Tracking Onslow: a community in transition. edition 1, 2012

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ONSLOW
a community in transition
dition 1, 2012
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Onslow, the town and community you live in, is in for a lot of changes over the next few years.

Gas projects will bring new faces, while many old faces are leaving, and new money will buy new things. Will this mean that Onslow loses some of it’s ramshackle, rustic charm? Will it attract hordes of new tourists who’ll crowd out the old crew?

Maybe, maybe not — either way we want to know what you think.

This project is a collaboration between the journalism program at Edith Cowan University and the Shire of Ashburton and it’s all about tracking your views and opinions over time as the changes roll out.

We’ll be visiting Onslow every six months over the next few years and sitting down with as many of you as we can, to listen to what you have to say about what’s happening in your town. Your voices are important because you make up the community, and this is your history in the making.

Our first visit was in July 2012. Journalism students Claire Ottaviano, Aine Ryan and Jasmine Amis came to Onslow with me and we interviewed, recorded and photographed as much of the town as we could. This magazine is the first document produced by the Tracking Onslow Project. We’ll do another in six month’s time. In the meantime we are working on a website that will include more photos and videos, that will also grow over time—providing a record of the community evolving.

It’s not only for Onslow to be able to look back on—but also so the rest of Australia can see the impacts of major resource projects on the communities that accommodate them.

We look forward to seeing you when we come back in February 2013.

Best regards,

Dr Kayt Davies
Edith Cowan University
2012
Onslow’s iconic war memorial serves as a gentle reminder for residents and visitors of the contribution of Australia’s armed forces. Erected in 2006, it is styled on the rising sun badge worn by the ANZAC soldiers. The steel structure is positioned so that on Anzac Day the sunrise on the horizon shines through the centre of the circle. The memorial was created by WA artists Joan Walsh-Smith and Charles Smith for the Shire of Ashburton.
Go looking for egos in Onslow and you may be searching for quite some time. Taking a drive down Second Ave, you’re not going to see a sports car, a stretched hummer or diamond-encrusted bling.

The friendly folk of Onslow have a kind of unofficial uniform consisting of a sun tan, sometimes a beer-fed turtle smuggled under the shirt, along with either steel caps or a trusty pair of double plugger thongs. There’s no doubt Onslow is a humble town, which may come as a surprise considering it lies in Australia’s highest earning postcode.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011 Census data released in mid-2012 revealed that the postcode of 6710 has the country’s highest median personal income of $2000 per week. The median value is decided by listing each and every income range reported in the Census for 6710 and then picking out the middle score.

Big bucks no matter how you look at it, but who is earning them? Jump a bit deeper into the ABS data and you find it may not be anyone on Second Ave.

On Census night, August 9, 2011, the town of Onslow had a median weekly personal income of $803. That comes from the 1103 people in town on the night, 472 ladies and 631 gents, including the 465 visitors.

Looking broader to the entire 6710 postcode, the $2000 per week figure came from 4576 people in the area, including 2249 visitors. There were 1088 ladies in the area that night and quite a few more blokes, with 3488 in all.

Looking at these fellas’ payslips, the big bucks begin to appear. Within the postcode of 6710, there were 1534 males earning over $2000 a week and 165 females too. Out of the boys earning the big money, 80 per cent of them are aged between 25 and 54.

Head back on over to Second Ave and ask anyone where these guys are earning all this cash and they’ll tell you they’re putting together Chevron’s Wheatstone Gas Hub or BHP’s Macedon Project.

And where is all this cash being spent?

Well, pretty soon it may be to a landlord.

Rentals in Onslow are limited at the moment with the demand far above the supply which is driving the
prices way up. A three-by-one in Onslow will set you back upwards of, and often far beyond, $1000 per week. Rent prices will continue to rise in Onslow until new land goes up for sale.

Of course, releasing new land to the market isn’t as simple as throwing up a fence or two and banging in a For Sale sign. There are a couple of pretty important infrastructure issues that have to be addressed first.

Water, waste and power systems are already running near their capacity and to get them upgraded, people are going to need to fly into Onslow. So, an upgrade to the airport will be the first step on the road to other big additions.

Western Australia’s Department of Planning predicted last year a need for a 5000 bed camp at the Ashburton North Strategic Industrial Area. A little further down the track, there will be a need for two worker camps, with 225 and 20 beds, once both gas plants get up and running. But within Onslow, it’s been estimated 495 family houses and 181 single units will be needed.

Leigh Anderson from Crawford Realty said that once the land sales begin, rent prices will plateau for a while. Unfortunately the rent for the new Onslow properties probably won’t stay in town. Ms Anderson said that the new land may be beyond the means of local people: “It’ll be investors for sure [who buy up the land], people wanting to house the employees.”

Fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers have already snapped up a fair bit of the accommodation in town. 48 new rooms were added to the Ashburton Resort Motel in a two year redevelopment. All these rooms are booked out for the foreseeable future for gas hub workers. The booking contract goes up for renewal part way through 2013.

