

# WHY SOME TOWNS THRIVE WHILE OTHERS FADE AWAY

Words Rosanne Barrett  
Photograph Sally Batt



**There was something about that speck on the map known as Nundle that kept luring Megan Trousdale back.**

It was beautiful, yes: the road snakes through the Peel Valley around the base of the Great Dividing Range with vistas at every turn; the timber fence around the oval; the double-storey goldrush pub on the main street. But there are lots of pretty towns. There was something else about Nundle, New South Wales. The small town 400 kilometres north of Sydney had an energy that made Megan feel like this was somewhere she could belong.

The Sydney-based journalist had seen a lot of country towns. Almost all of Megan's childhood holidays were spent in the regions (her dad was a teacher during term-time and a mad fisherman in the holidays); she went to an agricultural high school in Sydney and then worked as a rural journalist for a number of publications, taking her all over the countryside.

'I'd always come back from those trips wanting what those people had. I wanted their sense of community. I wanted to be the person who was helping organise festivals and markets. I wanted that life,' she says

For a work assignment, she was sent to Nundle to write a story about regional renewal. Several buildings in the main street of the town had been bought and restored. A seed was planted in Megan's heart, and later she returned to do more research with a photographer, then again with her partner Duncan. The seed sprouted.

Megan and Duncan started talking about making a permanent shift. What if they could turn their backs on their big-city rents and commutes and, instead, make a life in Nundle?

Twenty-one years later, Megan is part of a thriving community that is defying the slow population decline of Australia's rural areas.

Nundle is a handful of streets, 45 minutes' drive from Tamworth. By rights it should be following

the trajectory set by other rural and remote towns of a steady drip-feed of people to bigger regional centres and capital cities.

But Nundle's sense of self, its community spirit and its strategic vision has seen it add 50 more people than it has lost over the last 15 years—not bad for a town now numbered at 307 townsfolk.

A Regional Australia Institute report this year, *The Big Movers*, found that more young people are moving between country centres than to the cities. The report used the most recent census data to show that an extra 65,000 people moved out of cities, compared to the number who moved into the big smoke. Yet the number of people living in remote and very remote centres has declined, and has done so for decades.

While seven in 10 Australians live in cities, one in 10 live in the small towns of fewer than 10,000 people that form the backbone of regional Australia. Why do some of these towns buck the trend and thrive, while others fade away? >

**Giota please place this caption  
Right Megan Trousdale.  
Following page The former  
council chambers at Tenterfield.**



‘When the leaders seek control over what happens, they are almost inevitably conservative and not progressive. For them it is almost always “my way or the highway”. So good people leave.’

#### WHY SOME TOWNS THRIVE

As the world has globalised and urbanised, demographers and social researchers have searched for the answer to that question.

What they have found is that it comes down to the people: the people in the town who either welcome the newcomers or shun them; the people who engage with new ideas or shut them down; the community that gives it a go or gives in.

Organisational psychologist Dr Ian Plowman investigated this as one of the authors of a key report into innovation in Queensland towns, back in 2003.

‘It’s about the fundamental behaviour of collectives,’ he says. ‘The findings are universal. I’ve had people from the wheat belt in Canada contact me and say, “Were you over here?” And I’ve also had people in Tanzania in Africa [contact me].’

He found towns thrived when they were open to different people, when they had more doers than leaders, when they were committed

but not conservative and when they embraced outside ideas and resources.

Important factors stood out across the most innovative towns. They were willing to embrace creativity, they had decentralised decision-making systems and had sufficient resources, education and knowledge across the community to make things happen.

#### ‘WELCOME THE WEIRDOS’

When artist Luke Scibberas first visited Hill End in central New South Wales, he recognised it was something special.

A well-established haven for the arts, there was also a vibrancy and care across the population that extended to newcomers.

‘In every sense they have supported each other,’ he explains. ‘It’s the sense of care people have for their environment, their history and for each other, but also the built environment.’

‘It makes you feel as though you aren’t fighting for your life, but thriving.’

Hill End knows about boom and bust. The home of Australia’s biggest-ever gold nugget, in the 1870s its population hit more than 7000. By the time of Federation, it was down to 1000. Now it is just over 100, but in the past few years its numbers have held steady.

The town has been a magnet for creatives for decades. Regular visitors have included Russell Drysdale—who depicted the great Australian pastime in *The Cricketers* with Hill End scenery—John Olsen, Donald Friend and Brett and Wendy Whiteley.

Since 1999, the tradition of the artists’ visit has been formalised in the Hill End Artists In Residence Program, operated by the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery. A total of 364 residencies have so far been awarded to artists across many disciplines.

Luke has lived in the town for two decades. ‘I have to live in a country town because I find the intimacy of the community feeds my imagination,’ he says.

‘There is a secret code in country towns that either acknowledges the contribution of individuals or doesn’t. It is a mystery to me how it does, or doesn’t, work. I’ve been to country towns where you can really feel this gloomy sense of people living their very insular life and not wanting to participate or contribute to other people’s lives.’

‘That gives me a dreadful sinking feeling.’

