

What is holding Portland back?



Portland is a beautiful old town with so much to offer, so why is its population growth going backwards? Image: [Annesley House Accommodation](#).

OPINION

One of the many joys of working on *Bluestone* is that we get to meet so many fascinating people who live in interesting places – and **Portland** is one of our favourite destinations.

As you will see by some of the profiles in this edition, Portland has more than its share of highly creative, hard-working and community minded souls who bring something very special to a town of less than 11,000 people.

The arts community – for its size – is nothing short of extraordinary and includes people such as sculptor and printmaker [Carmel Wallace](#), visual artist **Tony Ashby**, textile artist **Trevor Smith**, and realist painter **Brett Jarrett** who, between them, produce works of international calibre, and they are just the tip of the iceberg (paintbrush?).

The **Julia Street Creative Space**, in the middle of town, is [a](#)

[hub for a range of artists and crafters](#) who use this wonderful space that grew from an influx of arts funding in the 1980s and 90s and, like all artistic spaces, brings a vitality and purpose to the community that goes beyond the practical.



The Pickled Pelican, run by Katy Sullivan, is one of several funky cafes that have sprung up in Portland in the past 10 years.

Portland also has some funky cafes that would not be out of place in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy – [Lido Larder](#), [Pickled Pelican](#) and the quirky [Tea-Tree Gallery Cafe](#) among them – plus one of the loveliest bookshops you will find in South-West Victoria ([The Little Bookshop](#)), together with more than 200 intact historic buildings that reflect its standing as the oldest town in Victoria.

Great art, good food, a lovely bookshop, historic buildings...but wait, there's more: a spectacular coastline.

If Portland was within 100km of Melbourne, most of us could never afford to live there. Its sweeping bay is on par with Port Fairy's highly prized East Beach, whales come to visit, as do nesting gannets, and the town is only 20 minutes from one of the most spectacular parts of the Victorian coastline around Cape Bridgewater and Discovery Bay.

So, given all of these natural and community assets, why aren't people flocking to live in Portland?



Joe Logan, from [luciandjoe](http://luciandjoe.com), is just one of the many creative souls who live in Portland and utilise the Julia Street Creative Space.

Since the 1990s, Portland's population has actually gone backwards. In 1991, it had a population of 10,115 which, a decade later, had dipped to 9566.

The latest census (in 2011) puts the population at 10,700, which means the number of people living in the town has not doubled even in 50 years (in 1961, it had 6041 people).

This is troublesome, if not downright worrying, for the long-term future of Portland. The question is, what can be done to turn things around?

The tyranny of distance is one critical factor and being more than three hours from Melbourne makes it hard to woo even retirees, especially when the only public transport to Melbourne is via a bus to and from Warrnambool, where the train line starts and finishes.

Indeed the Portland-Melbourne V-Line service is an indication of just how poorly serviced the South-West is when it comes to public transport.

If someone in Portland wants to be in Melbourne by 9am, they have to catch a bus that leaves at 3.55am for a bleary-eyed journey that takes five hours, assuming the train arrives in Melbourne on time, which it often doesn't. It takes less time to fly from Melbourne to New Zealand.

At the very least, express services and faster trains would help. Unfortunately, South-West Victoria hasn't been a priority for State rail funding compared to Ballarat, Bendigo and Pakenham, where a cool \$40 million will be spent in the next few years to improve Wi-Fi coverage for passengers.



Inside the Julia Street Creative Space which provides an artistic heart to Portland's CBD. Image: [Julia Street Creative Space](#).

The [Committee for Portland](#), which was established in 2008, has spent many hours mapping out what needs to be done to ensure a prosperous future for Portland and while there is not enough space to go into all of its ideas here, one prominent theme is [building a new economy around renewable energy](#).

As [one committee document put it](#), "the big kicker" for this whole region is being able to develop alternative energy resources to the coal-fired power stations of Latrobe Valley, because if there is one thing the South-West does well, it is wind (and water).