Long term accommodation is also offered over at the Ocean View Caravan Park. Zoe McGowan is the Project Officer at the Shire of Ashburton.

Ms McGowan oversees the caravan park and said that all 40 permanent sites are currently occupied with a fairly lengthy waiting list. On that list are locals working at the shops, pub or other businesses around town. The caravan park rents are now between $300 and $400 per week. Even with the increase, the caravan park may be the only option for locals.

There’s plenty of cash coming to Onslow and with it, rentals are going to go up and up.
But Onslow already had a pretty healthy earner in the tourism industry.

For a long time holiday makers have made the trip to town to soak up the sun, jump in the sea and snag a few of those tasty fish hiding inside it. Luckily, Onslow knows how important tourists are to the town and doesn’t plan on losing them.

During winter months, it’s quite common for Onslow’s population to swell up to and over 1000 people. Floating around the coral of the Mackerel Islands was, and still is, a beautiful getaway for people living a bit further inland in the Pilbara or folks making the trip up from Perth, or even international visitors.

It’s estimated that an average domestic tourist to the northwest region spent $1017 per trip in 2010. International tourists put up a bit more, spending $1505 per trip. But if a bigger proportion of those tourist dollars has to be spent on a bed, fresh faces during the winter months may not be seen as often.

A room for the night at the Ashburton Resort Motel will set you back $330. Linda Holt works at the motel and admitted: “A lot of the tourists that ring up won’t stop here when I tell them that price.”

Back over at the Ocean View Caravan Park the prices are set perfectly for a getaway by the sea.

It costs $40 per night for an unpowered site, $45 for powered and there are six bed units available for $125. The caravan park is split into short term and long term lots so, if an early booking is made, you can still grab a cheap spot.

Even if those prices at the caravan park go through the roof, which is unlikely, there are still other spots around town where it is free to pull up and spend a few nights.

Ms McGowan said spots like Three Mile Pool on the Ashburton River are free and always will be.

The town of Onslow is growing up pretty fast. With such rapid growth, there will be some giant challenges that will have to be overcome.

Getting roofs over the heads of all the new people in town is a major one, but with that comes the task of keeping light bulbs on, taps running and toilets flushing too. Tourists will still want to visit and not turning them back by waving a big price tag is also a hurdle for Onslow.

While Onslow has a big revamp on the way, the talk of the town is all about what the locals don’t want to lose, and that’s their humble little country town feel, snuggled between the reef and range.
**What:** $1.43 billion project to pipe gas from the Macedon Field to an onshore plant. The refined gas will then flow along the Dampier to Bunbury pipeline for the WA domestic market. Plant capacity is 200 million standard cubic feet (217 terrajoules) per day.

**Why:** To process gas from BHP’s four subsea wells, 100km west of Onslow.

**Where:** The Macedon hub is at Ashburton North 15km south west of Onslow on the Urala pastoral lease.

**Who:** BHP Billiton owns 71% of Macedon and is leading the Project on behalf of its joint venture partner, Apache Northwest which has a 29% share.

**When:**
- 1992 Macedon gas field discovered
- 2003 BHP found gas in its WA offshore prospects
- 2010 Environmental approval granted & final investment decision
- 2012 Construction started
- 2013 Construction scheduled for completion & first LNG expected
- Expected project life is 20 years

**How many:** 330 workers accommodated in the construction phase camp, and only 18 will be needed once the plant is operating.

**How much:** BHP Billiton has committed some funds to support health, youth and sport in Onslow but, when asked, declined to give an exact figure.

*Information sourced from www.bhpbilliton.com and www.epa.wa.gov.au*

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**What:** $29 billion Gas Hub in three parts. One section will process 200 terrajoules of gas per day for the WA market. The other two will convert the gas to liquid for export, each processing 4.45 million tones per year.

**Why:** To process gas from Chevron’s offshore Gorgon Gas field, that also includes the Barrow Island Project.

**Where:** The Wheatstone hub is also being built at Ashburton North not far from the Macedon Hub.

**Who:** Chevron owns 64% of Wheatstone and is leading the project on behalf of its joint venture partners: Apache Corporation (13%), Tokyo Electric Power Company (8%), Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company (7%), Shell and Kyushu Electric Power Company (1.5%).

**When:**
- 2004 Chevron discovered Wheatstone
- 2008 Intention to develop announced
- 2011 Construction started
- 2012 First LNG expected
- Expected project life is 40-50 years

**How many:** Employment will peak at 6500 jobs during the five year construction phase. Once the plant is operational in 2016 it will employ 225 people.

**How much:** Chevron has committed around $250 million to social infrastructure projects in Onslow to upgrade roads, health services, power, emergency and community services.

