

# 6 The changing dynamics of small towns

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## Introduction

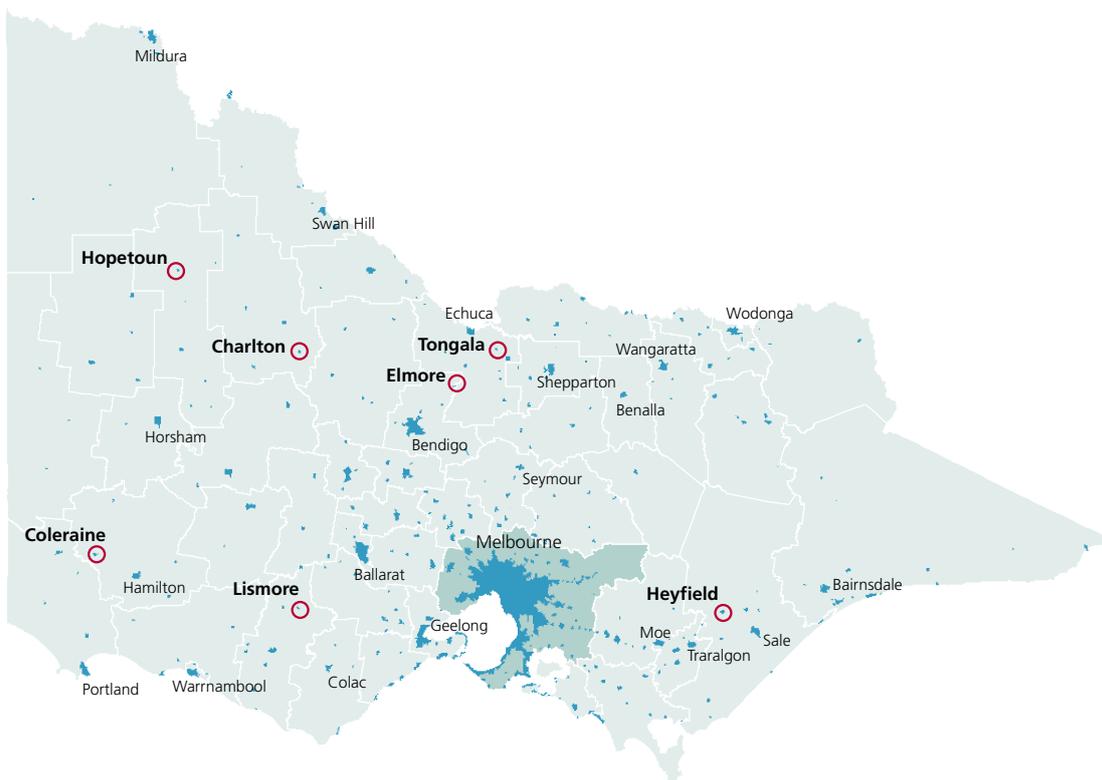
'Seen one town, seen them all'. It's a typical view of Australia's small country towns held by many metropolitan observers. But such a superficial judgement and dismissal belies the character and identity of each small country town. The apparent 'sameness' of appearance and function of such towns often blurs their individuality, especially to the traveller who is focused on reaching another destination within a certain time. To such observers, small country towns are nothing more than 'a pie and petrol stop', if that, on the way to more exotic places.

With little obvious appeal to the 'latte and chardonnay set', small country towns can represent a bygone era. And the commonly held view that they are in population and economic decline reinforces such ideas. The American writer, Ron Powers, made observations about such places in the United States, stating that 'towns were dying...or were dead, or were lingering in a kind of cataleptic trance, dreaming their histories like the mostly ageing people who lived in them' (1991, p. 3).

So are all these small country towns that dot our highways essentially the

same place repeated, merely clones in a passing parade? Powers describes this as a 'litter of dead and dying towns [that] had begun to form a kind of calligraphy on the surface of the country' (pp. 3–4). Can a generic description of all small country towns be produced meaning that further detailed research into a town's individuality is largely wasted effort, even though each town has its own unique history? Or is it possible that we can continue to learn from our small country towns by studying their individual characteristics and differences? And can we enrich our knowledge and

Figure 6.1 Victoria, major towns and local government areas shown - seven examined towns highlighted



Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment



understanding of the human condition and of the public policy and private initiative response by studying each town in some detail?

Some of these issues and questions can be explored by studying the story of towns in statistical terms. If small country towns are generally mere mirrors of each other, they will display similar indicators from the readily available census data. While a statistical analysis has its limitations, the stories of small country towns can be partly told by numbers, especially those that observe trends and changes over time—the measures of comparison using data about the people who live in the towns, the changes over time, and characteristics of the population such as age structure and place of employment. While we can observe what is happening in each of the towns through statistics, we can gain a much better insight into the changing roles and functions of the town by talking with the residents who live and work there.

This chapter focuses on seven of Victoria's small country towns, selected using a number of broad criteria in terms of population size and location. The study focuses on what has happened to these towns over the last generation using statistical data from the last (2001) census. To be part of this study, the town had to have less than 1,500 persons at the time of the 2001 census. And in terms of location, towns in the immediate vicinity of the metropolitan area or of the State's major regional centres were excluded, as were towns located on the coastline because of the immediate influence of another much larger place or of the 'sea change' phenomenon.

