of NSW's clean energy transformation over the next decade."

GRESB is an international sustainability benchmarking tool, providing quantitative insight into the ESG performance of major infrastructure assets.

A 5-star GRESB rating is the highest obtainable rating, which recognises industry leaders in sustainability and is reserved for the top 20% of all companies surveyed globally.

Port of Newcastle has a target for Net Zero emissions by 2040, as outlined in its ESG Strategy. The Port has also resolved to undertake GRESB benchmarking annually as a commitment to sustainability leadership within the ports sector.

\$68,299 RAISED AT BREAST CARE BREAKFAST

The PKF Sydney and Newcastle team has announced the success of its 19th annual Breast Care Breakfast (BCB), held on 16 October, raising \$68,299 in support of the Hunter Nurse Education Group (HNEG) and its network of specialist Breast Care nurses across the region.

With over 470 attendees gathering at NEX, the 2025 event marks 19 years of dedicated fundraising for those who care for others during their most vulnerable moments.

"To see our community come together like this, year after year, is truly moving," said Bob Bell, Managing Director at PKF Sydney and Newcastle.

"This breakfast began as a small initiative, and today it's become one of the most important dates on our calendar. We're so proud to be supporting the nurses who support our loved ones."

Breast Care nurses are a lifeline for patients navigating diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. The funds raised go directly toward funding specialised education and development opportunities for Breast Care nurses in the Hunter. Delivered by HNEG, these programs are offered free of charge to nurses, ensuring patients continue to receive the highest standard of care, close to home, for people right here in our community.

Highlights from the morning included:

- A powerful speech delivered by Terry Richards, sharing his personal breast cancer journey and the role the Hunter Breast Care nurses played in his care
- Over \$26,000 of raffle prizes were won by attendees, all donated by generous local and national people and businesses
- A sea of pink worn proudly, honouring loved ones and showing support for breast cancer awareness

While October is officially Breast Cancer Awareness Month, PKF's commitment to the cause continues year-round. Community members and businesses are encouraged to keep the momentum going by donating, hosting fundraising events, or learning more about the work of HNEG.

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*[National Listener Survey - conducted by McNair Yellow Squares - Greater Newcastle 2025 Survey Wave 1].

\$18.7 MILLION BOOST FOR BRAIN CANCER BREAKTHROUGH

A Newcastle-led research team, backed by national and international experts, is forging ahead in its mission to develop a life-saving treatment for the most aggressive and lethal of brain cancers – high grade gliomas (HGG), following the announcement of an \$18.7 million Australian Government grant.

The team, led by University of Newcastle Professor Matt Dun, of HMRI's Precision Medicine Research Program, will test a suite of new, next-generation therapies it has developed, including drugs designed to overcome the bloodbrain barrier. The aim is to reach clinical trials within five years, offering renewed hope to patients and families where none currently exists.

The grant is provided through the Frontier Health and Medical Research initiative, via the Australian Government's Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF). The Frontier initiative will provide \$700 million over 10 years to support research that delivers a 'moonshot' by creating a treatment for a currently serious and incurable health condition.

High grade gliomas (HGG) are one of the deadliest brain cancers, striking more than 2,000 Australians every year.

In children, the most common form of HGG is diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma (DIPG), a devastating diagnosis, with most children surviving less than 12 months, even with radiotherapy. In adults, glioblastoma accounts for 65 per cent of all brain cancer deaths and still has no effective treatment.

Professor Dun and his team have identified a critical gene that drives the growth and survival of HGGs.

Their research has shown that blocking this gene with new brain-penetrant drugs, especially when combined with radiotherapy and targeted therapy, can extend survival in preclinical models by more than 150%.

NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY REOPENS ITS DOORS FOR FIRST LOOK INSIDE EXPANDED BUILDING

At the end of September the City of Newcastle welcomed the community back into the Newcastle Art Gallery, unveiling the first new spaces completed as part of its landmark expansion project.

Visitors were treated to a taste of the Gallery's \$145 million collection alongside major First Nations commissions and acquisitions, which are on display across three of the new gallery spaces, entry foyer and soaring central atrium.

The celebrations began in the morning with an opening that championed the Gallery's First Nations First ethos and capped off with a high energy First Night Art Party on Laman Street as part of the New Annual festival.

City of Newcastle CEO Jeremy Bath said New Annual was the ideal time to give the community a preview of the reimagined Gallery.

The expansion project has more than doubled the size of the Gallery, delivering an additional 1,600 square meters of exhibition space.

A number of these new spaces have been named in honour of the community members and artists whose generous donations helped make the expansion possible, including Valerie and John Ryan, Margaret Olley, Robert and Lindy Henderson and Mary and Richard Owens AM.

Newcastle Art Gallery Director Lauretta Morton OAM said the expanded Gallery would be a permanent tribute to all those who had shown their support for the project over many years.

Valerie Ryan was a Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation member and former governor. She gifted the residue of her estate, with an estimated value of \$20 million, equally to the Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation and the Hunter Medical Research Institute.

Margaret Olley had a significant and long-standing connection to Newcastle and the Newcastle Art Gallery. Her legacy includes

48 works gifted to the Gallery during her life (often on her birthday) and a \$500,000 bequest for the expansion of the Gallery via the Margaret Olley Art Trust.

Former Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation President Robert Henderson and his wife Lindy are long-time supporters of the Gallery. In 2022, the Hendersons pledged to match the Margaret Olley Art Trust's gift toward the Gallery expansion.

Richard Owens, alongside his wife Mary, was a generous philanthropist and volunteer, pledging \$500,000 towards the transformation of the Gallery. Richard was pivotal in the establishment of the Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation and was Chairperson of the Foundation for some time.

The expansion project is supported by \$5 million from the Australian Government under the Regional Recovery Partnerships and \$5 million from the New South Wales Government under the Regional Recovery Package, as well as \$12 million from the Newcastle Art Gallery Foundation made possible through bequests, gifts and community fundraising over many years. A further \$1 million is currently being sought through the Foundation's public fundraising campaign.

The entire Gallery will be reopened in February next year, in conjunction with a major exhibition of works of art from the collection and the unveiling of the commission by internationally renowned artist Fayen d'Evie.

Newcastle Art Gallery reopens



CONSTRUCTION BEGINS ON THE HUNTER VALLEY'S FIRST NEW HIGH SCHOOL IN 25 YEARS

Construction has officially begun on a new public high school in Medowie, the first new high school to be built in the Hunter Valley in more than 25 years.

Medowie is the fastest growing suburb in the Port Stephens local government area, with the community's population expected to increase by more than 4,000 residents before 2040.

The new high school will feature 29 modern classrooms, specialist workshops and labs, a multipurpose hall, library, outdoor play areas and sport facilities. The school will welcome students on Day 1 Term 1 2027.