*Information sourced from www.chevronaustralia.com and www.planning.wa.gov.au*
The Chevron and BHP Billiton gas projects are set to increase Onslow’s population and that means the tiny town is expanding and maturing rapidly. Onslow needs more housing but before that can happen problems with power and water supplies have to be resolved. A team of people from the Shire of Ashburton, the Pilbara Cities Office, LandCorp, the Department of State Development, Department of Planning, Chevron and the Onslow community have been working on The Onslow Expansion Plan—a vision about how Onslow can become the Star of the North. The plan aims to respect Onslow’s heritage (both indigenous and European) and to focus on fostering community wellbeing. To find out more about the plan, stop in at the shire office or check it out online. This map is from the plan and it shows areas earmarked for rezoning and development, but please note that it’s a ‘vision map’ only and the work won’t go ahead until each project is investigated further and heritage and native title approvals have been granted. The Onslow Expansion Plan is online here: http://www.ashburton.wa.gov.au/library/file/Onslow%20Expansion%20Plan%20May%202012.pdf
Nested on the WA coast, 1400 kilometres north of Perth, Onslow is home to multi-national giant Chevron’s $29 billion Wheatstone Liquid Natural Gas Project — one of Australia’s largest ever resource projects.

This means Onslow’s current population is set to explode. The gas hub construction and operational workers are already moving in and bringing a host of other changes to the town with them.

Chevron has launched a recruitment drive for 5000 construction workers to join the town’s 600 residents, and the only pub in Onslow, the Beadon Bay Hotel, is already reaping the benefits of having more thirsty people around.

The pub, that was bought for less than $1 million in 2004, is now said to be worth almost $5 million.

Karratha real estate agent Leigh Anderson said property prices in Onslow are on their way up. “With the Wheatstone project about to commence, I expect the market to soar, as the demand will be more than the supply which will inflate prices,” she said.

“\textbf{I would expect the prices to increase around the 30 per cent mark per year for the next couple of years until there is a new land release.}”

Ms Anderson said prices have soared over the past four years.

“In 2008, the growth rate was minus 8.2 per cent,” she said. “Growth since 2008 has been an average of 32 per cent, per year.”

Onslow resident Geoff Herbert said the recent and upcoming increases in property prices have forced some residents to leave.

“The problem is a lot of people had chances to buy property in Onslow for $80,000, but didn’t and now it’s out of their reach, and some are leaving.”

However, Mr Herbert believes that while the changes Onslow is facing may be unfortunate for some, for others some good will also come of it.

“It’s good and it’s bad and you’ve got to control the bad, as much as take the good.

“For me the downsides are traffic and issues with alcohol at the pub, but I think Chevron and BHP will keep a close eye on that.

“And after the big construction phase, they all go and we’ll have 300 people to run the plant and their families and that’s what makes a community — the family.”

He went on to explain: “There’s only 60 years life...”
on the gas, which sounds like a long time but it will come around pretty quick.

"Then they'll get new production methods so it will go quicker, so maybe you've got 40 years. So in 40 years they'll ask 'so what will Onslow have left?'

"Onslow will have fantastic facilities. It will have a $14 million swimming complex. It's going to have a fantastic airport, all this accommodation in town, hotels, motels and restaurants.

"So it could turn into a fantastic sort of holiday spot. This is like a stage to build Onslow and you will keep the community because it is quite small. It will hold what it is and it's got a good future."

Felicity Brennan, co-owner of Tricks Electrics, is disappointed about the effect the changes have had on the town so far.

"It's very hard, and you've already lost a lot of community here," she said.

"People have been driven out of town, your locals that came here because there's nothing here; we chose [Onslow] because of that.

"That many people have already been driven out because of the rents. The rents have gone from $250 a week to anything up to two and a half grand so your average person is being driven out, because not everyone is earning $200,000 a year."

Ms Brennan said the changes will negatively impact her business: "We're going to lose our trade assistants because their rent is about to go from $250 to $1000 a week.

"They're only earning $50 or $60 grand a year, whereas everyone else coming in is on $150,000 a year, and they're not even paying their own rents, their companies are. "

Ms Brennan is critical of the way the change has been managed. She said: "It's all reactive, none of it is proactive. The government and the shire have known for 10 or 11 years that this was going to happen. Now, in retrospect they're racing to get power and water for these 500 new homes that they're going to put in here. That all comes back governments and councils now relying on everything being outsourced instead of doing it themselves and being owned, they are relying on resource companies to do it for them."

Like Geoff, Dawn McAullay, the Onslow Museum curator is relatively positive about Onslow's future.

"It doesn't really worry me because we've got to have progress," she said.
“As long as they don’t mess up the old part of Onslow, I’m happy with the progress.

“If they build out further and keep an eye on the ones that come in, the FIFO fellows, the ones I’ve met they’re all really nice but you get the odd one that does a bit of stirring up, as long as they keep things on a level keel it won’t worry me.”