When creative people are accepted in communities it is often a sign there is openness to ideas, and probably great innovation underway, and this can lead to greater social and economic benefits. Dr Plowman puts it plainly: ‘Creative ideas come from people who are different,’ he says. ‘Welcome the weirdos.’

#### LEADERS ARE A LIABILITY

Back in Nundle, some of the residents are getting together to figure out future plans. This is one of about 26 community groups in the tiny town.

‘There are a lot of options for finding your place and having a voice,’ Megan says. ‘And you get to know people.’

The local businesses—including Megan’s Odgers & McClelland Exchange Stores that sells household necessities from a 120-year-old building—pool their resources to market the town and its regular festivals.

They recognise they have set their own path for Nundle. They don’t compete directly with nearby ‘big city’ of Tamworth, but offer a complementary experience for tourists along the way. And they do it together, with all the decisions and the funding pooled. It’s this sort of collective decision-making that rings true to those who have studied successful groups.

In Ian Plowman’s 2003 report, centres that fared best had the lowest number of self-reported leaders. Towns that fared worst had the highest.

‘Leaders are a liability,’ he says; ‘it’s completely counterintuitive.’

‘When the leaders seek control over what happens, they are almost inevitably conservative and not progressive. For them it is almost always “my way or the highway”. So good people leave.’

He says, from an evolutionary perspective, respected elders were critical to maintaining the norms, values and safety of the group.

‘This has kept society safe for 90,000 years,’ he explains. ‘It is predicated, however, on the wisdom of the elders being acquired in the very same environment in which they wish to impart it 30 or 40 years later, and that is no longer the case.’

#### A FRESH SET OF EYES

It starts with an idea. It could be a new use for that crumbling old building, or a different idea for that land at the back where nothing seems to grow. Or maybe a new set of eyes that can see opportunity where others only see stagnation.

Steve Haslam saw potential in the scrubby back block of a >

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farm for sale in 2001. A 400 acre parcel of never-cleared land between Bald Rock National Park and Girraween National Park in northern New South Wales, it presented Steve with an ideal opportunity to create a nature reserve for an animal he had become fixated with finding: the quoll.

When he met his partner Bianca Wicks, she not only supported his love of quolls, but also saw beauty in the ageing town of Tenterfield.

When the crumbling 1884-built council chambers came up for sale, they snapped it up to start the laborious process of converting it into luxury accommodation.

‘Everyone thought we were mad,’ he says. ‘They just thought, who are these crazy people who are spending way too much time and effort on this building?’

The Tenterfield council and others have been nothing but supportive throughout the whole process. Other small businesses catering to city-based high-end tourists are also flourishing in

town, Steve says, creating a critical groundswell for visitors seeking a retreat.

Now they’re finalising their renovation and restoration of the local church, converting it into an event space for classes and a farmers’ market.

‘It is fabulous and it has worked,’ he says.

The accommodation business is humming along nicely and the quoll reserve continues to offer a refuge for the spot-tailed quoll, with Steve continuing to work on new fencing and protection systems in the reserve.

#### IT CAN WORK

Famed country cook and media personality Maggie Beer took a leap into the unknown when she and her husband Colin moved to the Barossa Valley in South Australia from Sydney in 1973.

The region was dotted with wineries, but there was none of the food culture that exists today.

After travelling to Scotland for Colin to complete a Churchill

Fellowship in pheasant farming, they returned to the Valley with the idea of establishing their now iconic restaurant, which has expanded into the Farm Shop.

‘We opened the farm, but it was off the rockiest road,’ she says, laughing. ‘It was the antithesis of position, position, position. It was in the middle of nowhere.’

But the new restaurant became a magnet. ‘Everyone was so excited,’ she says.

‘I felt I belonged from the moment I arrived, which is interesting, because it’s not always that way. We bought a property and Colin was very good at talking to the neighbours—and I was pregnant. It was just great.’

She says there was an incredible, ongoing sense of community across the Barossa that resulted in a sense of collaboration.

It was the community that had built the local hospital, the local hotel and the local co-op grocer.

And she says that community continues on, with a shared purpose and collaboration.



Momentum in the food and wine industry, propelled by successes such as the popular Maggie Beer brand, have continued into strong population growth and prosperity.

‘What’s so exciting about the Barossa is that it’s beautiful and there is a real sense of community and there is a real sense of hospitality,’ Maggie says.

‘The wineries and the businesses are in opposition, if you like, but they are collaborative—they agree that the Barossa is the most important thing and everyone doing well is the most important thing.’

So it continues to thrive. The sons and daughters of the previous vigneron are returning with new ideas to create new businesses and opportunities.

Maggie says that regional communities are ‘a lovely thing’.

‘You know, people look out for you,’ she says. ‘It doesn’t mean that you don’t have to work at it. If you want to be part of a community, you’ve got to become part of the community.’

#### THOSE THAT THRIVE

At the end of Dr Ian Plowman’s research, he visited the small Queensland towns in his study to present his findings.

In one town the dominant, conservative leaders invited the community to the council chambers to hear the outsider speak. There wasn’t room for everyone so the high school students had to stand.