The focus of this research is firmly on those towns that continue to function as a small rural service centre. Such towns supply goods and services and social and cultural support to a surrounding farming population, enhancing the agricultural production of the local region. These towns are generally portrayed as 'country towns' located in 'the bush', and are the focus of this study, away from the attractions and tourism influence of the coast or towns within the expanding commuter area of Melbourne and the major regional centres.

Many country towns, cities and regional centres exist because they support surrounding agricultural production, process locally produced products, and supply goods and services to maintain production and the population in the town's hinterland. This chapter seeks to examine the extent to which this role has changed and is changing, and will examine the functions, roles and characteristics of the towns and of those who live in them to determine the relationships between the town and the surrounding agricultural base. The research focuses on the changing population, age and employment/occupational profile of the people, and the characteristics of those who have moved into the town in the last decade or so. In terms of the roles and services these towns perform, the research examines the types of services provided and their relationship to the needs of agricultural production in the surrounding area.



## The seven towns

Seven towns were chosen for detailed examination—Charlton, Coleraine, Elmore, Heyfield, Hopetoun, Lismore and Tongala. These towns were chosen according to certain criteria mentioned previously; they were also selected to represent a range of geographic locations across the state and to encompass a range of agricultural commodity types. It is important to note that the towns are not meant to be representative of all Victoria's small country towns. While observations about their composition and characteristics may be representative of many towns, they may conversely represent unusual or very different features.

### Charlton

Charlton is in the state's north-west, about 110 kilometres from the regional centre of Bendigo on the Calder Highway, and located at the southern edge of the Mallee region wheat belt in the Buloke Shire. Prior to the municipal amalgamations in the mid-1990s, Charlton was the administrative town for the Shire of Charlton.

### Coleraine

Coleraine is located 35 kilometres west of Hamilton in the state's south-west, an area noted for wool and more recently timber plantations. The town is situated on the Glenelg Highway and was the administrative town for the Shire of Wannon, but is now part of the Southern Grampians Shire.

### Elmore

Elmore is located on the Campaspe River at the junction of the Northern and Midland Highways, about 50 kilometres north of Bendigo in a grain and sheep belt. It is now within the Greater Bendigo City local government area but was formerly part of the Shire of Huntly.

### Heyfield

Heyfield is located 35 kilometres north-west of Sale in a dairying and timber region. It is located adjacent to the Thomson River within the Wellington Shire and was formerly in the Shire of Maffra.

### Hopetoun

Hopetoun is midway between Mildura and Horsham and is the most isolated of the seven towns, being at least 100 kilometres away from these regional centres. The town is located on the Henty Highway in the wheat growing southern Mallee region, on the edge of the Wyperfeld National Park. It was the administrative centre of the former Shire of Karkaroc, but is now part of the Yarriambiack Shire. The shire's administrative centre is at Warracknabeal about 60 kilometres to the south.

### Lismore

Lismore is located 96 kilometres west of Geelong and 75 kilometres south-west of Ballarat on the Hamilton Highway in a sheep and grain producing area, and 10 kilometres from Derrinallum, its 'twin' town. Lismore was previously located in the Hampden Shire but is now located within the Corangamite Shire. The shire offices are at Camperdown about 40 kilometres to the south.

### Tongala

With the exception of Heyfield, Tongala is the only other town not located on a state highway, being 30 kilometres east of Echuca and 50 kilometres north-west of Shepparton. Tongala is within an irrigated dairying production area in the Campaspe Shire and was formerly the administrative town for the Shire of Deakin.



### Statistical profiles of each town

This section focuses on three elements over the period 1981–2001: the changes in population numbers; the age profile of the population; and the industry category of employed people. Representative tables and figures illustrating particular characteristics and structures of the population profile of the towns have been included.

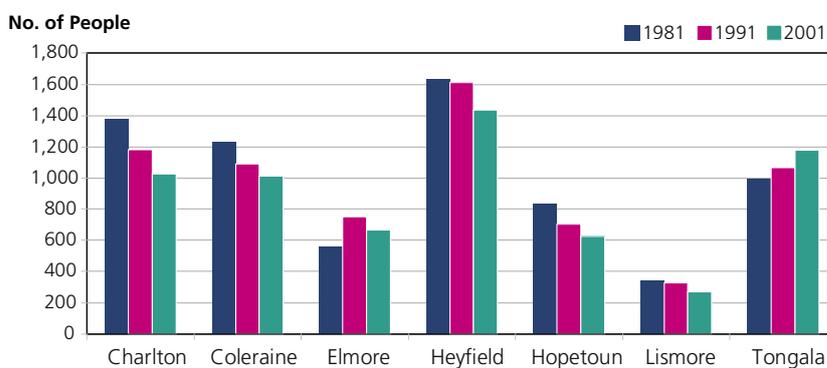
While there are notable differences in population, age structure and industry

category of employed people between the towns, strong common features are evident. Only two towns (Elmore and Tongala) experienced population increase. And the loss of population in many towns (including Charlton and Hopetoun) is linked to the problems of a narrow commodity base such as grains and sheep, and the reduced labour requirements in these sectors. Figure 6.2 shows the comparative change in population between 1981 and 2001.