Unfortunately, however, the momentum for such projects has taken a significant hit since the Coalition Government announced it was [reviewing the whole renewable energy target](#)

(a boring term, but essentially it provided the carrot for new energy investments).

Nobody is prepared to consider investing millions in new energy if the rules are all about to be changed.

Portland has the right ideas, and some smart, energetic thinkers prepared to drive them, but its overall progress appears to be a case of one step forward, two back. God forbid what would happen if Alcoa (one of its biggest employers) decided to pull up stumps, as it did with Port Henry earlier this year.

The recent arrival of the cruise ships is an indication of how Portland can promote itself as a lovely place to visit: the bigger challenge is encouraging people to live there.



Lido Larder staff Casey Anson (left) and Breanna Jones represent a changing Portland from that of a decade ago, but where does the town go next?



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Charming bookshop starts new chapter



Megan Langdon first dreamt of running her own bookshop 30 years ago and now operates the gorgeous The Little Bookshop, in Portland.

[box] Unfortunately The Little Bookshop closed in late July 2014. We wish Megan well for whatever she does next – she deserves every success.[/box]

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] B
[/dropcap]outique bookshops are making a comeback and they don't come any cuter than the charming **The Little Bookshop** in Portland.

Anybody who loves books (and we know that because you are reading *Bluestone*, that this includes you), will find that their heart slows and they breathe a bit more deeply when they walk into the quiet, stylish haven that **Megan Langdon** has created in the historic town.

To be accurate, we should say *re-created*, because The Little Bookshop is in its second incarnation.

The original bookshop started three years ago in Percy St, which is one block away from its present Bentick St location, but the high overheads that came from being in the main street of Portland eventually proved too much and, earlier this year, Megan made the tough decision to close.

“It was such a huge, emotional decision,” Megan said.

“I got my son, Matthew, to announce it on my Facebook page for me, because he looked after all that side of things, and then I got to work on closing it down,” she said.

There was only one hitch: Megan’s supporters, customers and book fans from around the South-West were not having a bar of it. They responded to the Facebook post by the hundreds, saying that Megan couldn’t possibly close such a lovely shop that had made books into something special again.

“It sent me on an emotional rollercoaster, to be honest, because having made the very hard decision to close, I had to question all over again whether it was the right decision,” Megan said.



Megan stood at the crossroads earlier this year, having decided to close – then relocate – her bookshop: “I knew that I hadn’t finished being a bookseller.”

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] A [dropcap]s fate would have it, one of Megan’s friends, **Milly Cameron**, had a small shop available right on the waterfront that she had been using as a pop-up gallery to exhibit work by her sisters-in-law, **Pat Cameron** and **Anne Langdon**. Megan was invited to take on the lease for her bookshop and to keep the gallery going.

If only it were that simple.

In the interim, Megan had also been offered several jobs, based on her previous career in adult education, and had to choose between the stability and regular income of a teaching position...or still running her own little bookshop.

“Every time I thought about it, the books kept winning. I knew

that I hadn't finished being a bookseller," she said.



Beautiful antique French items are also for sale, reflecting Megan's love of Paris that she visited for her 50th birthday.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] T
[/dropcap]he Little Bookshop was a 30-year-dream in the making for Megan, who has devoured books since growing up as a child in Ballarat. She remembers moving from Ballarat to Melbourne as a 17-year-old and being so deeply lonely that it was only books that saved her.

She also remembers walking into a bookshop in Echuca more than three decades ago – “The Tangled Garden, I think it was called” – and being completely enchanted by the surroundings. It was then Megan decided that, one day, she would run her own bookshop.

Being a single parent, however, made it almost impossible for Megan to pursue her dream until many years later when, armed with her superannuation, she moved to Portland from Geelong after visiting it several times to see her son, Ben, who is a school teacher.



