MY TOWN

Winton

Outback towns don't get much more Australian than Winton, the birthplace of *Waltzing Matilda* and one-time headquarters of Qantas. As the company celebrates 100 years, **Susan Horsburgh** goes back to the beginning and meets the town's 2020 community. Photography by Debbie Scott.



FESTIVAL AND EVENTS OFFICER

Chloe Stockham

"We've been in Winton for four generations. My dad worked for the council for twentysomething years as a road worker and I was one, too, for more than four years, until I was seven months pregnant with my first child. I was a roller driver and the only female. All the men were either related to me or friends of the family so I was really looked after – I was a bit of a princess out there.

I also worked behind the bar at the North Gregory, which is where they say Banjo Paterson first performed *Waltzing Matilda*. It's a beautiful Art Deco-style pub and they have music shows during Winton's Way Out West Fest in April.

There's always something happening in Winton; we had six major festivals and events last year and we're getting more of the younger generation coming for things like the film festival in June/July. People will travel from the coast for that outback adventure. I work for the council and love organising things. I'm probably a bit OCD sometimes; if it's not done my way, it's probably not the right way.

Winton's Royal Theatre is Queensland's only permanent open-air theatre. They still do regular nostalgia nights, with black-and-white movies like *The Three Stooges*, during the tourist season in winter. Growing up we used to go there every Saturday night. It has old canvas seats, like deck chairs, all joined together. It's all on a big cement ground and they used to turn it into a skating rink – it's still got the railings.

We have a lot of location scouts come looking for places to shoot. I was a production runner for the recent ABC series *Total Control* with Deborah Mailman and Rachel Griffiths. We've had a few productions made out here, like *Mystery Road* and *The Proposition*, and Winton people are really accommodating – that's why people keep coming back."



SHEEPDOG HANDLER

Pip Flower

"I grew up in Bath in south-west England, very much a townie, but we had plenty of pets and I wanted to be a vet. When I was 17, I was in a band called The Walrus Gumboots and thought I was going to be the next Stevie Nicks. After school we did a little tour around France and then I broke up with the lead singer and it all fell apart.

At 19 I did the backpacking thing from Sydney to Cairns but ran out of money within six weeks so I got a job at this cattle station in the Gulf – I'm actually quite introverted and like being outside so it was good. From there I started contracting – fencing and earthmoving – and found my way to Winton in 2013 when I was 22. I'm now an agriculture consultant at Camara Station.

I had to go home to England to get a degree but I came back in 2017 – for the lifestyle, the beautiful weather, the scenery. My dogs are my jam and I'm with them all day. There are drawbacks, like the isolation, but I can think of a lot more cons living in the city. Also, because you're so far away from temptation, you have a bit more money and it's nice not to worry about money – because keeping up with the Joneses just messes with your head.

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I always wanted a border collie. When I bought Betty in 2011 I just wanted a mate but she came from a sheepdog trialler and I started doing competitions. It takes your bond to another level. Now I've got a team of seven: Betty, Chaos, Pork, Fang, Poe, Hurricane and Wendy. Poe is named after the poet Edgar Allan Poe – it just suited him. Border collies are a lot more trainable and softer than kelpies.

This year Winton has started to feel like home. I was getting a coffee at the bakery and this tourist said, 'Bloody hell! What's a young, pretty girl like you doing out here? You should be in the city living your life.' A lot of people think like that. It goes through my mind – you know, what other dreams could I follow? – but I'm actually very happy. Winton is a quiet, friendly little town and it fills up with tourists every winter, which is a hoot."



Far right: Prospero Productions

RETIREE

Rosie Archer

"I've lived in the Winton area since I was born and I'm 93 now. I went to boarding school in Charters Towers and when the Second World War started they sent us all out to Richmond with the nuns, to a hotel there that wasn't getting used. After school the war was still on so I just went home to the property. You couldn't get a man to do any work so I helped my father.

I got married in 1950 when I was 26. My husband, John, had been the first to enlist in Brisbane in World War II – number QX1. He would have only been about 18 and he went off for five years. He never talked about it much; they never do when they've been in it. I met him after the war, probably at a race meeting. We had six children in 10 years – they seemed to just come along and you got used to having all the nappies. But you're young and active – you don't think it's hard work. We were 104km out of Winton at Wanora Downs.

I joined the CWA [Country Women's Association] in 1951. There was no-one to run it so we closed it down last year but then people got all upset – people in their 30s who hadn't shown much interest before – and now they've got it going again. A lot of young people with babies like to get together and compare notes. These days the women on the properties work as hard as the men so I don't think many of them get to town much.

When I was about 20, my mother sent me to Sydney for a couple of years so I'd know what the city is like but I was quite happy to go back to the bush. I can't stand being locked in the city. I can see for miles across the plains. We had a lot of rain last year – disastrous, a lot of it, but there's plenty of grass and it looks quite nice."

OPAL MINER

Col Duff

"I've always loved opals – I went to the Eulo lizard races and opal festival when I was 18 and bought a little chip jar – so when I was travelling around western Queensland in the '80s as a technician for Telecom, I'd try to find some on the weekends. I started mining full-time in 1990. It was just something I had to do. Australia has 90 per cent of the world's opal supply and it's top quality. Each is its own piece of art – like a rainbow dancing with a laser beam. Half of outback Queensland is opal country and we've probably only dug a couple of per cent. You could find [opal worth] a million dollars but it could be another 50 metres to the next pocket – it's very patchy and we don't have X-ray vision.