Figure 6.3 illustrates the population change over the period 1981–2001 for three age categories; 0–17 years, 18–59 years and over 60 years. While the population in all towns is obviously ageing, this does not set them apart from many other types of settlement across Australia. The ageing of the population is, however, more pronounced because of the significant decline in the number of young persons, which perhaps best illustrates the change experienced in the seven towns. The significant shift in population structure is clearly evident as is the dramatic increase in the proportion of the population aged over 60 years.

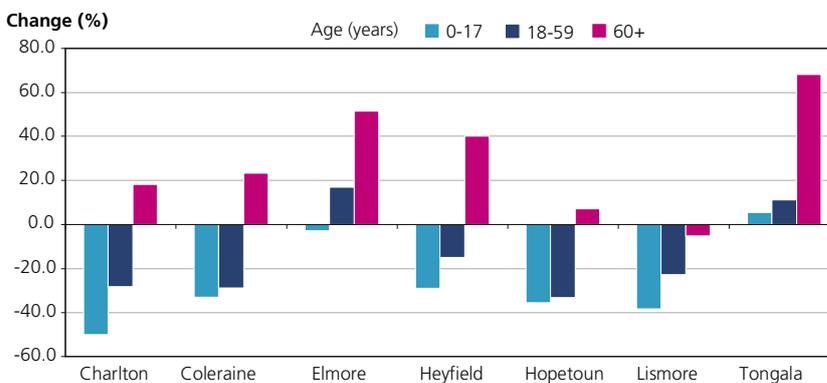
Table 6.1 and figure 6.4 show that the most pronounced trend in terms of the number of persons employed in various industry sectors was the growth in those employed in the health and community services sector.

**Figure 6.2 Town populations 1981, 1991 and 2001**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

**Figure 6.3 Percentage change in selected age categories 1981–2001**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

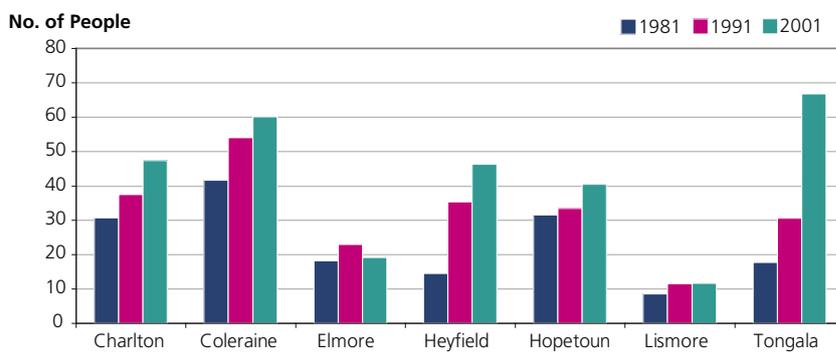


**Table 6.1 Health and community services sector employment 1981, 1991 and 2001**

Number employed in health and community services sector:	Charlton	Coleraine	Elmore	Heyfield	Hopetoun	Lismore	Tongala
1981	31	42	18	15	32	9	18
1991	38	54	23	35	33	12	31
2001	47	60	19	46	40	12	67
% change 1981–2001	54	44	5	22	28	37	276

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

**Figure 6.4 Health and community services sector employment 1981, 1991 and 2001**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



### Charlton

Charlton had a population of 1,026 persons at the 2001 Census, 351 less than in 1981, equating to an average annual population decline of 1.3 per cent. Like most small country towns, Charlton has an ageing population and has seen a steady decline in the number of young people. By 2001, there were 95 less 18–24 year olds than there were in 1981.

Charlton's largest employment industries in 1981, 1991 and 2001 were retail trade, agriculture, forestry and fishing, education, and health and community services. The health and community services sector is, however, the only sector to have gained employees between 1981 and 2001. Significant declines in employment in utility services and communications mainly occurred

in the 1990s. It should be noted that changes in the classification of finance and insurance and property and business services make direct comparisons between census dates difficult.

**Table 6.2 Population change by age group in Charlton 1981, 1991 and 2001**

Number of persons	Age group								Total
	0–4	5–17	18–24	25–34	35–49	50–59	60–74	75+	
1981	105	332	138	186	196	135	201	85	1,377
1991	75	234	86	150	209	120	200	109	1,182
2001	50	168	43	86	212	129	196	142	1,026
% change 1981–2001	-51.9	-49.4	-68.7	-53.5	8.2	-4.6	-2.7	67.2	-25.5

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

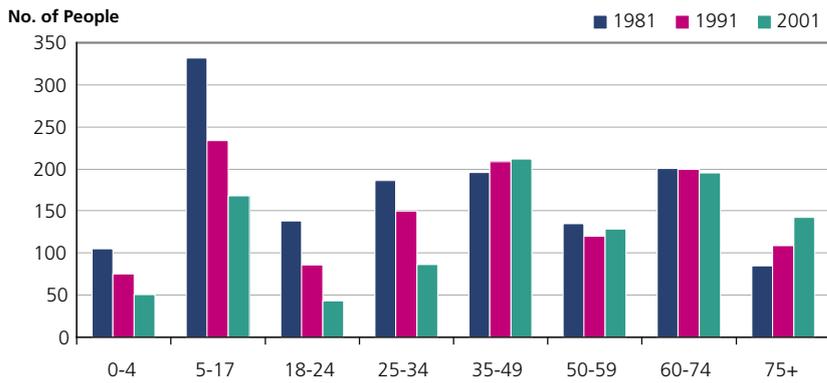
**Table 6.3 Employment by selected industry sector in Charlton 1981, 1991 and 2001**