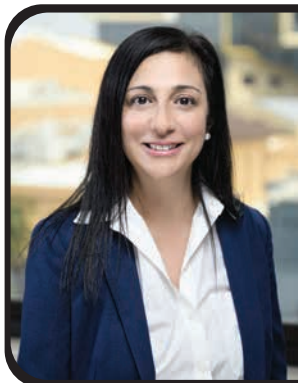
The NSW Government has invested heavily into education. Major education infrastructure projects underway or completed across the Hunter include the recently finished upgrades at Hunter River High School and Irawang High School, and upgrades to Newcastle High School, Gillieston Public School, and Thornton Public School. Planning is also underway for a new primary school and high school in Huntlee.

**HLB MANN JUDD**

HLB Mann Judd Newcastle has announced the appointment new partner **Alyce Stones**, strengthening its leadership team as the office transitions from Cutcher & Neale to full membership of the HLB Mann Judd Australasian Network. Alyce is a registered company auditor with 17 years of experience in audit and assurance services across mining, manufacturing, communications, construction, and the not-for-profit sector. Known for her analytical skills and hands-on approach, she is recognised for delivering insights that improve financial performance and strengthen internal systems.

**HUNTER WATER**

Hunter Water has appointed **Elizabeth Crouch** AM as Chair of its Board of Directors. Elizabeth brings extensive experience across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, with a distinguished career in governance, infrastructure and public policy. She currently chairs the boards of the Customer Owned Banking Association, the Sydney Children's Hospital Network, Hearing Australia, Ochre Health and Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese Ltd, and is the Emerita Deputy Chancellor of Macquarie University. She also serves on the boards of the University of Newcastle and the NSW Institute of Sport.

**HALL & WILCOX**

Hall & Wilcox has strengthened its statutory and workers compensation expertise, and added to its growing Newcastle office, with the appointment of partner **Rosie Petrolo**. Rosie is a highly experienced and well-regarded practitioner in the NSW workers compensation market, known for her strategic litigation expertise and her ability to deliver commercially focused outcomes for insurer clients. She has extensive experience managing complex claims involving catastrophic injuries, psychological harm, and multi-party disputes.

**LOVELLS GROUP**

Lovells Group, has announced the appointment of **Emeritus Professor Jacques W.M. Noordermeer** of the Netherlands to its engineering team. Professor Noordermeer is one of Europe's most respected polymer chemists, with more than 45 years of experience advising industry on advanced elastomers for the most demanding applications. He is an Officer in the Royal Dutch Order of Orange Nassau and in 2016 received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the TireTech Conference in Hannover, Germany, recognising his pioneering contributions to elastomer and tyre technology.

LET US KNOW ABOUT YOUR PEOPLE!

**HLB MANN JUDD**

HLB Mann Judd Newcastle has announced the appointment new partner **Jacob Medel**. Jacob is a registered company auditor with more than 12 years of experience in audit and assurance. He specialises in the not-for-profit, health, disability, and education sectors, and has led the development of audit methodology around the NDIS, Primary Health Networks, Government funded programs and schools. With expertise in IT audit methodology and contract compliance, Jacob brings both technical knowledge and practical insight to his work.

We would be pleased to receive information about your new appointments. Just email around 80 words on the employment plus a high resolution head shot to **editorial@HBRmag.com.au**

Submissions are **FREE** but subject to editorial control.



How to protect your small business from scams

Alexandria Baldwin
Newcastle Permanent

Whether it's fake invoices, fraudulent calls or malware attacks, cybercriminals are constantly finding new ways to steal money, data, and valuable business information.

Unlike larger corporations, small businesses often have fewer staff and resources to dedicate to fraud prevention. Scammers know this and they exploit it. Busy business owners can easily be caught off guard by a convincing email or a professional-looking invoice.

Common scams targeting small businesses

Access scams

Scammers pose as banks or trusted partners to trick you into revealing passwords or identifying details. Remember, your bank will never ask for login information or personal data via email or phone. If you're asked for this, you may be the target of a scam.

False billing scams

Fraudsters send invoices for directory listings, advertising, domain renewals or office supplies that were never ordered. They rely on busy staff paying these fake bills without verifying their authenticity.

Overpayment scams

In this scam, a business is tricked into refunding a scammer who claims to have sent too much money for an item you are selling.

Malware

Malicious software (malware) can be installed through unsafe links or attachments in emails or text messages. Once inside your system, it can track activity or access files. A related scam called ransomware demands payment to 'unlock' your computer or files.

Online shopping scams

Fake sellers or fraudulent websites pose as legitimate suppliers, luring businesses into paying for goods that never arrive.

Investment scams

These promise big payouts, quick money or guaranteed returns. Always be suspicious of any promise of a high return with little or no risk. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

How to protect your business

Scammers are becoming more sophisticated, but awareness and vigilance remain your strongest defence. Encourage a culture of caution in your workplace, where double-checking is second nature and online safety is part of everyday operations.

Educate your staff to look for signals or anything unusual, and verify credentials if they have any doubts of legitimacy. If you think a request is suspicious, independently check business details by doing a search online and/or calling them directly to confirm.

Keep your devices secure. Back up your data, regularly change your passwords and update your security software. Stay Smart Online is the Australian Government's online safety and security service, designed to help everyone understand the risks and the simple steps to take to protect personal and financial information online.

Contact your bank immediately if you feel you have been the victim of a scam, and report the scam to the ACCC.

Protecting your business doesn't have to be complex. By staying informed, questioning the unexpected, and keeping your systems secure, you can safeguard your small business from scammers.

This article is intended to provide general information of an educational nature only. Information in this article is current as at the date of publication. We do not recommend any third party products or services and we are not liable in relation to them. Any links to third party websites are for your information only and we do not endorse their content.



Alexandria Baldwin is a Regional Manager at Newcastle Permanent and is passionate about helping customers and communities thrive. She focuses on building strong teams who deliver genuine care and great service for individuals and small businesses across the Hunter, and making a positive difference in the communities we serve. Her goal is to create lasting relationships built on trust, understanding and exceptional service to be able to support our customers and their diverse needs.



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Focus Finance celebrates multiple national wins

Katie Thomas, Managing Director of Focus Finance, has officially been named Australia's Number 1 Broker by The Adviser and has now taken home the title of Australian Broker of the Year at the 2025 Australian Mortgage Awards. This recognition not only cements her status as a national leader in mortgage and finance but also highlights the growing influence of women at the top of the Australian finance industry.

This year's awards season has been a landmark moment for Focus Finance, with the firm and its team members receiving multiple accolades across key categories:

- Australian Broker of the Year – Katie Thomas
- Broker of the Year – Regional – Katie Thomas
- Young Gun of the Year – Maddison Brown
- Broker of the Year – Residential – Katie Thomas
- Broker of the Year – Specialist Lending – Katie Thomas
- Brokerage of the Year (6–20 Staff) – Focus Finance

Katie Thomas's commitment to mentoring and empowering others has been recognised through multiple award wins and nominations, including the Empowerment Award and Mentor of the Year.

