Farmer became a leader in his field

FROM humble beginnings, Jeffrey Arney became a statesman of South Australia’s agricultural industry.

He was born the oldest of three boys to farmers Tom and Ellen (nee Rowe) Arney. The family initially had land at Calomba – 65km north of Adelaide, near Dublin – before moving to Strathalbyn.

Jeff was educated in the town and at Prince Alfred College, in Adelaide. On gaining his leaving certificate, Jeff went back to the family farm as well as developing a successful pig enterprise.

He bought a property at Finniss, 70km south of Adelaide, where he and wife Josie (nee Smith) moved when they married in 1970. As well as general farming, he continued the lucrative pig operation.

In 1976, they moved to a 400 hectare property at Bordertown and set up an irrigation system for crop and pasture production. This became a very diverse and profitable farming business.

Established as an innovative and successful farmer, Jeff turned his attention to the wider issues of Australia’s grain industries.

He had been active in the Agricultural Bureau of SA – where farmers meet to discuss farming systems and development – and took part in local crop competitions.

That led to him becoming a member of SA’s Advisory Board of Agriculture, including two years as its chairman. The group advised the Agriculture Minister on industry issues, a task in which Jeff excelled.

He helped develop a secondary school agricultural curriculum and advised on everything from daylight saving, rural readjustment, transport, and major agricultural research sites at Northfield and Waite.

But it was his effort at this time on the “Right Rotations” program that would have an enormous impact.

He and project manager Jon Lamb, The Advertiser’s gardening writer, with the support of the Agriculture Department and the Grains Research and Development Corporation, developed a self-help cropping program dealing with plant diseases and weeds and their impact on crop yields.

The improvements over a short period were astounding and still form the basis of sound farming practices today.

Jeff was an active member of the South Australian Farmers Federation, including a period on the executive and on the wheat quality advisory committee which made decisions on variety releases on behalf of all growers.

He had a particular interest in soft wheats and formed – and became chairman of – the Soft Wheat Growers Association, based in the South-East.

On the national front, he served as a member of the southern panel of GRDC.

In the 1990s, he was president of the Grains Council of Australia – the peak national grain industry body. He played a pivotal role in the negotiations which resulted in the Australian Wheat Board being privatised.

Jeff was in the thick of things at the time of the greatest deregulation moves in the grain industry’s history and brought a clear and balanced grower view to the discussions which were often surrounded more by emotion than by facts.

He served on national and international cereal research boards and brought these perspectives home to play in SA.

His farm was always available for research and demonstrations. Jeff typified that generation of farmers who were not only good operators at home, but recognised the need for improvements in the broader industry.

Jeff’s sense of fairness and service to others was probably, at least in part, a spin-off from his long family association with the Uniting Church. Often referred to as “Mr Agriculture”, he was a great family man who enjoyed tennis, cricket and football.

He died after a long battle with cancer.