Onslow recently saw the opening of its very first pharmacy; one of the first changes that the Wheatstone Project has prompted.

Diana Moriarty, manager at Mindaroo Station — the ancestral family home of mining magnate Andrew Forrest — said: “I think the greatest thing that Onslow has seen since I have been here is the pharmacy.”

Mrs Moriarty believes that the Wheatstone Project will continue to bring positive changes for Onslow.

She added: “I believe they’re going to get regular public transport which could benefit the town greatly, because if they want to fly somewhere they won’t have to go to Karratha. So things like that will be brilliant for Onslow.”

Mrs Moriarty hopes the spirit of Onslow will remain and that it won’t be just a town to make money from and then leave.

“There are a lot of people who are purely coming here for the dollar signs whether it be mining or just buying up in Onslow,” she said.

“I think there are a lot of people who think they are going to make big money, and those people I would perhaps say, do they have Onslow at heart or themselves at heart?

“I think there will be a huge division between the locals and those who want to make the big dollar.”

Whether Onslow will remain a small town or not, only time can tell. It’s a mixed bag for now.

They say a change is as good as a holiday, but when you live in a holiday town it’s understandable to want to keep things idyllic. Whether the locals like it or not though change is coming to Onslow and only time will tell how it will all work out.
While options are limited there are a few eateries to chose from if you're in Onslow and hungry. While the IGA sells ingredients and the petrol stations sell some snack foods, you’ll have to head to either the pub, Nikki’s Restaurant or the Coffee Pot van for freshly cooked meals.

**Beadon Hotel and Pub**
It’s both the beloved ‘local’ and the only pub in town. The charm of this pub is, as you’d expect, locals hanging around enjoying a few bevvies and swapping stories of the day. Enjoy typical good pub grub and daily specials for $18 and on Friday night expect it to be packed as locals flock in for a uniquely local activity called Hunt the Turtle—a community card game that promises a chance of winning a cash prize.

**Nikki’s Restaurant**
If you’re looking for some silver service and an à la carte menu head to Nikki’s Restaurant for unrestricted ocean views and fine dining. There are tempting specials every day, a variety of wines to choose from and a salt and pepper squid dish famous with the locals. Nikki’s is very popular so bookings are essential. Prices range from $8-$20 for an entrée and $36-$42 for mains, and you'll be tempted by the desserts too.

**Coffee Pot**
If you’re on the go then the Coffee Pot is the place to stop. The food is pretty good for something that comes from a van, yummy bacon and egg muffins for 7 bucks and a home-style burger for around $15. An added bonus is that the Coffee Pot is a good place to hang out and catch up on a bit of the local gossip.
Sandi McAullay remembers her childhood as simple and free. There were no computers or televisions, time was spent on the beach and in the sand hills, and kids had to use their imaginations.

Sandi worries that today’s generation of kids will lose that sense of community interaction as work hours increase and parents are home less often.

“There’s no family time, shifts are 7am to 7pm so kids don’t see their mother or father or whoever’s working,” she said.

Sandi Peters (McAullay), daughter of Dawn McAullay, recently returned home after 22 years living in Karratha where she raised two children of her own. Born and raised in Onslow, Sandi has a deep community connection to the town and can see how the community spirit has changed since her homecoming.

“That’s one of the reasons I came back, because there hasn’t been community spirit here for years and that is all to do with shift work going from eight hours to 12 hours.

“If you have a quiz night or a sports day, someone’s not going to be there because they’re working. That’s not just here, it’s all through the mining sector.

“I have two boys and I did the sports thing with them and there were rarely any parents at the soccer matches.”

The McAullays are well known in town; Dawn McAullay has called Onslow home for the last 63 years and is the town’s museum curator and historian. Dawn and her daughter are both torn between maintaining the town and its heritage while also allowing for continued progress and growth.

“We started preserving our history prior to Chevron and BHP coming on board, it’s just something you do, you preserve your history. The town has grown, as you know, with all this industry happening but it doesn’t really worry me because we’ve got to have progress,” said Dawn, adding that she wants the old part of Onslow to stay the same but has no problem with the town expanding outwards.

“There are things the town could do with, but what you don’t have you don’t miss as far as I’m concerned. The younger ones possibly would want to see a few changes. But as long as I’ve got my TV, electricity, running water, I’d be quite happy for Onslow to stay the same.”
Asked why she returned home, Sandi looked towards her mother and said: “Family, that's the most important thing, and to make sure Onslow stayed the same.”

The obvious changes happening around town like the new chemist and Multi Purpose Centre positively affect the community in big ways, but some big changes directly harm local residents.

“Theoretically not a lot has changed at the moment apart from the house prices and the rent. It’s a problem now because people can’t afford to stay here so you end up with itinerant workers. The backpackers have got all the jobs in the shops because people can’t afford to stay here [long term].