"We have built the business to be team first," said Katie Thomas. "Empowering your team, elevating their worth — we all rise together. If you're sitting down having genuine, authentic human interaction, the ability to help each other succeed is phenomenal."

The success of Focus Finance is also reflected in the achievements of its rising stars:

- Maddison Brown – Winner, Young Gun of the Year
- Ashlee Sillay – Ranked 31st on the national Top 100 Brokers list

These recognitions highlight the depth of female talent within the business and the broader industry.



The Mutual Bank named Lender of the Year

The Mutual Bank has been recognised as a market leader at the WeMoney 2025 Financial Services Awards, taking home the prestigious title of Lender of the Year (Customer Owned Bank) - Home Loans, as well as a slew of other awards.

The Hunter-based bank also took out awards for Term Deposit Account of the Year (Customer Owned Bank), Outstanding Customer Service - Personal Loans, and Outstanding Customer Service - Car Loans. The Mutual Bank was also named a finalist for Best for First Home Buyers.

The Mutual Bank's CEO Mark Williams said these awards highlight The Mutual Bank's commitment to delivering exceptional value and service to its Members.

"As a customer-owned bank we reinvest profits back into better products and services for our Members, and provide stronger community support," he said.

"By understanding and supporting the unique needs of our Members, we aim to provide personalised banking solutions that help individuals, families and business feel secure".

These wins cement The Mutual Bank's position as a true leader in the market, according to Matthew Ikin, Executive General Manager WeMoney.

"Winning a pinnacle award in the industry is an incredible achievement, recognising The Mutual Bank as the preferred choice for Australians," he said.

"Throughout the last four years, WeMoney's audience has grown significantly, now reaching over 1.3 million downloads, with 93% in the Gen Z and Millennial demographic."



Inflation upturn stalls interest rate cuts

A higher than expected inflation figure for the September quarter has stalled the interest rate cuts by the Reserve Bank and increased the chance that the next interest rate move will be up instead of down.

According to the Australia Bureau of Statistics, underlying inflation for the September quarter was 1% and for the year to September was 3%, significantly higher than expectations of 2.7%. This is the first time in around 3 years there has been an increase in the inflation rate.

Earlier in the year, there was widespread expectations that the Reserve Bank would continue to reduce interest rates, however, this seems to be off the cards for at least the near future.

If inflation does not fall, there is an expectation that the Reserve Bank may increase rates at one of their next meetings.

It may be a delicate balancing act, however, with a recent increase in unemployment, although the labour market remains fairly tight by historical standards.

As always, when borrowing money businesses and consumers are advised to consider their ability to make repayments if interest rates do increase.

Judo Bank supporting the Hunter

With locations across the country, **Judo Bank's** Newcastle office has been proudly supporting the thriving region for over five years. Since opening its doors, the team has significantly grown with specialist bankers dedicated to delivering relationship-driven banking tailored to the needs of local SMEs, including a strong focus on Agribusiness.

As Australia's only challenger bank built for small and medium businesses (SMEs), **Judo Bank** is redefining business banking by putting relationships first. With fewer customers per banker, the team has more time to understand each business' goals and opportunities. This leads to delivering smarter judgment, faster decisions and stronger relationships centred around the customer.

Today, the Newcastle team are on the ground, working side-by-side with local businesses to provide access to capital essential to driving growth, navigating acquisitions, and unlocking new opportunities for innovation. Direct access to experienced decision-makers and deep industry insights means support is fast, informed, and tailored to each businesses unique goals. This approach is anchored in empowering business owners to move with confidence and seize new opportunities.

Tim Blakemore, Regional Director, says the milestone reflects Judo's purpose-built approach to SME banking.

"We're proud of the impact our Newcastle team has made to the community over the past five years," said Blakemore. "What sets Judo apart is our ability to back businesses in a truly unique way. With eight bankers now on the ground, we're deeply embedded in the local economy and able to make faster, more informed decisions. We take the time to understand each business's story, not just their balance sheet, and that's why more than 150 local businesses choose to bank with us."



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Celebrating 20 years of fabrication excellence

BJL Welding & Fabrication is a leading structural steel and metalwork company, specialising in a wide range of services tailored to the building industry and beyond. They streamline the entire process from initial consultation and site measurement to fabrication, painting, and final installation. Whether you're a homeowner needing a single post or a business requiring large-scale fabrication, BJL delivers high-quality, custom steel solutions.

The business celebrated 20 years in business on October 18 at Merewether Surfhouse in the company of family, team members and clients.

BJL Welding & Fabrication was founded in 2005 by Director Brad Lloyd, who began the business in the backyard of his parents' home, taking on small fabrication jobs with a clear vision for something greater. It quickly became apparent that steel fabrication and suburban living didn't mix, so Brad leased a small workshop to expand operations and pursue larger opportunities.

By 2007, growing demand led to a move into a larger facility in Redhead. Steady expansion continued, and by 2010, BJL welcomed its first tradesman—followed soon after by two more team members. Their commitment, skill, and mentorship have played a key role in shaping the next generation of tradespeople within the business.

In 2013, BJL welcomed their first office team member, Peta Lindsay, marking a major turning point in BJL's journey. No longer just a hands-on fabrication operation, BJL began investing in structured growth—introducing leadership and conflict resolution training, obtaining industry certifications, and working with a business coach to strengthen culture and processes.

From 2018 to 2020, like many Australian businesses, BJL faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty, restrictions, and supply chain disruptions tested their



Director Brad Lloyd and his Partner Casey Dunn, at Merewether Surfhouse last month, celebrating 20 years in business with his team.

resilience and flexibility. However, through clear communication, careful planning, and a commitment to keeping the team employed and supported, BJL adapted to a rapidly changing environment. Their leadership focused on retaining staff, adjusting workflows for safety and compliance, and maintaining strong client relationships even in the most difficult conditions. These years reinforced BJL's belief in the strength of their people and the importance of a supportive workplace culture.

From a \$600,000 turnover in 2013 to over \$5.4 million in 2025, the growth has been extraordinary. What began as a one-man operation is now a team of 20 skilled professionals based in a purpose-built facility in Beresfield. The business has taken on increasingly complex and large-scale projects, supported apprentices from all walks of life, and remained true to the values that define us: respect, integrity, and continuous improvement.

Director, Brad Lloyd said "At BJL, we don't just build steel structures—we build people, careers, and long-term partnerships with our clients. Our story is still unfolding, and we're proud of every chapter so far."



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Newcastle Talent Drives Innovation

Australian technology company S-Tech Cameras has been awarded a prestigious Australian Good Design Award for its Sentra 4K (M60) Survey Camera in the Product Design – Commercial and Industrial category. This accolade celebrates excellence in design and innovation and underscores the role of Australian talent in shaping world-class technology.

At the centre of this achievement is Glen Woollard, S-Tech's Product and Technology Manager, who grew up in Shortland. Glen's technical expertise—spanning avionics engineering, biomedical equipment, 3D printing and advanced survey technologies—was instrumental in creating the rugged, autonomous camera that delivers up to 60 hours of continuous 4K video recording via a high-capacity battery and weeks or more with the external hot swappable accessory pack.