Number	Industry sector				
	Agriculture, forestry & fishing	Electricity, gas & water supply	Communication	Government administration & defence	Health & community services
1981	97	23	22	32	31
1991	65	17	13	28	38
2001	61	3	6	15	47
<b>% change</b>					
1981	17.5	4.2	4.0	5.8	5.6
1991	13.5	3.4	2.7	5.7	7.8
2001	14.8	0.8	1.6	3.6	11.4

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

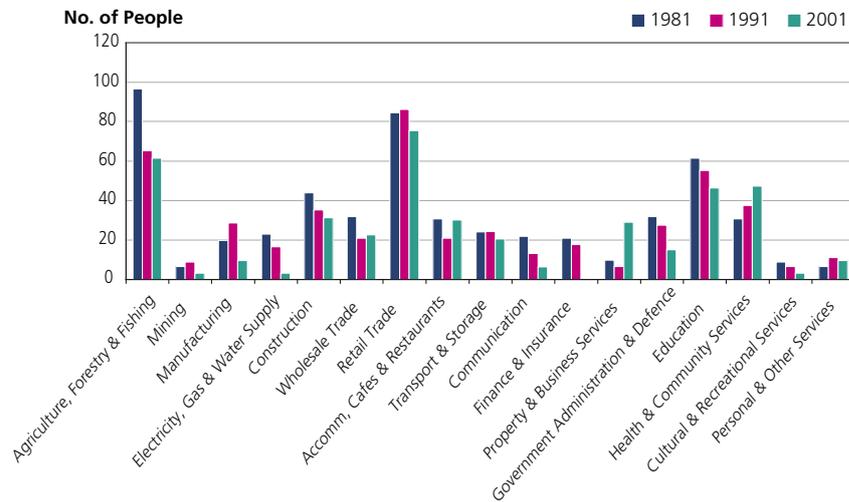


**Figure 6.5 Population change by age group in Charlton 1981, 1991 and 2001**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

**Figure 6.6 Change in employment by industry sector in Charlton 1981, 1991 and 2001**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



### Coleraine

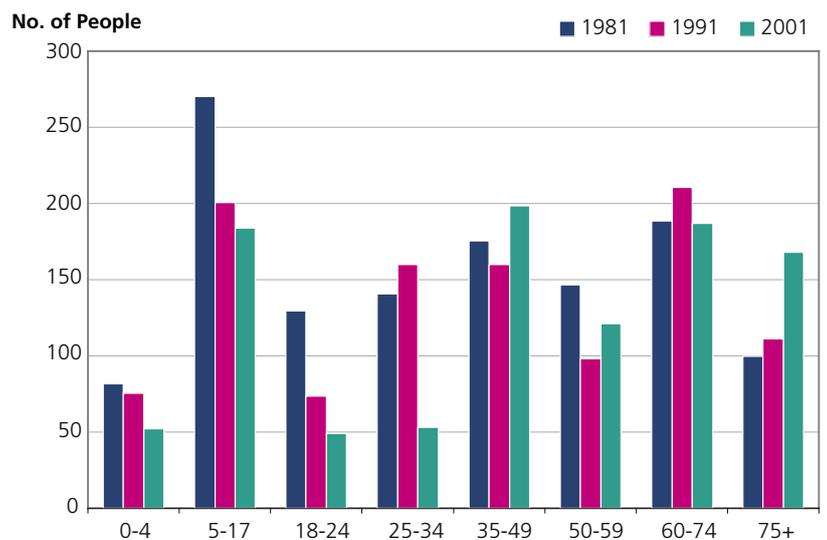
Coleraine had 1,013 people at the 2001 Census, a small population decline from the 1981 figure of 1,232. Coleraine's population has aged significantly, with 68.7 per cent more people aged over 75 years in 2001 compared with 1981. In contrast, there was a 62.1 per cent decline in the population aged 18–34 years and a 66.7 per cent decline in the population aged 25–34 years during the same period.

Coleraine experienced an overall increase in the number of people working in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector between 1981 and 2001, but there was a sharp decline in employment in the retail trade and government services sectors from 1981 to 1991. Employment in the health and community services sector experienced a steady increase between 1981 and 2001.

### Elmore

Elmore's population peaked in 1991 with 749 people, and while it fell to 665 in 2001, this figure was still greater than the 1981 figure of 558. The change in age group structure between 1981 and 2001 did not follow a similar pattern

Figure 6.7 Population change by age group in Coleraine 1981, 1991 and 2001



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

to that seen in most of the other study towns. The 0–4 years age group has remained relatively stable while the number of people aged 50 years and over has steadily increased. The 5–17 and 25–34 years age groups appear to have followed the general trend of the total population during the twenty-year period. Interestingly, the 35–49 years age group grew by 76.6 per cent between

1981 and 1991, and only decreased by 3.6 per cent between 1991 and 2001.

Elmore's largest employment sectors are agriculture, retail trade, and health and community services. The agriculture sector experienced a decline between 1981 and 1991 but increased between 1991 and 2001 to about the 1981 figure.