“There are million dollar blocks for sale, which is ridiculous. Six or seven years ago $340,000 for a four-by-two was deemed expensive and now those homes are a million dollars. They’re unaffordable for a normal person and the rents are $1800 a week. Who can afford that?”

As in Tom Price and Port Hedland there are those who come to Onslow because they see the potential to make money in a newly booming town. But, as a local hoping to maintain the community feel of the town, Sandi feels there are those who only come to Onslow for the dollar signs.

“They’re not here because they like Onslow, they’re just here to make a quick buck and go. What they make here will get spent at their own home in Perth or Brisbane or wherever they come from. Australia is being built on WA at the moment and its mining boom but nothing's coming back to WA. It might go back to Perth to clean up the streets in Perth, but it's not cleaning up the streets here or making our roads better.”

That’s not to say Sandi doesn't want new people to come to town, quite the contrary, you can’t have community without people to build and nourish it.

“When the salt people came here there was a particular division between salt people and town people and now you hear stories that the BHP and Chevron crews aren’t to mix with the town’s people. There goes your community spirit again.

“Why aren’t there cricket matches happening to...
involve these people that are supposed to be doing good things for us. There are miles of coastline that doesn’t get used, why can’t they come and fish and swim?”

Sandi remains involved with the community since her return and has been working on restoring the cemetery, as well as up keeping the town chapel. Unfortunately there are things the town needs but can’t get funding for, like cleaning up the beaches and restoring the church.

“[The church] badly needs work done on it, but you can’t get grants to paint it or put decking on it because it’s deemed to be a religious thing, not historical.”

What will receive funding, however, is the museum. By early 2013, the visitor centre will have a new floor, interpreter panels explaining parts of the museum and a shell collection.

There are other things Sandi wants to see improved as well.

“When the salt people first came here there was a particular division between salt people and town people and now you hear stories that the BHP and Chevron crews aren’t to
The caravan park for instance, to me, that needs a lot of work done on it, to have some proper holiday chalets for people, a backpackers and a camp kitchen. But I’d hate for it to be another FIFO caravan park.

“In Karratha, the caravan parks are full of FIFOs or permanent residents with jobs so the tourists have nowhere to go, and they can’t stay in the hotels because it’s almost $400 a night.”

It is obvious after speaking to Sandi that a desire to maintain the community runs in the family.

Sandi may not be looking after the museum yet but she is already doing what she can around town to make it a welcoming place for the families living there and the new families still to come.

“I’d like Onslow to be much the same. Like the pub, for example, has such great atmosphere. It always has and I don’t want it to change.

“A lot of people don’t like change, and there have been a few changes I don’t like, but there has to be progress.”

“particular division between salt people and town people mix with the towns people. There goes your community spirit again.”
In the pioneering days of WA, Sir John Forrest and his brothers Alexander and David secured a lease of land along the Ashburton River and established the first pastoral station in the area. In 1878 the station was named Minderoo and David Forrest, who was 26 at the time, was appointed manager.

David brought 2000 sheep 1000 miles across the country to Minderoo. Six years later, the station had 16,000 sheep, 80 horses and 200 head of cattle. Mervyn, the only one of David’s five sons who lived beyond childhood, inherited the station.

Mervyn expanded the sheep station to over 500,000 acres and built a big workshop that is still treasured by the family and may have inspired Andrew’s passion for men’s sheds.

Mervyn’s son Don inherited the property next, but due to drought and mounting debt he sold it in 1998. In the mid-2000s there was speculation that Don’s son Andrew was thinking of buying the estate back.

Andrew’s sister Jane told an ABC documentary team in 2005 that she saw the ambition of four generations of Forrest’s in her brother: “He’s seriously got whatever it was that drove Alexander and John and David Forrest to go into the deserts of the middle of the country. It’s in the history, in the blood.”

The dream became reality when Andrew bought the property in 2009 for $12 million and started restoring it to its full glory, adding to the buildings and creating a lake.

He reduced the cattle from 11,000 to 3500 and put in a weir to access the Ashburton River’s underground water supply.

Manager Diana Moriarty said the Chevron and BHP gas hubs would directly affect the property.

She said: “The traffic on the roads is quite a big deal for us ... when there are cattle on the roads, because not all roads are fenced. So those sort of issues come into play with a huge mining venture that goes on on your land.”

Although he’s known a mining magnate Andrew refers to himself as just another bloke. His recent passions include the GenerationOne project, aimed at helping indigenous Australians find employment.
Graffiti, dating back through many decades, on the ruins of Old Onslow are a reminder that the place is not forgotten and has been visited by tourists over the years.

But truth be told, not a lot still remains at the historic site. Prison buildings, an underground cyclone shelter and the cemetery are all that is left, among the waist high grass and spinifex.