Glen's journey with S-Tech began when Founder and Director Adam Marsland went searching for a technical strategic thinker to lead his product development team. Adam's vision for smarter traffic data solutions and Glen's engineering prowess have proven to be a winning combination, driving innovation from concept to reality.

Glen also actively mentors young tech enthusiasts in the region and keeps a close eye on emerging talent.

Industrial Gaskets & Sealants expands precision cutting capabilities with new Flow Mach 200C Waterjet System

Industrial Gaskets & Sealants has taken another major step forward in advanced manufacturing with the installation of a Flow Mach 200C Waterjet System, featuring a 5-axis Pivot Plus cutting head and Motojet 50 Intensifier 60,000psi pump.

Installed by Performatec Australia in June 2025, the new system represents a significant upgrade to the company's precision cutting capabilities.

It builds on the success of the Flow Mach 100, which has been a cornerstone of production at Industrial Gaskets & Sealants since 2019.

The addition of the Mach 200C enables both 2D and 3D cutting, with a 2D cutting area of 4000 x 2000mm and a 3D cutting area of 3050 x 1600 mm.

Its 5-axis Pivot Plus cutting head allows for up to 60 degrees of bevel cutting, expanding the company's ability to produce complex, high-accuracy components across a wide range of materials and industries.

Equipped with Flow's SmartMap height touchdown probe for automatic height control, the Mach 200C ensures consistent and precise results.

The system can cut materials up to 180 mm thick, using either water-only or water/garnet cutting methods, providing unmatched versatility.

Cutting capabilities Include:

- Sheet rubber
- Mild steel plate and shim
- Stainless steel plate and shim
- Brass, copper and aluminium
- Rubber/steel composite material
- Polyurethane and engineered plastics
- Laminated steel shim

Built on a large-format table with a compact gantry-style platform, the Mach 200C integrates the powerful FlowExpert Infinity software, delivering optimal toolpath control, streamlined programming, and superior accuracy.

Technical Specifications:

- Workpiece load capacity: 1465 kg/m²
- Linear positional accuracy: ±0.064 mm/m
- Repeatability: ±0.025 mm

"Our investment in the Mach 200C represents a major step forward for our business," said Joel Gardiner, Managing Director of Industrial Gaskets & Sealants.

"Since installing our first Flow Mach 100 in 2019, we've seen the benefits of high-performance waterjet technology. The new system allows us to deliver greater precision, flexibility, and speed — helping us meet growing customer demand across multiple industries."

With the installation of the Flow Mach 200C, Industrial Gaskets & Sealants continues to strengthen its position as a leader in gasket and sealing technology.

The company remains committed to investing in advanced manufacturing solutions that deliver exceptional quality, precision, and value to clients across Australia's industrial, mining, and engineering sectors.



- Motojet 50 Intensifier 60,000psi pump
- 2D Cutting area size 4000 x 2000mm
- 3D Cutting area size 3050 x 1600mm
- 5-axis Pivot Plus cutting head with 60 degree bevel cutting functionality
- Smartmap height touchdown probe for automatic height control
- Can cut materials up to 180mm thick
- Cutting capabilities include; Sheet Rubber; Mild Steel Plate & Shim; Stainless Steel Plate & Shim; Brass, Copper, Rubber/Steel composite material; Aluminium; Polyurethane, Engineered Plastics; Laminated Steel Shim
- Water only cutting and Water/Garnet cutting capabilities

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Larry Platt celebrates 40 years

Larry Platt, owner and Executive Chairman of Emergent Group (Engineering, Science & Technology) recently celebrated 40 years of influential business leadership.

Larry Platt is the founding director of Emergent Group (formerly The Advitech Group), a group of specialised engineering and technical sciences companies. The three companies that make up Emergent Group are Advitech, Novecom and Acubis.

Larry is a chemical engineer with a passion for science and technology and their application to solving problems for society. From his earliest days working at the Wollongong steel mill as a 16-year-old, and his subsequent 50+ years in the engineering profession, Larry has dedicated himself to learning and honing skills and developing his business, its people and his community.

Larry is an entrepreneur and a supporter of entrepreneurs. As a founding member of the Hunter Angels Group, Larry used his own funds to help fledgling businesses flourish.

The philosophy that has guided Larry is that innovation emerges from the foundations of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), in an environment of encouragement, collaboration and cross-disciplinary thinking.

An impactful product of this approach is the SentineX remote monitoring platform. SentineX was developed as a continuous environmental monitoring solution to help the mining industry meet strict environmental regulations.

During Larry's formative years working in the steel mills of Wollongong and Newcastle, he developed a passion for improving safety for workers. This passion drove the development of Advitech's groundbreaking Criteria software, which pioneered structured risk management. Its principles continue to be widely adopted to this day.

Larry was a foundation member of the Australian Institute of Dangerous Goods Consultants (AIDGC). The AIDGC is an independent industry body which aims to keep workplaces safe for workers and help businesses avoid financial losses, insurance problems and penalties.

Larry has held numerous leadership positions in the business community, including: Chairman of the Australian Industry Group's Manufacturing Innovation Cluster, Founding Director of HunterTech (2000-2003), board member of Hunter Manufacturing Awards Inc. (2006-2007), member of the Hunter Economic Development Corporation (HEDC) Manufacturing Task Force, and member of the City of Newcastle Strategy & Innovation Advisory Committee.

The University of Newcastle has recognised Larry as a significant community leader through several honours. As a member of the University Convocation Management Committee, Larry provided advice to the University Council on community and industry matters. Larry was also invited to advise the University on the development and evolution of engineering courses through his role on the Industry Advisory Committee for Chemical Engineering. The University of Newcastle also presented Larry with the 2015 Leonard Award for Innovation.

For four decades, Larry's business has delivered STEM solutions to industry locally, nationally and internationally, and he believes that the 'Golden age of Australia' is yet to come. He continues to advocate for local innovation and manufacturing.



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Varley Vehicles: Built in the Hunter, serving Australia

At Varley Group's Tomago facility, specialised fire, rescue and law enforcement vehicles are built every week, around fifteen on average. These customised vehicles are manufactured to support the frontline needs of emergency services across NSW and interstate. To produce so many vehicles, Varley Vehicles has a large workforce made up of experienced engineers and highly skilled tradespeople. That means every Varley vehicle is built with the skill and experience of our local workforce.

The team manufactures the full spectrum of community protection vehicles including advanced firefighting multipurpose pumpers, tankers, bulk water carriers, SES rescue vehicles and unimogs, as well as hazmat response vehicles, police pods, prisoner transport, and command vehicles.

