



## Cream buns, entrepreneurs and modest urbanity

# Re-imagining the small town

In downtown Cambridge there just isn't an empty shop to be found. Presided over by a hundred-year-old town hall and flanked by the verdant Victoria Square and busily cultivating boutique shopping credentials, Cambridge town centre is clearly a part of 'old Cambridge'. [01]

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Across river is Cambridge's 'southbank', Leamington, with its own distinct character. Originally a separate borough, Leamington has its shopping precinct currently in growth mode. Nine retail shop units, a café, a supermarket, and a new, more intimate two-bar tavern replacing the old medallion-carpeted, 70s vintage one, is the latest development for Leamington's heart.

"If you want to succeed, if you want to get ahead of the competition, then you need to stop tolerating mediocrity and start focusing on the behaviours and attitudes that get results," advises LesleyAnn Thomas, the new president of the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce.<sup>1</sup>

LesleyAnn, a freelance human resources consultant and business owner, directs her counsel at small enterprise, but equally it could apply to the management of small towns. LesleyAnn Thomas is the third woman in a row to hold the presidency of this 230-strong membership business organisation.

Cambridge has that timeless quality, built on a simple street grid of vista-harvesting tree-lined avenues, culminating in a town centre of admirable architecture.

Its congenial relationship with both the equine and dairy industries, its proximity to Hamilton and its attractive arboreal environment are commonly presented as the principal contributors to its consistent progress. But the continuing dedication over time of an active and committed Cambridge entrepreneurial core – as in many other successful towns – is an enviable asset not to be dismissed too lightly.

### **Baker's man**

Across the Tasman in rural northeast Victoria, Tom O'Toole is busy containing his ebullient bakery team. Tom O'Toole is no ordinary baker. He owns the very felicitous Beechworth bakery. If you have read Bryce Courtney's novel 'Four Fires', you'll have some familiarity with Beechworth. About 280 kilometres from Melbourne, Beechworth is a well-preserved historical town, establishing itself during the gold rush days of mid 1850s. Its present population is just 3200, about the size of Putaruru in south Waikato.

On one recent Easter Saturday, the cash registers of the Beechworth Bakery rang up some 3500 transactions, altogether taking \$31,000 in one day's trading. They had 30 staff in the shop working that day.<sup>2</sup>

Tom O'Toole reminisces: 'I remember when I first came back to Beechworth 26 years ago to set up the bakery, my accountant and the bank manager said I was mad taking a risk investing in a dying country town, but luckily I didn't listen to them.'

The exuberant Tom O'Toole is proud of his employees and encourages initiative and participation. 'I sell lamingtons and pies, and my business is far from perfect. Its 5 per cent technology and 95 per cent psychology – it's all about people. You need to have vision, persistence and discipline, but most of all you need to believe in yourself, your business and your community.'

Today the Beechworth Bakery boasts six bakeries across Victoria and southern New South Wales. Tom O'Toole is an entrepreneur and a great ambassador for his hometown.

### **Give the town the business**

In New Zealand, the late 1980s was a difficult time for many small towns. Locally owned businesses and manufacturers were struggling to compete against pressure from international corporations and countries with

low wages and often poor environmental protection. The economic reforms of the mid-80s had removed import tariffs and privatised government departments. This hit hard with business closures, unemployment and general economic decline in many communities throughout the country. Kaitaia, a small town in far north New Zealand, nearly 400 kilometres from the Auckland CBD, was not immune.

But with DIY resilience, Kaitaia (population around only 5000) responded positively, seeing the opportunity for establishing an enterprise that would put community benefit before return on profit. In 1989, Kaitaia's 'Community Business and Environment Centre' (CBEC) was born.<sup>3</sup>

CBEC's raison d'être was to create a community owned organisation that could generate new businesses and jobs. The organisation was seen as being able to bid for contracts that would otherwise be won by companies from outside the district. Profits could be ploughed back into the community to create more employment and other community benefit.

The founding managers and board members were determined to establish sustainable businesses and practices that, at the same time, would provide training and employment for local people.