And then there are the books: wrapped to take home in paper and brown string.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] I keeping with her dream, Megan's bookshop sells only quality fiction and specialises in promoting Australian authors. She also sells a select range of beautiful French antique items, including French linen, that reflects her love of Paris, which she visited for her 50th birthday.

This specialisation means that Megan works in with Portland's other booksellers – there are five in total – who all have their own areas of expertise.

"We send customers to each other, because we all do things a

little differently," she said.

[box] You can find The Little Bookshop at 51 Bentick St, Portland. Ph: (03) 5523 1440. Visit The Little Bookshop [Facebook page here](#). [/box]

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A cafe that feels like coming home



Owner of the Tea-Tree Gallery and Cafe, Belinda White, who has created a quirky, memorable space in the heart of Portland.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] T
[/dropcap]here are not too many cafes in the main street of a town that have a huge front lawn and a century-old tree in the garden, but Portland is home to one such place.

And home is a perfect way to describe **The Tea-Tree Gallery Cafe** that is smack bang in the middle of Percy St, because that is exactly how the cafe looks and feels.

The single-storey stone building was built around 1870 as the Manse for the adjacent Uniting Church and even though it has not been used as a family home for many years, it still has its most of its original layout, including former bedrooms and a non-commercial kitchen.

The garden is also expansive and dominated by a stunning

Spanish cork oak tree that was probably planted as an acorn by early settlers.



Feels like home: the former Manse has been converted into a series of cafe rooms, each with their own character.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] C
[/dropcap]afe owner **Belinda White** made a conscious decision when she first rented the space five years ago to make the most of its homely appeal and turn it into an asset rather than a liability.

“So many cafes these days look exactly the same, feel exactly the same and all serve the same sort of food,” she says.

“We want people to come here and have a different experience, to feel the character of the place and to know that is something they won’t find anywhere else.”

Belinda, who is a dental nurse who detoured into hospitality, has created a quirky, memorable space that is packed with art,

collectables and the smells of home cooking – everything she bakes comes straight out of the oven rather than a bain marie.

“I have tried to create a space in which I would feel comfortable and that includes the smells coming from the kitchen, be it soup, or cakes or the aromas from a roast. It makes people feel at home – I call it natural aromatherapy,” she says with a laugh.



Artist Tony Ashby (this work is entitled *Breakfast*) is a regular exhibitor at the cafe, that prides itself on promoting local artists.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] V
[dropcap]isual art is also a critical part of the equation and Belinda, who is an artist herself, offers wall space to any local artist who is keen for the exposure.

“When I opened five years ago, nobody else was displaying art in cafes in Portland and that has since changed, which is a wonderful thing, because it is bringing art to a whole new audience in a non-pretentious way,” she explains.

Belinda likes to call it “accidental art appreciation”, where people enjoying lunch or a coffee notice the name of the artist whose work is displayed on the wall above their heads. And because they see the art hanging in a home environment, they can envisage it in their own home and are more likely to buy it, she says.

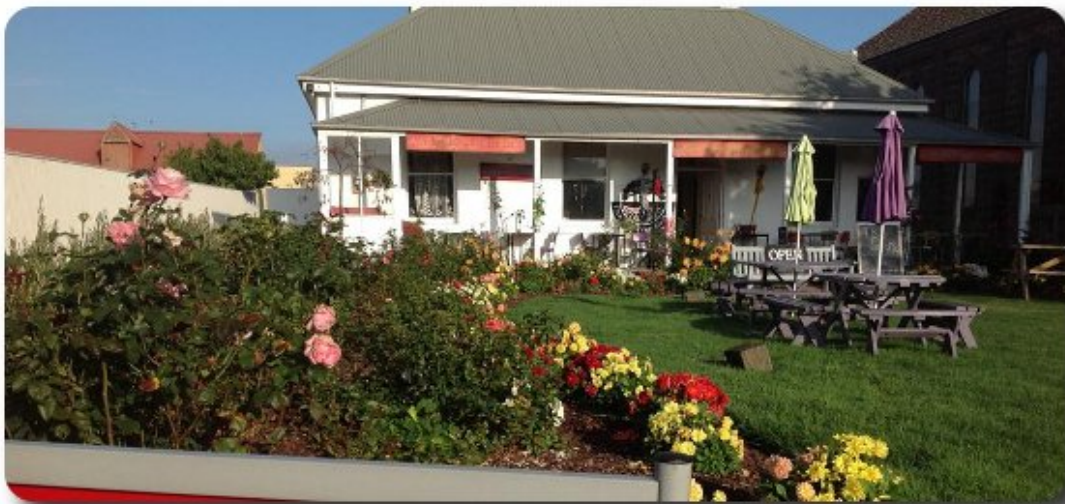
“We have sold a lot of art since we first opened...and I am happy to take a piece off the wall and walk it into a another room so they can see what it might look like in their own house,” she says.