Varley's continuous focus on innovation is also driving advancements in health mobility. In Brisbane, Varley Vehicles has delivered projects such as Heart of Australia's world's first battery-powered CT scanning truck 'HEART 5', which brings life-saving lung cancer screening to people living hundreds of kilometres away from hospital facilities. Other advanced health units manufactured by the team include mobile breast screening centres, pathology labs, vaccination and dental clinics, and Red Cross's mobile blood donation trucks.

"Whether it's fighting fires, rescuing people, or taking vital health services on the road, our vehicles all have one purpose, which is to make communities safer and stronger. That's what drives our teams across the Hunter, Sydney, Ballarat and Brisbane," shares Jeff Honniball, CEO of Varley Vehicles.

As a family-owned manufacturer for 139 years, Varley Group is one of Australia's oldest and most respected manufacturers, which continues to invest in its people, facilities, and technology to further strengthen our sovereign manufacturing capability.

HunterNet Future Leaders 10th Anniversary Gala Dinner & Awards

The HunterNet Future Leaders 10th Anniversary Gala Dinner & Awards brought together alumni, mentors, judges and member organisations to reflect on a decade of leadership, connection and collaboration.

The 2025 Winning Project Team, GWTW Consulting, collaborated with HunterNet Member Company Industrial Gaskets & Sealants under the mentorship of Jaimee Tobin from the Anglican Group and 2016 Alumni.

The GWTW Consulting team included Ambrosius Abner – Port Waratah Coal Services, Zoe Armitage – Hunter Water, Thomas Boyes – Reidlaw, Veronica Price – Port of Newcastle and Angus Reedy – Ampcontrol.

Other winners on the night included:

- Chairperson's Award 2025 – Rod Henderson. With a legacy of passion and advocacy for developing the Hunter's talent, Rod Henderson has been a driving force behind leadership growth in the region. Since 2018, Rod has championed the HunterNet Future Leaders Program – endorsing participants, fostering further learning through the University of Newcastle MBA, and encouraging alumni to give back through mentorship and committee roles.
- Future Leader of the Year 2025 – Kim Jordan, University of Newcastle. From the very first session, Kim Jordan brought these qualities to every moment of the 2025 program, growing from strength to strength.
- Future Leader Growth Award 2025 – Kym Munro, Port Waratah Coal Services. This year's Future Leader Growth Award celebrates a participant who embraced every



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Winning Team - GWTW Consulting

challenge, asked insightful questions, and continually evolved through self-awareness and feedback. From the first session to the confident leader we see today, Kym Munro has exemplified what it means to grow through the HunterNet Future Leaders journey.

Each year, HunterNet mentors play a pivotal role in guiding, challenging, and supporting our participants as they grow through the program. In 2025, three exceptional alumni returned to share their experience, insight, and leadership with the next generation: Jaimee Tobin -Alumni 2016, Senior Business Analyst, Newcastle Anglican; Sam Noakes -Alumni 2019, HR Business Partner, Port Waratah Coal Services; and Ellie Langford -Alumni 2017, Lead Consultant, FiveSeven Consulting.

Thanks were also given to the judging panel representing the best of leadership across the Hunter: Suzie Leask - Partner, Hall & Wilcox | Vice Chair, HunterNet Cooperative; Jammes Ritchie -

Managing Director, Bellrock Advisory; Graeme Vennell - Chair, HunterNet Cooperative; Steph Black - Managing Director, COAL Services Australia; and Ivan Waterfield -CEO, HunterNet Cooperative.

Each year, the HunterNet Future Leaders Program connects emerging leaders with real industry challenges. In 2025, the project teams had the privilege of working alongside three outstanding organisations: Milltech Martin Bright – championing innovation in manufacturing and fabrication; LMATS – leading the way in testing, inspection and advanced technology solutions; and Industrial Gaskets & Sealants – delivering engineered sealing solutions that keep industries moving forward.

A special congratulations also to Industrial Gaskets & Sealants, this year's Winning Member Company, recognised for their collaboration, openness, and commitment to innovation throughout the project process.

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From start-ups and apprentices to global exporters and century-old innovators, the 2025 Hunter Manufacturing Awards (HMA) have celebrated a sector on the rise, one that's building the industries, technologies, and jobs of Australia's future.

Now in its 21st year, the awards drew a record number of entries, more than 50% up on last year, showcasing the ingenuity, craftsmanship, and courage that continue to define manufacturing across the Hunter, Central Coast, Mid North Coast, and New England.

The Awards event also attracted a record number of attendees, with over 460 leaders and business representatives gathering at NEX in Newcastle on 30 October.

HMA Chair Jacqui Daley said the night was about recognising the strength, innovation, and resilience of a sector that is vital to Australia's economic future.

"Manufacturing in the Hunter is more diverse, more advanced, and more connected to the world than ever before," Ms Daley said. Our 2025 Manufacturer of the Year winners, Brain Industries and Agrana Fruit Australia, both have export at the heart of their success. They're taking the Hunter to the world and proving that regional manufacturers can compete, and succeed, on the international stage."

"We're seeing extraordinary things being made right here, from Elecbrakes revolutionising towing technology through Australian-made automation, to Supacell turning everyday recyclables into sustainable insulation, and from Tomago Aluminium's digital transformation to Design Anthology's advanced med-tech design."

"Manufacturing isn't sitting quietly behind the scenes anymore. It's the backbone of our economy, the engine of regional jobs, and the platform that will power Australia's next great leaps in clean energy, defence capability, health, and technology."



Minister for the Hunter Yasmin Catley congratulated all winners and finalists, acknowledging their contribution to the region's proud industrial legacy and future growth.

"Tonight's celebration is the best of the Hunter on display, our ingenuity, our craftsmanship, and our courage to reimagine what's possible," Minister Catley said.

"This year's Hunter Manufacturing Awards theme, Forging Our Future, could not be more fitting. It speaks to our proud industrial heritage and our bold journey into advanced, sustainable, and inclusive manufacturing."

Winners from the 2025 HMAs will be fast-tracked as national finalists in the 2026 Australian Manufacturing Awards.

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MANUFACTURER OF THE YEAR – 50 EMPLOYEES OR MORE

Sponsor: Downer Group

Winner: AGRANA Fruit Australia

AGRANA Fruit Australia produces fruit preparations for the yoghurt, ice cream and bakery industries, supplying many of Australia's most loved brands.

The company's commitment to innovation, quality, and sustainable manufacturing continues to strengthen its role as a trusted partner in the food industry.

Since 1989, the AGRANA group has had a presence in Australia with manufacturing and corporate offices located in Central Mangrove.

Hunter Manufacturing Awards judges were extremely impressed by AGRANA Fruit Australia, praising them for their high-quality production, strong export performance, innovation, investment in people, and application of best-practice production systems including ISO certification and lean principles.

They were truly worthy of the accolade of Manufacturer of the Year – 50 or More Employees.

AGRANA Fruit Australia General Manager Saffron Cosh spoke proudly of her team.

"This award truly belongs to all of us at AGRANA. It recognises the dedication, passion, and teamwork that make what we do possible. I'm so proud of how our people come together every day to deliver excellence and this win is a reflection of that spirit," said Saffron.