Dr Plowman highlighted his findings. Those towns that were thriving took the chance to welcome the weirdos. They had more people involved than leaders who took control. They kept at it. They viewed outsiders as an opportunity. They allowed young people to leave, then welcomed them back with their new ideas. And they sought out and accepted outside professional help. ‘Be alive to new possibilities,’ he urged his audience.

Towns that thrive are towns that can cultivate a sense of hope and opportunity. They can plant seeds in people’s hearts. These are the

towns that whisper, ‘There is a place for you here. You can contribute. You can be seen. Dreams are possible.’

On reflecting why Nundle is thriving, Megan says it’s about attitude. The towns that thrive ‘don’t sit back and wait for another larger organisation to do things for them. If you want change, you make it. You don’t wait or complain that someone isn’t doing it for you.’

This attitude, like a self-fulfilling prophesy, leads to actual empowerment, change and innovation. This is the energy Megan felt when she visited Nundle all those years ago.

The fertile ground where seeds sprout does not belong to specific main streets or particularly pretty buildings or only to villages nestled in winding valleys. The fertility of the ground is linked to the attitudes of the people who live in the town.

‘All you need to do is look around and dig in and join in,’ Megan says. ■

# DESTINATION PENTLAND

Words Jayne Cuddihy Photographs Sally Batt

**'Blink and you'll miss it.'** A tiny sentence that might describe any number of tiny towns across Australia.

Pentland is a gem hidden in plain sight. With a population of 250, it straddles the highway halfway between Hughenden and Charters Towers in North West Queensland. For many travellers, Pentland is a highway marker, a measure of how far they are from somewhere else. But it is a small town with much to offer. It is a community that is reinventing.

'People called us stupid to our faces,' says local artist and coffee-shop owner Louise Dean. 'They told us, "You'll never get local support and you'll never sell art in Pentland".'

The Deans' Wookatook café and gallery has become a destination. Visitors will travel hundreds of kilometres for the gallery experience paired with good coffee and homemade food in the converted railway house.

'We've had astounding support; so much, we need to start slowing the business down!' says Louise. 'We came here for a quiet life—to paint and write poetry—and we're run off our feet!'

Louise and her husband Graham moved from Winton five years ago. Pentland was attractive because of the landscape and the atmosphere and the fact there were no flies, unlike in the western Queensland outback, where the air can be thick with them.

'We're chuffed we've designed a place where people want to be. People plan to come here. Even if they come in a hurry for takeaway,

by the time you bring them their food, they are happy to sit and enjoy it on the verandah. There's a real atmosphere here.'

Further down a little back street live Jet and Katie Jones, a young couple with three school-aged children. Jet grew up locally, working as a stockman all over the north. While on the rodeo circuit in Canada he met Katie, a journalist with a background in fine arts. Fast forward a few years and now they sip tea barefoot in the yard, quietly discussing details of their third children's book. Jet pens the poetry and Katie illustrates.

For them, telling stories of the Australian bush is a responsibility.

'When Katie first came to Australia, she couldn't get over the perception of the bush in the cities. We want to bring the romanticism back.' Jet is the quintessential Queensland cowboy: blue eyes, big hat, rough hands. But he has his own barriers to break.

'The whole idea of performance—be it song or poetry—has been lost in the bush. There's a foolish perception that it's not really macho, but if you look back at history a lot of poetry was written by stockmen. Banjo Paterson hunted buffalo, was in the Boer War, and was a terrific horseman,' he says.

At his kitchen table in Pentland, Jet writes lyrics for the likes of Golden Guitar winner Dean Perrett, between writing poems for his books and working on the land.

The Joneses have been based in Pentland for the last five years, with Katie continuing her drawing and conducting art workshops in

the community. She recently curated an art exhibition, 'We are Pentland', in nearby Charters Towers, featuring 15 local artists.

'I was literally hanging pieces on the wall and people were telling me about more artists in the area who I didn't even know. I couldn't believe it!'

Throughout the township are bright reminders of local talent in murals, public mosaics, decorated houses and fences and quilting displays. The arts community is helping Pentland to thrive. And long-time local, Robyn Muller, has been leading the charge.

'It started in the early nineties with Ray Rumbold, a retired art teacher who would take a lesson by the side of the creek where he lived. We had weekly gatherings of around 20 people. It was a wonderful community.'

Robyn says Pentland, like many small towns, has a transient population and, as arts and regional funding slowed, so did their community. Their local gallery downsized and the population ducked below 200 a decade ago, but currently there is a number of young families, boosting the school and giving new energy to the township.

What was once a railway town is now showing that an artistic movement can keep communities vibrant. The call to action has come through the likes of the Wookatook Gallery.

'The isolation of where we live actually serves to bring people together and encourages everyone to pursue what they love,' says Robyn. ■

**Opposite page, clockwise from top left** Louise Dean; the landscape is an artist's dream; a Pentland personality; arts and crafts for sale; good coffee and homemade food on the verandah at Wookatook; Jet and Katie Jones; people come from miles around to call in and say hello; a mural decorates the pool shed.