Established artists **Tony Ashby** and **Brett Jarrett** are regular exhibitors, but Belinda is just as happy to support emerging and amateur artists.

“As long as the work is not violent or pornographic, you can do anything you want...it is about inclusion. We have had an 81-year-old exhibiting and we are about to have a three-year-old, who asked his mother if he could have a little show for his birthday.”

No wonder the cafe is such a hit with tourists, in particular, who have crammed the visitor’s book with positive comments about it being like nothing they have encountered before.

“I like to think that we are bringing back the art of hospitality. True hospitality is hard work, but I want to make the idea of going out for coffee, or lunch, to be special again, like it used to be,” Belinda says.



The expansive front lawn and gardens set the Tea-Tree Gallery and Cafe apart.

[box type="bio"] **The Tea-Tree Gallery and Cafe is at 59 Percy St, Portland. Ph: (03) 5523 7376. Find them on [Facebook here](#) or visit the website [here](#).** [/box]

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From a cupcake copper to a farmer's wife



Within the space of about a fortnight, Jo O'Keefe went from being a police officer in Portland to running her own cafe in Port Fairy, The Farmer's Wife Harvest Cafe.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] A [dropcap]t the risk of using a bad pun, a new alleyway café in the heart of Port Fairy is quite arresting – not least because it is run by a former police officer.

The Farmer's Wife Harvest Cafe, tucked at the end of a gorgeous bluestone and rubble walled lane off Sackville St, is the latest venture for local **Jo O'Keefe** who has had what can only be described as a varied career.

Until last November, Jo was Senior Constable O'Keefe based at the Portland police station as part of a 10-year career with the thin blue line.

Prior to joining the force, however, she had spent most of her life in hospitality, including working in kitchens while studying – and completing – a Fine Art degree at Deakin University in Warrnambool in the early 1990s.

“Everyone used to call me the Cupcake Copper because I was better known for my scones and cupcakes that I would bring into work, than for any actual policing,” Jo laughs.

“I have always had a background in hospitality though and, since I was 18, worked in Lorne, Apollo Bay, Warrnambool and up at the snow fields.”



An earlier life in hospitality has seen Jo turn full circle and live her dream of opening her own place.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] A [dropcap]fter the birth of her son, Tex, in 2000, Jo decided to scratch an itch that she had harboured since she was 12 years old, after one of the police horses visited her school in Melbourne.

"That horse, 'Gendarme', had me completely hooked and I was determined to join the force one day...I finally did, just before I turned 40," Jo explains.

"I am not sure why, but I thought it might also be better for me as a single Mum, which I was at the time, but I didn't factor in the night shifts," she laughs.

As a result, Tex was "raised by the village" of Port Fairy with various friends chipping in to help when Jo moved there in 2006.

It has made Tex a well-adjusted kid, who now helps out making smoothies and juices in the café during school holidays, says Jo.