Table 6.4 Population change by age group in Elmore, 1981, 1991 and 2001

Number of persons	Age group								Total
	0–4	5–17	18–24	25–34	35–49	50–59	60–74	75+	
1981	40	120	54	68	81	66	96	33	40
1991	42	165	42	76	143	80	116	84	42
2001	40	116	27	61	137	88	132	63	40
% change 1981–2001	–1.6	–3.3	–49.5	–9.6	70.3	33.5	38.1	89.6	–1.6

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



### Heyfield

Heyfield experienced a 0.6 per cent annual average population decline between 1981 and 2001. The 5–17 years age group experienced a 1.1 per cent decline from 1981 to 2001 while the average annual rate of change for those aged over 75 years increased by 10.3 per cent.

Heyfield experienced a significant loss in the number of persons employed in the manufacturing industry sector between 1981 and 2001. Transport and storage was the biggest growth sector between 1991 and 2001 and the largest employment sector by 2001. The agriculture sector experienced a decline from 1981 to 1991 but increased between 1991 and 2001.

**Table 6.5 Population change by age group in Heyfield 1981, 1991 and 2001**

Number of persons	Age group (years)								Total
	0–4	5–17	18–24	25–34	35–49	50–59	60–74	75+	
1981	159	406	172	232	242	198	179	46	159
1991	143	412	120	237	311	112	214	65	143
2001	83	319	103	157	289	170	175	140	83
% change 1981–2001	–47.8	–21.5	–40.0	–32.5	19.4	–14.4	–2.6	204.3	–47.8

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

**Table 6.6 Employment by selected industry sector in Heyfield 1981, 1991 and 2001**

Number	Industry sector					
	Agriculture, forestry & fishing	Manufacturing	Transport & storage	Government administration & defence	Education	Health & community services
1981	55	208	36	17	19	15
1991	24	130	18	38	24	35
2001	36	45	99	3	37	46
<b>% change</b>						
1981	9.0	34.2	5.9	2.8	3.1	2.4
1991	4.5	24.6	3.5	7.1	4.5	6.7
2001	7.0	8.7	19.2	0.7	7.2	9.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



### Hopetoun

Hopetoun's population decreased from 832 to 625 persons between 1981 and 1991, an annual average decline of 1.2 per cent. There was a significant decline (46.6 per cent) in the 5–17 years age group in this period and the 18–24 years age group declined by 72.6 per cent between 1981 and 2001. Employment in agriculture declined significantly between 1981 and 1991 and retail trade employment declined between 1991 and 2001. Employment in health and community services increased between 1991 and 2001, as did employment in the accommodation, cafés and restaurants sector.

### Lismore

Lismore experienced an average annual rate of population loss of 1.1 per cent between 1981 and 2001. The most significant loss (47.6 per cent) was in the 5–17 years age group between 1991 and 2001. Numbers in the 35–49 years age group have steadily increased (average annual rate of change of 1.3 per cent) while other age groups have all experienced losses. While there were significant losses in employment numbers in agriculture and retail trade between 1981 and 1991, retail trade actually increased between 1991 and 2001. Employment in transport and storage increased significantly between 1991 and 2001.

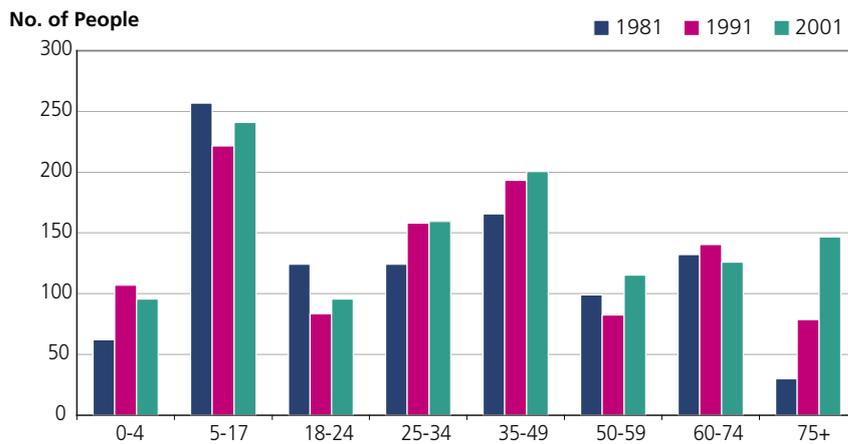


### Tongala

Tongala's population grew at an annual average rate of 0.9 per cent between 1981 and 2001. The establishment of a major milk processing plant during this period sharply changed the town's age profile. The 75-years-plus age group had the sharpest increase in numbers between 1981 and 2001 with a 19.4 per cent average annual rate of change.

The largest industry sector in Tongala is manufacturing, employing over 25 per cent of the workforce during the period 1981–2001. Other sectors to experience growth included health and community services, wholesale trade and retail trade. Agriculture declined between 1981 and 1991 but grew between 1991 and 2001 to surpass the 1981 figures by about 70 per cent.

Figure 6.8 Population change by age group in Tongala, 1981, 1991 and 2001 census



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

Table 6.7 Population change by age group in Tongala, 1981, 1991 and 2001

Number of persons	Age group (years)							
	0-4	5-17	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-59	60-74	75+
1981	62	257	124	124	166	99	132	30
1991	107	222	83	158	193	82	140	79
2001	95	241	95	159	201	115	126	147
% change 1981–2001	53.8	-6.3	-23.1	28.5	20.8	16.2	-4.6	388.4

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.