Looking ahead, AGRANA aims to build on this success by continuing to invest in its people, technology, and ideas that shape the future of food manufacturing in Australia.

"This award truly belongs to all of us at AGRANA. It recognises the dedication, passion, and teamwork that make what we do possible. I'm so proud of how our people come together every day to deliver excellence and this win is a reflection of that spirit."
Saffron Cosh - General Manager



AGRANA Fruit Australia

Proud winners of
Manufacturer of the Year
50 Employees or more

A recognition that celebrates excellence across all areas of the business, including innovation, sustainability, sales performance, and people development.



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MANUFACTURER OF THE YEAR – LESS THAN 50 EMPLOYEES

Sponsor: Auditco

Winner: Brain Industries International

Brain Industries was founded by Gillian Summers and Tony Lobb to solve materials handling and safety issues.

Brain stone dusters, conveyor pulleys, pulley lagging, other conveyor products, oil and fluid diffusers (hydraguard), Fines Separation Units, polyurethane products and other industrial equipment products make difficult jobs easier and keep workforces safe.

Brain Industries can customise products to suit customer needs. They are experts in manufacturing Polyurethane industrial products.

Customers can upgrade their pumps for even more vacuum, speed and vertical lift.

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The Hunter Manufacturing Awards judges were very impressed by **Brain Industries'** application, praising them for developing an outstanding manufacturing business with a strong export focus, supported by strong customer relationships and an engaged workforce.

Gillian Summers was ecstatic with the win, saying "What a night 2025 Hunter Manufacturing Awards! Hats off to the HMA Board and staff for elevating our manufacturing to a national stage. Their message is crystal clear – the Hunter and Central Coast Regions are powerhouses of Australia!"



I JUST WANNA GO TO WORK AND MAKE THINGS

Tony Lobb

Managing Director

Brain Industries (International)

"With every new dawn that breaks, let the realisation of being alive fill your heart with awe..."

Roman Emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote that nearly two thousand years ago — and it still fires up business people like me today.

We in manufacturing know that feeling. The early starts. The smell of metal and paint before sunrise. The thrill of making something real — something that works, sells, and sometimes even surprises you. The rush when a customer says, "That's brilliant — we didn't think it could be done." We're addicted to that moment. We wouldn't do anything else.

That's why local champions like Varley Group, Whiteleys, Omnia Wheel, Agrana Fruit, Banlaw, and all the other Hunter Manufacturing Awards contenders inspire me daily. They prove this region punches far above its weight. Brain Industries is genuinely humbled to be counted among them. And hats off to the HMA crew for continuing to spruik the quality of what we make right here in the Hunter.

I've been lucky enough to lead an Australian manufacturer with 1,500 employees working on national defence contracts — and now one with fewer than 50 people focused on mining and exports. The scale is different. The challenges? Pretty much identical.

- Get orders in the door and quality products out the door — on time and built to last.
- Keep inventing, protecting your IP, and chasing new markets.
- Make a profit (yes, that word!) or you won't keep the lights on.
- Find good people and keep them — not easy in today's regulatory maze.
- Stay up to date with equipment and tech while staring cash flow reality in the eye.

- And above all, pay your suppliers — they're your oxygen.

But lately, there's a worrying undertone in Aussie manufacturing. My mates at ChatGPT (yes, I ask the robots) tell me insolvencies are up and closures are higher than we've seen in years. One estimate puts it at more than 1,400 manufacturers gone since 2022–23. That's not just numbers — that's experience, ideas, and capability disappearing.

So what's the fix? Part of it's simple: give Australian contracts to Australian builders. With a bias. Yes, I said it. A bias.

If Government awards a \$100 million train contract offshore because it's cheaper, we get trains that often need reworking to meet our standards — at extra cost. But if that same contract went to local builders for, say, \$200 million, what do we gain? Skills. Jobs. Taxes. Payroll. Superannuation. Fuel excise. Real value that circulates through the economy instead of vanishing overseas. Run the pub test — we'd probably double our money keeping it here.

The Federal Government is now talking up a "Back Australia" campaign — our "next making revolution." Sounds great. But before the slogans and the banners, let's fix the basics:

- Award big contracts locally.
- Create an employment environment that helps, not hinders, manufacturers.
- Deliver affordable industrial energy.
- Encourage investment.
- Champion exports.

Ask Tomago Aluminium — they'll tell you what difference the right settings can make.

As for me? I just "wanna" go to work and make things. Because making things is what keeps this country moving — and it's still the most satisfying job in the world.

HMA

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HALL OF FAME

Sponsor: Civmec

Winner: Varley Group

A legacy of innovation nearly 140 years in the making was honoured, with **Varley Group** inducted into the Hunter Manufacturing Awards Hall of Fame for its contribution to the region's industrial and manufacturing landscape.

Founded in 1886, Varley is one of the Hunter's oldest and most respected companies, a major regional employer, skills developer, and national leader across defence, emergency services, marine, health, cyber and mining sectors.

The board-appointed induction recognises Varley's ability to continually evolve, diversify and innovate while maintaining its headquarters and heart firmly in the Hunter.

HMA Chair Jacqui Daley said Varley's recognition reflected the company's enduring impact and its role in shaping both the region's history and its future.

"Varley symbolises everything that's great about manufacturing in this region, ingenuity, adaptability, and pride in building things that matter," Ms Daley said.

"This is a business that has been operating through the 1800s, 1900s and now the 2000s - they've helped define what it means to make things in the Hunter, creating local jobs, developing skilled tradespeople, and delivering world-class capability across industries that are essential to Australia's future."

"From emergency response vehicles and naval systems to advanced defence, cyber and energy, Varley continues to prove that a company proudly based in the Hunter can lead on the national and global stage."

Varley's continued investment in apprenticeships, veterans' employment, and STEM education was also commended,



including partnerships with local schools, TAFE NSW and the University of Newcastle that support the next generation of manufacturing talent.

Still proudly headquartered in Newcastle after nearly 140 years, Varley employs more than 1,200 people across 12 facilities and supports hundreds of local suppliers. The company's influence extends well beyond contracts and projects, it represents the ingenuity, loyalty and future focus that define manufacturing in the Hunter.

The 2025 Hall of Fame induction celebrates Varley's enduring impact on the Hunter economy and its continued leadership in forging Australia's manufacturing future.



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OUTSTANDING START-UP

Sponsor: OMNIA

Winner: Australian Electric Vehicle Specialists

Australian Electric Vehicle Specialists provide tailored electric drive solutions and modifications for commercial fleets, classic cars, and modern 4x4s. A notable achievement was building the world's first all-electric brand-new Toyota LandCruiser, delivering three times the power at a quarter of the running cost.

Judges highlighted their comprehensive EV solution, strong team growth, diverse projects, and clear scaling plans, praising their focus on fleet emissions, classic car preservation, and cost savings, alongside a culture of collaboration and talent development.