Some of the tasty treats on offer: the brownies sold by the tray-full during the peak summer season.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] F
[/dropcap]our years ago, life took another turn when Jo married local farmer **Scott Moore** – hence the inspiration for the name of her café.

“I had been thinking about getting out of the force and I always wanted to run my own café, then this place came up and I jumped at it,” Jo says.

“I finished up work in November and, two weeks later, opened up the café in December.”

The café, which offers simple healthy lunches, coffees, cakes, fresh juices and a range of gluten-free products, hit the ground running and Jo found herself making 5.30am starts to keep on top of the summer rush.

“I knew it was going to be full on for those first couple of months, but it was great fun,” she says.

Part of the café's appeal is that it is tucked well away from the main street and provides a safe place for kids who are kept entertained by the plastic farm animals that are provided by Jo and can be hidden into the nooks and crannies of the sandstone wall.

"I am not sure if we have found them all again yet," she smiles.



Some of the local patrons that help to keep the kids happy...

[box] The Farmer's Wife Harvest Cafe is at 47a Sackville St, Port Fairy, and is open 9am-3pm seven days. You can find it on Facebook [here](#). [/box]



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Has food ever felt this good?



These felt lobsters are among Tara Davies' range of "foods" that are being snapped up.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] W
[/dropcap]hen **Tara Davies** began stitching and sewing items to sell at her first market, she didn't expect some of her best customers to be five year olds.

Yet it is Tara's range of "felt food" that has since been flying off her market stall like hot cakes or perhaps, more specifically, felt cup cakes, or felt gingerbread men ...

Each piece of felt food is hand made by Tara, right down to hand stuffing each individual yolk of the fried eggs, and her stall can sometimes look more like a grocery stand than a purveyor of crafts.

The kids and their parents, it seems, can't get enough of the fake fruit, steak, vegetables, seafood and pasta that might be inedible, but feels a lot better than plastic and is far more cuddly. More mature folk have also been known to snap up a lobster or a slice of watermelon just because they can't resist touching them.

Tara, from Portland, comes from a family who have always enjoyed making things and her grandmother, in particular, loved painting, drawing and crocheting.

But like many women who have moved into the craft market scene, Tara started sewing a range of items just for fun and decided to sell a few online as **Sewww Pretty Handcrafted Gifts and Homewares** before trying out her own stall in the middle of last year.

"The response and feedback at the markets has been just amazing and it has gone in ways that I never, ever expected," she said.



Tara Davies is reviving some of the crafts of yesteryear, like scrappy mats made from recycled fabrics.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] A side from the felt food, Tara's hand-sewn heat packs and her version of the "scrappy mats" that were once so popular in the 40s and 50s have proven to be winners.

The scrappy mats are made from recycled fabrics such as denim, felts or silks that are cut into strips and hand-knotted onto a backing mat. A small mat can involve up to 6000 individual pieces of material and take 10 days to complete, while the larger mats use up to 10,000 pieces: that means tying 10,000 knots.

"They are very time consuming, but luckily I find it relaxing and I can work on it in front of the TV," Tara laughed.

The scrappy mats are also a direct link back to the crafts her grandmother did as a younger woman, when women would tear up old towels to make a "new" bathmat: who ever said up-cycling was a new concept?



Zero cholesterol and pure fun: the hand-stuffed and sewn fried eggs.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] W
[/dropcap]hile Tara has been delighted with how well her crafts have been received, she now suffers from a common complaint among her peers and that is finding the time – and space – to keep up with demand.

“My craft room is getting overloaded and I have already moved the sewing machine into the lounge room,” she said with a laugh.

Fortunately Tara’s boss – Sobey Services, where she has worked as office manager for the past 10 years – is understanding when it comes to occasionally needing flexible hours to prepare for a market.

“It never feels like there is enough time – if only we didn’t have to sleep!”



A heat pack or a hoot pack?

[box] Tara appears at various markets around the south-west region and you can find her on [Facebook here](#). [/box]



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