## Additional research

To develop a more comprehensive picture of the changes in the towns, telephone interviews were conducted with about 8–10 residents from each town. Interviewees were selected according to certain criteria. Generally, two real estate agents were selected, but in towns with no real estate agents, agents from nearby towns were interviewed. Operators of larger retail or agricultural businesses were also selected, and in some cases local councillors or ex-councillors were contacted. Most towns have a progress association or similar body, and a representative from such local organisations was contacted. In many cases, interviewees provided the names of other residents who could enhance the research from an economic, community or social perspective.

The results of these interviews are not intended to provide a comprehensive discussion of all aspects of the seven towns. What is presented is only representative of the extensive material supplied in those interviews. Specific mention is made of a particular town only when it is significant in the context of the subject being discussed. In most cases, however, the information has been used to produce an amalgam of responses on a particular theme or topic.

While the phone research was undertaken as unstructured interviews, it focused on a series of questions and observations about change in the town based on three broad topics:

1. How has the role of the town changed over the last 10 to 20 years? What is the cultural, social and economic role of the town now compared with 10 or 20 years ago? What services and facilities have been lost and gained? How strong is the link to the surrounding rural community and agricultural production? To what extent is the town still operating as a rural service centre?
2. How is the town's population changing? Who is moving in and who is moving out and why are they moving? Where are new people coming from and what difference are they making to the town?
3. How has the town physically changed over the last 20 or so years? Are new houses being built and what other investments have been made in the town such as shops, businesses and facilities? How has the main street changed in appearance and function?

Perhaps the strongest observations made by interviewees were the loss of facilities and services and therefore an erosion of the roles and functions performed by their town. It was clear from many of the comments that this cut deeply into the pride of the town. Decisions about these roles and functions had largely been made outside the town, and the feeling of helplessness highlighted the interdependence of towns on external economies. In particular, facilities such as banks, hospitals and schools, all considered the very essence of the town, were hardest hit. But there

was also town 'grief' over the loss of certain essential stores and services. The opening of a Bendigo Community Bank in a number of towns seems to have rejuvenated them, not only in terms of financial services but also by providing a renewed sense of pride and optimism.

*[Our town] was left in the dry when the NAB and Commonwealth banks closed branches in the area. The Bendigo Community Bank opened here in 2002, which did wonders for the town. Prior to that, people were going to [another town] to do banking and out of convenience would then do all shopping while there which wasn't helping [our town] survive.*

*The community bank has been a major influence. Thirty years ago there were four banks, six years ago the last one closed. Three years ago the community bank was opened. It has been a great success in the town and is set to make profit this year. There was and is overwhelming support for the bank. They raised \$470,000 in capital from 360 shareholders.*

*The biggest turnaround for [our town] was the establishment of the Bendigo Community Bank five years ago. This was the 'biggest boost' to the town. The bank opened with an ATM that was a big win as a bank. The bank gave the town confidence and the ATM has encouraged people to spend locally. The NAB still has a branch in town but is only open 80 per cent of the 'banking week'. The community bank is open five days and Saturday morning.*



*When a country town loses its important services, such as the closure of a hospital, it really 'knocks them around' and their 'independence is taken away'. When this occurs it changes the thinking of country town people.*

*As services become more complex sometimes farmers are forced to seek out these services in [regional centres, services] such as a plumber who can do particular fit outs. This is the same with motor vehicles. The days of small town garages are coming to a close. People buy cars from as far away as [another town]. There have been no car dealers in town for 20 years. There are two specialised garages though; one in hydraulics servicing trucks/tractors for transport companies and farmers and a man that it is a specialist in wheel alignment. There is an opening for people who have specialised skills to attract customers from all around.*

*[Our town] is limited in terms of shopping. There is only one supermarket and for other things like clothes people go to [another town] where there are more options. Farmers today are price conscious and the loyalty factor is no longer there. Farmers have no qualms about driving a distance to another town to get a better price and 90 per cent of companies will now do deliveries so they don't always have to travel. There is strong competition with...as well as the sales agents who do all their business on the road.*

Another dominant theme was the number of people who had moved

into the town in recent years, with all interviewees commenting that people were moving into the town largely for lifestyle reasons. Small country towns are often attractive for lower house prices although many people observed that house prices had risen dramatically. Some observed tensions between new residents who often didn't need local jobs and longer term residents. This became particularly evident when proposals arose for new businesses that would affect the apparent lifestyle qualities of the town.