EXCELLENCE IN MARKETING

Sponsor: Brand Chemistry

Winner: Classic Blinds & Shutters

Founded in 2004, **Classic Blinds and Shutters** specialises in a variety of window coverings, including plantation shutters, roller blinds, and awnings. They offer high-quality, Australian-made products designed to enhance both the aesthetics and functionality.

A recent development has been SleepMax which delivers, 100% blackout with zero light leakage.

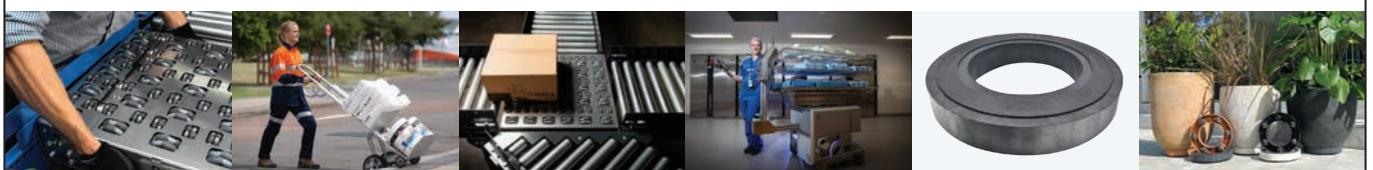
The judges commented on the positive customer testimonials, new reseller interest, and strengthened supplier partnerships demonstrate how Classic Blinds successfully created a new niche while reinforcing its reputation as an industry innovator.



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APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR

Sponsor: Westrac

Winner: Nicole Clifton – Regal Rexnord and HunterNet Career Connections

Now in her fourth year, **Nicole Clifton** is completing her Certificate III in Engineering – Mechanical Trade alongside completing her Certificate IV in Engineering (Fluid Power) with HunterNet Career Connections and host company Regal Rexnord.

Judges praised Nicole for her tremendous personal and professional growth, highlighting her strong technical expertise and the way she fosters a productive, challenging and harmonious work environment.



DIVERSITY IN MANUFACTURING

Sponsor: Ampcontrol

Winner: Morgan Engineering

For over 45 years **Morgan Engineering** has been delivering reliable and quality services to the mining and earthmoving industries. Specialising in engineering and CAD drafting, large capacity CNC machining, on-site machining and heavy fabrication, the team are at the forefront of innovation and modern machining techniques.

Judges praised **Morgan Engineering** for its strong Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) outcomes, leadership-driven initiatives, and positive impact on workforce culture, community engagement, and innovation.



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EXCELLENCE IN SUSTAINABLE OPERATIONS

Sponsor: AGL

Winner: Downer Rail & Transit Systems

Downer has over 155 years' rail experience providing end to end, innovative transport solutions. With a major presence in the Hunter, they are a leading provider of rail and transit systems in Australia, offering turnkey solutions for complex projects and spanning every project phase, from design and manufacture to through-life-support, condition monitoring and data analytics, fleet maintenance, operations and comprehensive overhaul of assets.

The judges commented that Downer's submission demonstrates a scalable, circular, and sustainable approach to rail maintenance with real-world impact.



EXCELLENCE IN EXPORT & GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAINS

Sponsor: Hedweld

Winner: Banlaw

Banlaw delivers connected and synergised Flow Logistics infrastructure, Resource Tracking technologies, and Safe Filling hardware products globally. As Pioneers of Unified Fluid Management, the Banlaw team can help improve efficiency and enhance your environmental and safety performance in every aspect of managing fuels, lubricants, and high-value chemicals.

Judges highlighted Banlaw's clear market strategy, innovative solutions, and practical approach to overcoming export challenges from regulatory compliance to logistics, cultural differences, and digital marketing.





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RIISING STAR

Sponsor: Whiteley Corporation
Winner: Brandon Lane – Elecbreaks

Brandon Lane is an Electronic Product Design Engineer at Elecbreaks, the leading choice for high-quality, proven electric brake controllers in Australia.

Designed for convenience and control, Elecbreaks electric brake controllers require no in-car modifications. They provide an excellent solution for towing caravans and horse floats to boat trailers and more.

Judges praised his technical capability, initiative, and calm under pressure... qualities that already mark him as a future leader in advanced manufacturing.



COLLABORATION PARTNERSHIP AWARD

Sponsor: Hunter MLA
Winner: SupaCell (iQRenew & 4 Seasons Industries)

SupaCell is a powerful example of sustainability creating a high-performing solution. **iQRenew** collects processed soft plastics, paper and cardboard - materials first placed in local household yellow bins - and 4 Season Industries transforms them into a world-first cellulose insulation innovation.

Judges described it as “a standout,” noting the clear governance, accountability, and commercialisation strategy established from the outset. They praised both partners for taking the plunge to share ideas, commit funding, and build a business model that turns innovation into tangible impact.



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EXCELLENCE IN INNOVATION

Sponsor: TAFE NSW
Winner: Design Anthology

Design Anthology specialises in product design, product development and manufacturing for corporates, SMEs and entrepreneurs.

The award-winning product design studio has a team of passionate and experienced industrial design and product development specialists who have successfully transformed clients' ideas into innovative and commercially viable products since 2006. This has included various products for the aeronautic, sporting equipment, industrial equipment, medical device, consumer electronic, homeware, advertising, point of purchase, transport and commercial interiors.

In the most popular category this year, with more finalists than ever in HMA history, **Design Anthology** stood out for their clear, disciplined, and truly innovative approach.