Onslow was first founded on the banks of the Ashburton River as a port to serve the pastoral industry in 1885. Named after Alexander Campbell Onslow — the chief justice of WA and acting governor of the time — the town included 120 blocks of land and would eventually become the sites for a hospital, magistrate’s house, a bonds store, police station, court house and prison.

There were no roads or rail connecting the town to anywhere else, so a jetty was built and connected to four miles of tramway over marsh and sandhills out to the ocean. It would be another 100 years before the rail line would reach Onslow.

Recurring cyclones were a constant battle for Old Onslow. Not only did they repeatedly destroy the jetties but they also caused a build-up of sand at the river’s mouth, making it hard for ships to pass.

In 1925 it was decided that Onslow would move 19 kilometres north-east to where it is now located at Beadon Point.

Now Old Onslow is sadly disappearing into the land only a short distance away from some of the centrepieces of WA’s resources boom.

So what’s being done to protect it? One attempt at restoring Old Onslow saw plaques erected to keep it tourist friendly, although time, sun and the weather has eroded many of these.

The 2010 *Onslow Townsite Strategy Background Report* states: “Restoration works to the old police and jail complex have been undertaken to stabilise the ruins and conserve the site, however, more work is needed to adequately protect the future of these structures.”

In 1999 protection efforts saw 99 sites placed on the Shire’s Municipal Heritage Inventory. Only eight of these sites are in Onslow, and only three are from Old Onslow: The police residence, the post office and the Onslow goods shed/museum, which was once the bonds store but has been relocated into town. Although the Old Onslow town site is on the Heritage Council of WA’s Register of Heritage Places, it is not yet on the National Register.
Marie-Pierre Dussault moved to Onslow with her partner Geoff in 2002. She unexpectedly fell in love with the small town and has lived here ever since.

“It’s a little place with a lot of opportunities.”

For years she has worked at Onslow Salt. However, it is not the only thing that takes up her time. As well as raising a family with Geoff, she has dedicated her time to bird rescuing.

“Everyone was giving me injured birds. I think they knew I liked animals and for some reason they kept giving me animals to look after because they didn’t seem to know what to do with them,” she said.

“Something is calling you to something and you don’t really have a choice. I’m glad it happened. It’s beautiful.”

As for the changes occurring to Onslow?

“I’m a bit of a hippy. I like things to stay as natural as possible. That’s why I came to live in Onslow, because of the nature surrounding us.”

Felicity Brennan has lived in Onslow for years, running Trick Electricks.

While she’s enjoyed the time she’s spent in the town, she’s losing patience with all the changes that are occurring.

She believes the town is not benefiting at all.

“There are planes coming in, we can’t get on one,” she said.

“They’re talking about all the money that Chevron are going to throw here on a new hospital and so on and so forth, but the hospitals not going to happen until at least another six years.

“Things like the tourists — they’ve been driven out because of the prices and there is nowhere else for them to stay.”

While Felicity still has a fondness for the town, the reasons she came to live in Onslow are still the reasons she loves the place.

“It’s a great place to bring your kids up,” she said.

“You can go fishing, you can go down to the beach and find no one there, which is the best.”
Jackie Barry is the principal at Onslow Primary School and she’s been in town since 2010. She said the mining companies coming to town have helped the school access funding for new technology in the classroom, including iPads.

As well as the new facilities, the upgraded roads make Onslow a safer place and the hospital will be a big benefit too.

Jackie thinks it is good for the town to have access to infrastructure and resources that are more up to date and readily available. She has been in the Pilbara for five years now and has fallen in love with the way of life.

"I just really like the lifestyle here. Even though Onslow is busy now it still has that small town feel. There isn’t really anywhere you can’t walk to at this stage. I also like to take my dog down to the beach, walk for an hour and not see anybody.

“It is bound to change but it’s about working with that change so that it does benefit the community. Having access to a lot more infrastructure and resources will be the big benefit.”

In two words Jackie describes Onslow as a hidden gem. “Particularly when you talk about the kids at school,” she said. “Everyone who comes comments on their behaviour. They’re really good kids.”

Pete Kalalo is a remarkable man to sit down and have a chat with. Full of old stories and jokes, Pete has done everything from a law degree at Murdoch to hand making his own unique art and being in his own band, the Back Alley Boys.

Pete, or Back Alley Pete as he is known around town, came to the Pilbara from Melbourne in the ‘70s during Dampier’s mining boom.

He ran his own business in Carnarvon printing t-shirts for the local clubs, pubs and tourists shops.

When a mate asked him to come to Onslow to paint a mural he immediately fell in love with the town and packed up the shop he had owned for eight years to move here.

An avid windsurfer, Pete enjoyed having the whole ocean to himself. He worked on the Chevron offshore gas hub for a while before going to the Onslow hospital as an orderly for 15 years.

After 23 years in Onslow how does Pete feel about the place?

“You can trust everybody. You go down the street for a litre of milk and you’re there for two hours. Before you know it you’ve bought a carton of beer, when you went for milk and you’re ’round their place having a drink. That’s the lifestyle.”