I live in Winton and have a camp in Opalton, 120 kilometres away. Most of the Queensland fields are really remote so most of us swag; when it gets real cold I've got a camper that I sleep in but when the weather's good there's nothing better than a starry sky. It's so dark you can see the colours in the stars, the swirls of the Milky Way. Out in the middle of nowhere, you're as free as you'll ever be.

Winton is a real battler town. I know that if I come to town and I've broken down, I could get my car fixed, get fuel and food and have a night out at the pub and I can sort it out next time if I'm having a bad run. People look after each other.

The producers of Discovery Channel's *Outback Opal Hunters* saw me in a YouTube video and asked me and a few mates to be on the show. It's not staged, it's all legit, but they know how to make an interesting story. Like the first episode, me and Aaron [Grotjahn] had an argument underground and they loved it. If anything goes wrong, bang! The cameras are out! I was digging and the cameraman said, 'Aaron's digging where you told him not to.' So we had a bit of a drama. The hardest bit was, we had to do it three times! We laugh our guts out every time we see it. And we make a bit of tucker money."





GRAZIER AND DINOSAUR ENTHUSIAST

David Elliott

"It all started when I was mustering and found dinosaur bones on our property in 1999. They don't look like much – just big rocks full of bones – until you tear the rock off them, chip by chip, and that's painstaking. Bones were originally going to Queensland Museum and they couldn't keep up so my wife, Judy, and I started the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum 10 years ago – so we could get volunteers, prepare the bones ourselves and put them on display. People said, 'Why are you doing it way out there?' but isolation is Winton's strength, not its weakness. It's something you could never reproduce in a city.

Ultimately it will be the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum of Natural History, which will cost about $50 million. We're just doing it in stages as we can afford them. Every year it gets bigger and better – and I get older and greyer! An observatory will also be built to look like a meteorite in a crater. The mesa where the museum sits is Australia's first international dark-sky sanctuary – a drawcard for astro-tourism from places like Europe and China, where they've got too much light pollution to see the stars. We'll have sound and light shows down through Dinosaur Canyon.

Probably our most exciting find has been the *Australovenator wintonensis*, Australia's most complete meat-eating dinosaur, from 95 million years ago. For our dinosaur digs we have 13 people a week for three weeks and they pay about $3000 each. It's often the same people every year – they love it. They live in the shearers' quarters and get their little torch and walk out into the middle of nowhere to go to the old thunderbox.

"Isolation is Winton's strength, not its weakness. [We have] something you could never reproduce in a city."

My great-grandfather was a bullocky and settled in Winton in the mid-1880s. My grandfather and father were both graziers. I used to worry about having to step aside to let my sons run the property but then I found the dinosaur bones and that's taken over my life; now they never see me.

We want to create a major museum here that can compete with natural-history museums around the world so that not just Winton but the region can stay alive. When you've got such a strong history in a town, it's nice to be in a position to put something back in. I feel like I belong to Winton, I'm part of it."

"It's the sort of community that sticks together like fleas on a dog's back. It's a wonderful place to be."



AMATEUR LOCAL HISTORIAN

Jeff Close

"I moved to Winton in my 20s as a high-school teacher but I've also been a jackaroo, farmer and small-business owner. My grandmother said, 'If there are things you want to do, make sure you do them, because you're dead a long time.'

For the past couple of years I've been chairman of the board at Winton's Waltzing Matilda Centre. I definitely don't think *Waltzing Matilda* should be Australia's national anthem – it's better off as the people's song. We can muck around with it, sing it where we like, change the tune, it doesn't matter. There are a thousand recordings of the song – from Slim Dusty to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir – and you can listen to some at the centre.

A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson wrote *Waltzing Matilda* when he came to Winton in 1895 when he was just a lawyer called Barty and very few knew he was writing poetry for *The Bulletin*. He never said he was a poet; he used to call himself a 'versifier'. He came with his fiancée, Sarah Riley, who was a local Winton girl, and her old schoolmate Christina Macpherson asked them out to Dagworth Station. Christina started playing this old Scottish tune and between her and Banjo up popped the song *Waltzing Matilda*. There's been some conjecture that Barty might have been a bit of a flirter. Apparently Sarah broke off their eight-year engagement and didn't give the ring back; it's still in the Riley family.

The song is a snapshot of western Queensland at the time. In 1894 Winton had just had the massive shearers' strike – the great struggle between the landed class and the working class. The grazier fraternity say sheep were being pinched left, right and centre – they'd find carcasses with one leg missing that the jolly swagmen had taken.

There was a lot of writing and poetry going on and creativity in business, like the boys who set up Qantas. Qantas had its first board meeting in Winton in 1920. Co-founder Hudson Fysh said the airline was 'conceived in Cloncurry; it was born in Winton; it grew up in Longreach'. It's a true western Queensland success story.

I love Winton's history, the magnificent countryside and the people – it's the sort of community that sticks together like fleas on a dog's back. Those three things just make it a wonderful place to be." ●