CBEC is a community enterprise that now operates a range of businesses and environmental programmes as part of an overall effort to build a sustainable local economy. A shareholder-elected board of directors controls CBEC. Anyone within the far north community can become a shareholder.

Today CBEC employs more than 70 full-time staff in a number of enterprises and joint ventures, including waste management, recycling, labour hire, transport, home insulation, nursery and environmental education.

### **Cultivating entrepreneurship**

"The green shoots of entrepreneurship give an economy its vitality," maintain William Bygrave and Andrew Zacharakis of the Babson College, Massachusetts in their textbook on the subject, 'Entrepreneurship'.

Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs come in many shapes and sizes. Some create businesses, some contribute to civic organisations and still others endeavour to enhance the provision of public goods and services. What they all have in common is what Bygrave characterises as 'the presence of imagination, flexibility, creativity, a willingness to think conceptually and the capacity to see change as an opportunity.'

Entrepreneurship, however defined, is commonly recognised as a key ingredient of a robust community and a sustainable economy.

### **Over the Moon in Putaruru**

Operated by longtime Waikato resident Sue Arthur and situated in a small factory in Putaruru, Over the Moon is a boutique cheese-making company producing around 9000 kilograms of cheese a year.<sup>4</sup> [02] Sue Arthur is clearly an entrepreneur in its widest sense.

Since 1985 she has served in various elected and executive positions on the local South Waikato District Council, helping to drive many high-profile local tourist attractions such as Tokoroa's 'Talking Poles', Tirau's 'Big Dog' tourist information centre and upgrades of three of the region's central business districts.

The perfect dairying environment that begirded Sue Arthur over many years had inspired a passion for dairy products that eventually sent her globetrotting – experiencing, making and sampling cheese. Sue eventually brought her inspiration back to the South Waikato and set up Over the Moon and its affiliate the New Zealand Cheese School in late 2007. By early 2008, Over the Moon had made its first cheeses and won a gold and two silver medals at the Cuisine New Zealand Champion of Cheese Awards. In 2010 Over the Moon was recognised by the international cheese community as the world's best producer of semi-soft mixed milk and flavoured sheep cheese.

Located on State Highway 1200 kilometres south of Auckland, Putaruru is a rural town with a population of around 3800. Putaruru's 'Blue Spring' on the local Te Waihou River provides 60 per cent of New Zealand's bottled water (distributed nationwide and internationally) and also supplies the town's water supply.

Across Tirau Street from Over the Moon is Putaruru's former post office. Constructed in 1968 and designed on a circular plan with a crown-shaped roof of thin parabolic pre-cast concrete shells, the former post office and its 900 square-metre footprint is architecturally undoubtedly provincial New Zealand's most outstanding example. [03] No longer used by NZ Post, the building is now in private hands and destined to gain a new zest for life as a food court.

Shepherding Putaruru's development potential is Pride in Putaruru, a close descendant of the Chamber of Commerce, but which now embraces not only the business interests of the town but the social and community interests as well. Capably orchestrated by the dynamic Annie Waterworth, Pride in Putaruru is currently actioning a plan Vibrant Putaruru commissioned by it to coordinate future social and economic development.<sup>5</sup>

### **Social entrepreneurship**

Just as there are entrepreneurs who change the face of business, there are also social entrepreneurs who act as the change agents



for society, seizing opportunities others miss and improving systems, inventing new approaches and creating solutions to change society for the better. While a business entrepreneur might create entirely new industries, a social entrepreneur comes up with new solutions to social problems and then implements them on a large scale.

“Our job is not to give people fish, it’s to teach them how to fish, it’s to build new and better fishing industries,” explains Bill Drayton, the ‘godfather of social entrepreneurship’ and founder of Ashoka, a global non-profit organisation with headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, dedicated to finding and fostering social entrepreneurs worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

The Industrial Revolution of the 1700s split society into two unequal segments, maintains Ashoka’s Bill Drayton. Commerce became entrepreneurial and competitive, its compounding productivity gains sparking rapid income growth. But somehow enlightenment bypassed society’s other half, that part concerned with education, public welfare and the environment, Drayton laments. As the consumer sector grew more productive, the social sector supported by taxes and protected from competition, fell even further behind.