Despite his Indonesian and Scottish heritage, Pete is a full-blooded Aussie who has given his life to the land, the lifestyle and the people.
Austrian-born Joe Freeman originally came to Onslow to cook at the pub. Despite having family in Austria and across Australia, he has made Onslow his home. “I get up in the morning, have a coffee and watch the sun come up – it’s absolutely magic,” he smiled.

Joe works for the Post Office delivering parcels, and during his interactions with the community he has noticed attitudes changing. “A lot of locals are fed up with what’s happening. They are selling up and moving off to Shark Bay or Kalbarri,” he said.

Pearse Herbert keeps coming back to Onslow. After being born here in 1944, and raised on Peedermulla Station life has taken him to different jobs and places, but in his retirement he’s chosen a beautiful beachfront property on First Avenue.

Growing up, Pearse found that there weren’t many job prospects in Onslow, so he drove trucks for iron ore projects, such as Tom Price and Mount Newman. Recalling the long drives, he said: “I saw them all going from spinifex country to big mines.”

Asked what’s now changing in Onslow he said: “A lot more fluorescent vests popping up” and “the thing that really brings it home is their reversing horns. It took awhile to train them to reverse in at night and drive out in the morning.”

Having previously seen mining towns grow, Pearse isn’t too concerned about it. He explained: “People say, ‘We don’t want Onslow to change.’ But I say, ‘Well, it’s too late. Onslow has changed far beyond anything that was here before, 40 years ago. The only thing you can do is try and guide change so it has a better outcome. ‘I want to see Onslow get the best deal, because this will most likely be the last big expansion to Onslow that I can see.”

Joe thinks that the upcoming changes in the town will mostly be positive: “Some things will be for the better. More infrastructures are going to happen. We need a permanent doctor and we need a bank. The only banking facilities are at the Post Office and you can only use two cards!

“The water has to be upgraded because there isn’t enough water supply here. Chevron have been thinking about putting in a desalination plant but God knows when that’s going to happen. “There’s all this talk about what’s being upgraded but nothing’s started yet.”
Many changes and upgrades are on the way for Onslow that will bring with them new services and new faces.

The first of many popped up earlier this year when the Onslow chemist opened its doors.

Vincent Cosentino opened the Onslow Pharmacy on April 1, 2012. He also owns the pharmacy in the South West town of Harvey.

Before the chemist opened prescriptions would have to be faxed to Exmouth and there would be a one day turn-around time before the medicines would arrive back in Onslow. Sometimes it took as long as three days. That’s not the case anymore, as Mr Cosentino explained: “Any script that’s supplied by any doctor in Australia can be filled.”

The Onslow chemist employs a full-time pharmacist, a full-time pharmacist’s assistant and a casual pharmacist.

Mr Cosentino said once the town begins to grow the pharmacy will have to grow as well. But to what degree in terms of employees, shop size and opening hours, is yet to be decided.

An added bonus for locals is that the pharmacy also stocks a range of body care and pampering products to make life a little more luxurious.

Over at Onslow Hospital there is a six-bed inpatient service with a 24 hour nurse-led emergency department. While there are no resident GPs, District Medical Officers fly in from Karratha’s Nickol Bay Hospital when they are needed. Community Health Nurse Jill Gibson also makes the trip to Onslow from Exmouth each fortnight.

The WA Country Health Service said that with the forecast population growth, primary healthcare and emergency services will face the biggest increase in demand.

“Any script that’s supplied by any doctor in Australia can be filled.”
Onslow is second to Dampier as Western Australia’s largest exporter of salt. The high evaporation levels relative to the annual rainfall of the Pilbara region make the area extremely suitable for salt production.

The Onslow salt mine pumps seawater from Beadon Creek to a system of condenser ponds, where it dries out and gets saltier before being pumped to crystallisers.

It takes a few months for the salt to grow on the surface of the condenser ponds to a thickness suitable for harvesting. After harvesting it is trucked to a wash plant before being conveyed to the stockpile. An overland conveyor belt transports the salt to the boats that moor at the end of the jetty on Sunset Beach.

Onslow Salt began commercial operation in 1999, bringing a big population boost to the previously sleepy town, at first in 1999 and again in July 2002 when exporting began.

According to the Department of Planning, without the expansion of salt operations, and later oil and gas developments, no significant growth of Onslow’s 700-strong population would have been expected.

Prior to the Chevron’s Wheatstone and BHP Billiton’s Macedon gas projects starting construction, Onslow Salt was the town’s largest employer, with a 100 per cent locally based workforce policy.

It was reported by the Western Australian Mineral and Petroleum Statistics Digest 2009/10 the Onslow Salt operation had a drop of 18 people in 2009 from the previous year, to 143 employees.

However, it is predicted that demand for salt will continue to increase, particularly from Asia, given Onslow’s close proximity.

