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 Acccommodation.

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, 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).

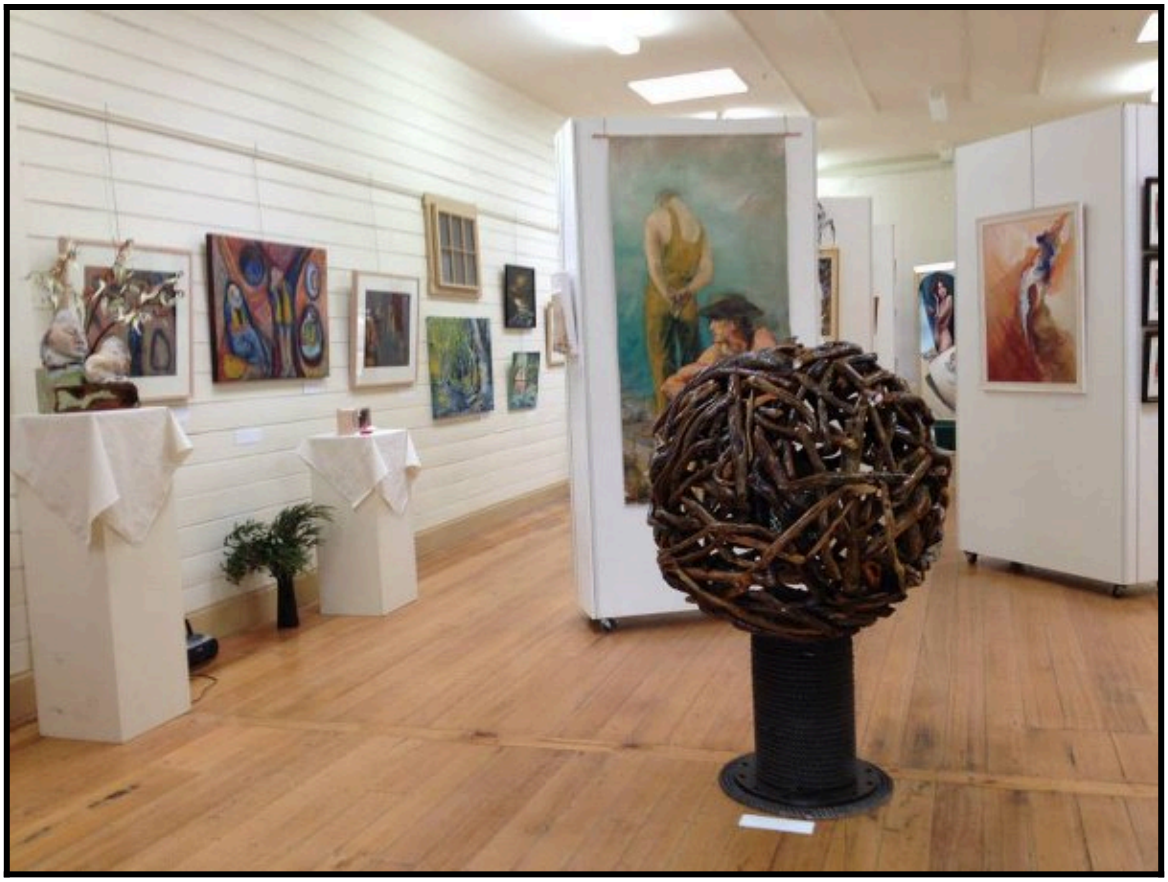
This is troublesome, if not downright worrying, for the long-term future of Portland. The question is, what can be done to turn things around?

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?

You might also enjoy…

We still have jumps racing? Can’t get over it.

Having a year of your life back

David Jones Jr on the future of the FJ site

The heartache of saying goodbye

Losing sleep over a load of old rubbish

Close Flagstaff Hill, save Fletcher Jones