While it is basic for human beings to trade and exchange, it is just as fundamental to cooperate. We are social beings who are at our best as active participants of thriving groups and networks.

‘Community is not something we have, it is something we never stop doing.’<sup>7</sup>

Set around 1950, Nevil Shute’s novel, *A Town Like Alice*, is firstly a love story – about a Jean Paget and a Joe Harman, two people thrown together by war finding each other again after six years. But also it is a story about love of place and what one person with the motivation to contribute and build for the benefit of community can achieve.

*A Town Like Alice* captures the vision of a young Englishwoman: how to build attractiveness into a place such that its young people want to remain and where others want to come to live. In her travels Jean had been enchanted with the quality of life in the remote Alice Springs (population then about 1200) in central Australia. Armed with this experience, she devises a plan for her adopted home, an outback town in western Queensland starting

with the building of a workshop to employ a small number of ladies making fashion goods from locally produced leather – and progressively superintends the plan’s implementation.

“Community is about place, spirit, belonging and connection. It is about joy, fear, love and hope. Community is also about friendship, caring and being cared for. These are the things that motivate us every day,” announces the Tamarack Institute website. Tamarack is the real-time Jean Paget. It is a Canadian organisation dedicated to supporting “collaborative strategies that engage citizens and institutions to solve major community challenges”.<sup>8</sup>

Brit Nevil Shute was himself an entrepreneur, starting up an aeronautical engineering business prior to taking up writing full time. All his books, one way or another, are about this – except ‘*On the Beach*’, and that is a warning of what will happen to mankind if it ceases to be on the side of creation and improvement.

### Small towns, big opportunities

It takes less than four minutes to drive through the built-up area of Putaruru and at just five houses to the hectare, it is neither a big nor a particularly compact place. This is not necessarily a bad thing. With their walkable characteristics, spare infrastructure, space for local food production and home occupations, small towns like Putaruru are in fact well-placed to confront issues of climate change and diminishing resources.

Retirees are already discovering the affordable housing such places offer. Businesses that are able to service their clients remotely via telephone and the Internet are discovering the benefits with cheaper overheads.

The important challenges facing us today – the need for frugality, living more sustainably and fostering civic engagement – are all made easier in small towns.

Small town initiatives are part of an emerging movement that is bringing people together to explore how we – as communities – can respond to the environmental, economic and social exigencies of today. Our communities have within themselves the innovation and ingenuity to create positive rejoinders to these challenges of our time. What is required is firstly igniting and

supporting local responses and then weaving them together into a coordinated action plan for change.

By building local resilience, we are able, collectively, to respond to whatever the future may bring in a positive and creative way. By remembering how to live within our means, we can rediscover the spirit of community and a feeling of empowerment that flows from belonging and sharing in a world that is vibrant, just and truly sustainable.

### Conclusion: stewardship and imagination

“If Henry Ford had gone out and surveyed his community, they probably would have told him they needed a faster horse.” It’s trite but pedagogical. We all need a vision. Communities need vision. But equally important, communities need people to help articulate, nurture and drive their vision.

In the future, leaders will not be remembered for their professional, technical or cost-cutting skills but for their wisdom, empathy, presence, intuition and artistry, predicts leadership educator and pianist/composer, Michael Jones.<sup>9</sup>

“It will be a way of leading that is more relational focused and based upon creating an empathic resonance with others as a networker, connector and convener of webs and communities,” suggests Jones.

As designers we practise those particular disciplines that awaken the power of the imagination. These help transform our mechanistic or industrial view of our world to one that is more subtle – and sustainable – a transcendent vision that is more creative, organic and whole. This is how an artistic viewpoint can be especially helpful to community leaders.

“Make and mend is a fundamental principle in the history of cities as of civilisation,” observed Professor Arthur Smailes in his slim but pithy volume on the history and morphology of town building, *The Geography of Towns*.

The scale of required interventions to make better, more-liveable places does not have to be big. Small projects can add massive value to rural towns and these small urban programmes can be the catalyst for positive change. Likewise, solutions do not need to be spectacular or eye-catching. The important thing is they need to be pragmatic, sensible and place-based. If they are, they can work.

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