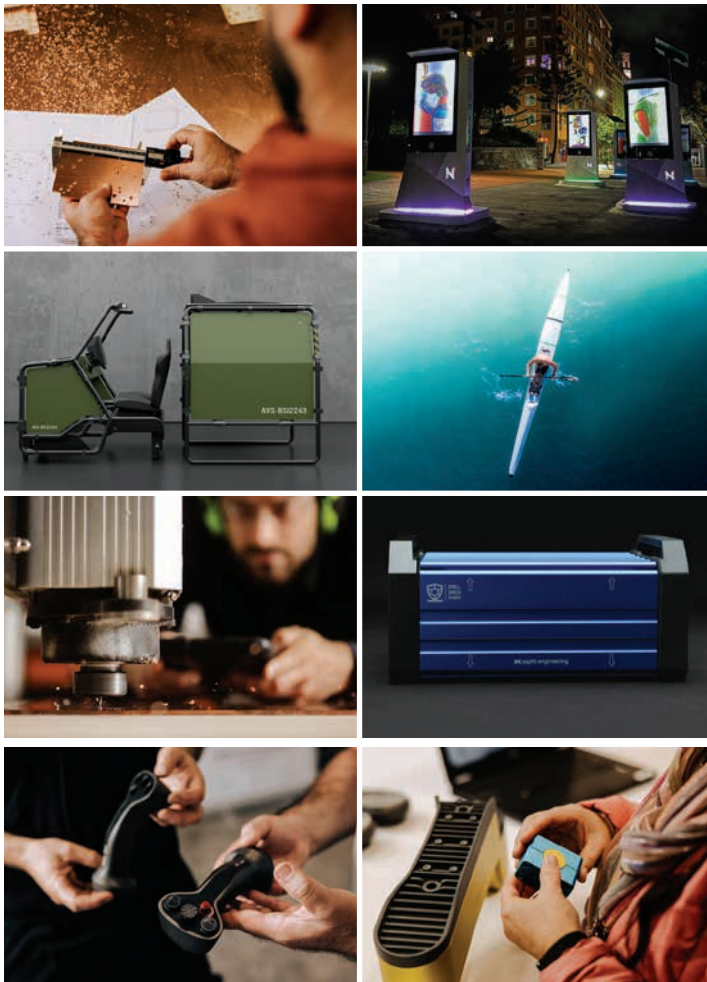


EXCELLENCE IN MANUFACTURING CAPABILITY

Sponsor: KPMG
Winner: Elecbrakes

Designed for convenience and control, Elecbrakes electric brake controllers require no in-car modifications. They provide an excellent solution for towing caravans and horse floats to boat trailers and more.

In their decision to award Elecbrakes the Excellence in Manufacturing Capability award, the judges praised the structured execution, staff engagement, and measurable gains in cost, quality, and capacity — identifying Elecbrakes as a leader in disciplined, data-driven improvement.



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EXCELLENCE IN PRODUCT DESIGN

Sponsor: Varley

Winner: SafeGauge – Push Rod and MultiTool Pro

SafeGauge wireless sensors boost safety and efficiency while reducing downtime and labour hours in heavy/plant industries including mining, construction, forestry, agriculture, and oil and gas.

Today, with sales spanning over 15 countries and supported by a global distribution network, the company continues to champion safer working practices in heavy industries worldwide.

Judges praised **Safe Gauge** for putting people first, noting that the Push Rod is innovative, intuitive, and enhances efficiency and accuracy in heavy machinery maintenance, all while keeping technicians safe in hazardous environments.



EXCELLENCE IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Sponsor: Biscit

Winner: Jaegersoft (in partnership with Tomago Aluminium)

Jaegersoft is a software consultancy specialising in digital transformation and custom software development. They focus on creating innovative software solutions for various industries, including mining, manufacturing, and construction.

Operating 24 hours a day since 1983, Tomago Aluminium is Australia's largest aluminium smelter.

Judges praised the outstanding digital transformation, noting significant operational, safety, and financial improvements, strong employee co-design, customer engagement, and a modular, future-ready architecture that sets a new benchmark for the industry.



HUNTER MANUFACTURING AWARDS 2025

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EXCELLENCE IN MANUFACTURING LEADERSHIP

Sponsor: Bekaert

Winner: Tony Lobb – Brain Industries International

With Gillian Summers, Tony Lobb founded Brain Industries to solve materials handling and safety issues.

Brain stone dusters, conveyor pulleys, pulley lagging, other conveyor products, oil and fluid diffusers (hydraguard), Fines Separation Units, polyurethane products and other industrial equipment products make difficult jobs easier and keep workforces safe. They are experts in manufacturing Polyurethane industrial products.

Customers can upgrade their pumps for even more vacuum, speed and vertical lift. Judges praised Tony's commitment and highlighted his focus on developing future manufacturing leaders. Known for his hands-on style, he works alongside his team on the shop floor, inspiring and empowering employees to solve problems, innovate, and achieve outstanding results.



Congratulations to all winners and finalists at the **2025 Hunter Manufacturing Awards** and all Hunter manufacturers generally for supporting the future of our region.





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HUNTER MANUFACTURING AWARDS

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CONGRATULATIONS

TO ALL THE WINNERS & FINALISTS OF THE
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**Hall of Fame
Inductee**
VARLEY GROUP

Manufacturer of the Year
(Less than 50 employees)
BRAIN INDUSTRIES

Manufacturer of the Year
(50 or more employees)
AGRANA FRUIT AUSTRALIA

Apprentice of the Year: Nicole Clifton – Regal Rexnord and HunterNet Career Connections

Outstanding Start-Up: Australian Electric Vehicle Specialists

Excellence in Export & Global Supply Chains: Banlaw

Rising Star: Brandon Lane - Elecbrakes

Excellence in Marketing: Classic Blinds & Shutters

Excellence in Product Design: SafeGauge – Push Rod and MultiTool Pro

Excellence in Innovation: Design Anthology

Excellence in Manufacturing Capability: Elecbrakes

Collaboration Partnership Award: SupaCell (iQRenew & 4 Seasons Industries)

Diversity in Manufacturing: Morgan Engineering

Excellence in Sustainability: Downer Rail & Transit Systems

Digital Transformation: Jaegersoft (in partnership with Tomago Aluminium)

Excellence in Manufacturing Leadership: Tony Lobb – Brain Industries International

Winners from the 2025 HMAs will be fast-tracked as national finalists in the 2026 Australian Manufacturing Awards.

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★ A pharmacist walks into his shop and sees a man leaning against the wall.

"What's wrong with him?" he asks his assistant.

"He came in for cough syrup," the assistant explains. "But I couldn't find any, so I sold him some laxatives instead."

"What?! You can't treat a cough with laxatives!" the chemist says, horrified.

The assistant replies, "Of course you can... look at him — he's way too scared to cough!"

★ A Japanese, an Englishman, a Frenchman, an Israeli, a Spaniard, and a Dutchman are all on a Zoom call.

The six men are all on a Zoom call with their boss. Their boss asks, "Hi, can you see me?" and they respond:

"Hai"

"Yes"

"Oui"

"Ken"

"Si"

"Ja"

★ In a job interview, an interviewee was asked, "Do you perform well under pressure?"

He said, "No, but I do a pretty decent Bohemian Rhapsody..."

★ Son: "Dad, today I watched someone do 50 pushups, do you think you could do that?"

Dad: "Of course, son. Don't want to brag, but I could probably watch someone do 100 push-ups."

★ A businessman arrives at a hotel and asks the bellhop, "What's the biggest tip you've gotten, son?"

"\$10, sir," the bellhop replied.

The man gives the bellhop \$20 and says, "Next time you get asked that, you tell them it was \$20 and that I gave it to you."

"Thanks!" the bellhop replies.

"Who gave you the \$10?" the man asks.

"You did last month," the bellhop replies.

★ A woman walks into a store and asks, "Can I have a watch for my husband, please?"

Salesperson: "Sorry, we don't barter."

★ A vulture is about to board a plane but is stopped by an airline worker.

"Sir, you can't bring 10 kg of putrid animal flesh onto the flight. You'll have to leave it behind."

"Oh, that?" said the vulture. "That's just my carrion."

★ Have you heard, recent studies have shown you shouldn't brush your teeth with your left hand...

A toothbrush is better.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot"

- Michael Altschuler



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