

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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