*Six years ago the 'greenchange' started happening. Retirees are moving in and renovating houses. A new subdivision in town is underway and all blocks are sold. There is another five blocks in the pipeline adjoining the property. Real estate prices have increased by 50 per cent.*

*A basic three bedroom home was \$70–80,000 two years ago; now it is \$120,000. Outside people are purchasing homes, including young families. Our town is attractive because housing is cheaper than [in the nearest regional centre]. The only thing it is missing is a secondary school.*

*A few 'spec' homes have been built in town and are basically the only ones for sale. At one stage you could buy a house in [our town] for \$15,000; this house is now selling for \$150,000. Retirees are moving in. Previously they were moving off their farms, [but] today the retirees are moving in from [regional centre]. Others moving in are those who are 'unemployed and wanting to stay unemployed'. They*

*want to take advantage of the lower cost of living.*

*There is a trend of people from the city buying cheaper housing in [our town]. Some of them last; some Melbourne people struggle with lifestyle, the isolation and the higher price of products.*

*In the last couple of years [our town] has turned around. There are more people moving in. A lot of these people are retired and some are people who work in [regional centres] or even commute to Melbourne.*

*People moving into town are retirees and a 'strange lot of people', a 'feral type' meaning lower socio economic and welfare groups.*

*There is good quality of life in [our town] which attracts people, particularly city dwellers as people 'smile and say g'day' in the street.*

*There have been new families moving into [our town]. About 12 months ago the town had a welcoming celebration for those who had moved into town and there were about eighty people.*

*The upward trend in property values is a result of the retiring influx of people from farms and metro areas. There is continuing movement from Melbourne, Adelaide and even Sydney. Many people don't stay a long time, particularly metro people. Not sure why but perhaps it has something to do with the lack of family and social connections that allows them to just pick up and move on. Also that 'people move there thinking it is going to be all sweetness and light' and maybe find that it's not.*



*The town has lost people like bank managers, teachers and shire workers because there is not employment to attract this type of person to the town. The type of people coming into the town now are older couples retiring from larger towns and also some portion of unemployed 'welfare band' types who are looking for cheaper accommodation rather than looking for work.*

*[The] kindergarten used to thrive... Now it really battles to survive. Not many young families moving in. Source of young families is usually teacher/police persons and their families. Teachers don't move around as much anymore. You don't get a new influx of young people and their families anymore.*

*There are four or five people in...who are part of the set of 'angry people' who have moved in recently. They are retiree age therefore not looking at employment opportunities from new business. New businesses have been stopped from opening by the same people.*

Loss of young people in the towns due to lower birth rates, children being sent away for schooling, and a decline in young families was a particularly painful observation. These trends are combined with a common observation that farmers are ageing and few young people are attracted to farming or have the financial capacity to take it on. The general mood or feeling of confidence varied between and within towns. Some residents and businesses were uncertain about the agricultural service role as the number of individual farms declined and as the

next generation of young people willing to take on farming declined, while others saw new roles for the towns.

*It's the innovative farmers [who] are moving out rather than the traditional farmer. Rats leaving a sinking ship. They are selling out while the money is good, buying in Queensland and working in various areas such as mowing lawns a la 'Jim's mowing'.*

*Two to three families per year are moving out. Reasons for moving out: education (for kids), and not enough land to make income from.*

*The number of farms is getting smaller as farms buy out other farms. This has a snowball effect because the number of farming families reduces, which reduces the number of kids in the primary school and so on.*

*Some farmers [are] moving out because kids aren't interested in taking over [the] farm. Additionally, spouses would have had jobs that could carry them and have found similar jobs in Queensland or Ballarat or wherever they have moved.*

*Many people who have been in farming a long time are looking to get out and are tired. They will not be prepared to take chances on change and will get out. Who will take the farms on? It is so expensive to get into that many will not opt for it. Some children will inherit the farm and take [it] on although many aren't interested and prefer to go to [the] 'big smoke'. However some of them as they get older look to come back for a slower pace of life and to raise children. It is a lonely existence though. Hard*

*to meet people your own age and find a partner [and] there is a lack of entertainment like what is offered in cities.*

*There are few employment opportunities for kids who have left school. There's not much for kids.*

*Fifteen years ago there were a lot more youth around and there was more of a social network. Young people spent time together in...then. Today there are less young people and they spend more time socialising in [regional centre] (nightlife, shopping etc). Or they go to B&S balls.*

*So many family farms will not see another generation [because] children aren't taking on the farms from their parents.*

*Some parents are encouraging their children not to take on farming because...it is a hard slog and there are more opportunities and financial rewards with living and working in larger towns or cities.*

*Sporting facilities struggle to get people to participate. Not many new people want to participate in the community and [you don't] know many faces anymore whereas you used to know everyone and everyone was involved. These people have satellite dishes on their homes and you see them at the video store. You wonder what they do.*

The characteristics of self help and self reliance appear to have always been strong features of country towns, and it is still alive and well in most towns. Ongoing drought and continuing loss



of people and business however seems to have affected the optimism and self assurance of some communities.

*Development depends on community leadership, which has been quite good in...[Prior to amalgamation]...Shire had the right philosophies for attracting industry and diversifying. There are some young leaders in the town who will continue the work that the older generation is doing now and have done.*

*There is a good local drive but no one is putting their hand up to take over. Who will take on after us? People are becoming more and more self centred and they don't teach responsibility in the community. Everybody is working longer hours to survive; people are more materialistic and have to have more things. People get themselves into debt. There needs to be balance and perspective [to get] priorities right.*

*Town people have [the] attitude of getting things done when government won't provide funding. The people say 'righto', what's to be done, let's do it.*

*This is a town that is fairly self reliant and has 'can-do' people, people who 'get it done' when it needs doing. As long as this continues and...has this type of people, the town will survive.*

*Things take longer to get done here than in the city but they do get done. Newcomers sometimes get frustrated by this but soon acclimatise.*

*There are three or four new families who are really good, involved. People don't get involved in volunteering [for things such as] meals on wheels. The... Club can't attract new members (men*

*in their 40s, 50s, 60s). Traditionally the bankers, stock agents, farmers etc were all members. Now they have no interest. They have tried to attract [the] farming community [but] to no avail. They have either no need or supposedly no time to join.*

*I see things folding, like the tennis club, and I'm concerned about who will run these clubs and services once this generation is too old or gone.*

*No one wants to take over. Children learning ballet, swimming, tennis etc are usually taken to larger centres for their classes and the parents probably do the shopping there also.*

*[There is] not a lot of support from local businesses for community/local things.*

*The Progress Association is a progressive group. It has initiated development of an industrial estate in town. It saw a lack of machinery service/product businesses. The estate was developed as a co-op and three sites are available.*

Most towns have a 'unique' enterprise or event that not only gives the town an identity but sets it apart from other places and generates a particular sense of pride and accomplishment. Notable examples include:

- the Elmore Field Days, which attract about 30,000 people in October and the Campaspe Run Discovery Centre in Elmore:

*The field days were established in 1962 by a group of local men. The Elmore Agricultural Show had finished in 1939 and many other agriculture shows were finishing at the time.*

*Local men saw an opportunity. Many people volunteer for Elmore Field Day – set up, catering, and clean up. Last year the catering made a profit of \$3,700. There were 420 volunteers last year. The field days support [the] local community in various ways [for example, money raised is used to provide funds to the hospital for an X-ray machine which is now at Rochester].*

*The Campaspe Run Discovery Centre evolved from a series of community meetings in 1995 where the local community got together to brainstorm what they wanted for the town in terms of youth, tourism, facilities etc. A motivational speaker was invited to the meetings and approximately 100 people were involved. Out of the tourism category, Campaspe Run evolved. People wanted to showcase HB McKay's achievements because he was a local. A subcommittee of Elmore Progress Association pursued the development. Campaspe Run opened on 16 April 1998, almost three years to the day from the original community meetings.*

- Coleraine's famous chocolate factory: *People come from Hamilton to buy chocolate. [The factory] does not employ a huge number of people but [it] is great asset and icon of [the] town, particularly for tourists/visitors. Other towns [such as Daylesford] have tried to poach the factory.*



- Hopetoun's award winning Mallee design for a bush retreat:  
*This holiday accommodation facility on Lake Lascelles was designed by a Melbourne architect. The design reflects the mallee: shearing sheds were an inspiration for a communal lounge and portable silos have been used for some accommodation. Second stage of development is for group accommodation (for example, for schools). There is now also funding for a new toilet block and a caravan/tent site. All this is community driven and the locals have seen [the] potential [for] tourism for town. [The] Wimmera/Mallee pipeline should hopefully bring water to Lake Lascelles.*

While each town has its own story to tell, some common observations can be made:

- Schools, banks and health services are critical not only for the survival of a town's traditional role. They also determine the capacity of a town to continue to attract people and help foster a sense of pride, resilience and town identity.
- Towns need innovative and energetic community-minded people to help them thrive or even survive. It actually takes surprisingly few people to perform this role or for a town to lose this quality.

- The role of small country towns as rural service centres still persists but is under severe challenge as farm populations decline and as competition from larger centres increases. The towns that have done better economically and socially are those that have realised change is occurring and have been able to seek alternatives.
- The 'treechange' phenomenon is happening for a whole host of reasons and does not seem to be confined to those towns that may 'appear' to have something to offer.

The research findings are dominated by three overall observations. Firstly, the towns display similar demographic profile characteristics that allow generalised commentary on common trends, which is useful for understanding these changes. Similar observations about economic and social change and the qualities and frailties of the towns allow a typical profile to be developed. Factors such as the ageing of the population and the changing employment profile were generally consistent. What the statistics do not show (but will be worthy of detailed examination with the release of the 2006 Census data) is that all towns were experiencing an influx of new residents attracted by cheaper housing and country town lifestyle. This trend is not predictable from the statistics or from distant observations.

Secondly, and in complete contrast to the first view, there are sufficient differences between each town to highlight the dangers of producing generalised descriptions and analysis. Examples of local circumstances causing significant departures from the norm in terms of the age profile include the establishment of a major business bringing families and young people into a town, and the establishment of major aged care facilities bolstering the numbers of aged people. Statistical analysis told little of what was actually happening in the town itself; it was the observations of the locals that set the towns apart. Towns were 'go ahead' and progressive or had a generally depressed mood; some main streets had been rejuvenated and businesses were going well while others had some empty shops; and volunteerism was strong in some towns while there was concern about dwindling numbers in others. The overall performance and mood of a town, which did not relate to size or economic fortune, had been turned around by a new enterprise, by newcomers to the town, or by something as simple as a community bank.



The third observation is that remotely conceived and delivered prescriptive policy and initiatives for small country towns will hit some targets, but will miss others and actually damage the social, economic and community fabric of many small country towns. There is sufficient local variation and subtlety even in the bold statistics to warn of the dangers of a standardised response. When the actual physical and community fabric of a town is uncovered by direct contact with the local residents, it is evident that each is a place worthy of respect and individual engagement.

#### **References**

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