Onslow Salt employment has created 39 homes in the town. The Shire of Ashburton is currently seeking a further 20 lots. As of November 2011, a small scale expansion of the salt operation is already planned.

Japanese company Mitsui and Co Ltd acquired Onslow Salt from Gulf Holdings Pty Ltd in 2006.

It is the third largest salt supplier in the Asian market, and it also controls the Shark Bay Salt Joint Venture.
Growing together

community gardening

Words & photo by Aine Ryan

It’s impossible to visit the town of Onslow without noticing the beautiful community garden.

Established and tended by an enthusiastic group of green thumbs, the Onslow Community Garden was officially opened in July 2010 with 300-400 locals there for the occasion.

The community garden is next to the school garden founded by Marcelle Coakley in 2007. Marcelle initially work-shopped the idea with the intention of promoting healthy eating for the kids in the town and the project developed from there, with the help of some corporate funding and lots of local participation.

Celebrity chefs Don Hancey and Pete Manifis, an Onslow man himself, have told radio stations that they believe Onslow has something the rest of the world should be copying.

Geoff Herbert, the Project Manager of Onslow Community Garden, enjoys maintaining the garden.

“I go down and keep an eye on it for half an hour every day and we have Busy Bees every month or so,” he said.

“The turnout goes up and down. We might have 10 people, other times we might have 30, but people always show up and afterwards we’ll have a big pizza afternoon.”

The garden, which is full of fresh fruit, vegetables, herbs and a wood-fired pizza oven, serves as the perfect meeting spot for members of the community.

It is also used for fundraisers and town events.

In early 2012, the town received a grant from the Easternwell Community Grants program which allowed Onslow to purchase new seedlings for the garden. The seedlings provided fresh produce to the town at no cost.

Meanwhile in the school garden, the children are still actively involved, with each year group taking care of a different garden bed.
In November 1998 Gerard Carroll came to Onslow with what was initially a five-year-plan and purchased the local Australia Post office. Located on Second Avenue, it has always been a small business, however this may be changing with the increasing population of the town.

Gerard said he could see inevitable changes in the future.

“I can see it’s going to get a lot busier,” he said. “It will have to get bigger and we are going to need to extend the counter and get more post office boxes put in.”

He said the business was short-staffed and he would need to hire more employees.

Mel Ward, Australia Post’s Media and Communications Manager said: “While Australia Post does not have any plans to open an additional post office in the area, we will continue to monitor the needs of the community going forward.”

The post office currently offers bill payment banking, money orders and transfers, gift cards and pre-paid cards, as well as identity-related services such as passport applications and 100-point checks.

Customers planning a holiday can also access a growing suite of travel products including passport photos, foreign currency and travel insurance. Stamps, packing products, post office boxes and a range of general merchandise are also available at the Onslow Licenced Post Office.

Some Onslow residents said they thought the growing population would mean services like the post office would also need to grown.

Diana Moriarty, manager at Minderoo Station said: “The post office is an issue because it’s such a small area for now, but one of the fastest growing in Australia.”

Gerard sees the changes as a good thing for his post office.

“It’ll help the business. Some people don’t like it, but progress is inevitable and you can’t stop it. “You’re better to work with it than against it.”
Replacing the Onslow Police Station is one of the highest priorities on WA Police’s things-to-do list. WA Police will be asking for $16.7 million to fund a rebuild in its submission to the 2013/14 WA State Budget.

Sergeant Jeremy Coulson was the Officer in Charge at Onslow in July 2012. He’s since been snapped up by Chevron and replaced at the helm by Senior Constable Mick Lupau — but before leaving he described Onslow as a quiet town, and said: “It’s always had a low crime rate generally, but in a couple of years things could be different.”

At the moment, the most common offenses in Onslow are domestic assaults and property crime, which includes burglary, theft, damage or stolen motor vehicles. There were 24 reported burglaries in the 2010 – 2011 financial year.

Sergeant Coulson said that this could be easily reduced: “Most of our crime is done by juveniles who see an opportunity, where they find a door open, or a car unlocked and they just go in there and steal something. But if they were locked, they probably wouldn’t even bother.”

WA Police and the Attorney General have both recognised the need to increase policing and court services in Onslow to cater for the increasing growth and activity in the town. The proposed new facility will service both the Ashburton North Strategic Industrial Area and Onslow.

Sergeant Coulson said he didn’t think the increase in population or the FIFO workers would have much impact on the crime rate. “Chevron have been quite good at providing facilities for them out on site, not so much now but in the future, and the people won’t be required to come into town,” he said.

“The big deterrent for them is that if they play up, and we let their employers know; they’ve pretty much lost their job. They get flown home, and that’s it. So, that’s probably a greater penalty than we can dish out to them. They know what the rules are.”

Sergeant Coulson was also a member of the community reference group for Chevron and BHP and he has raised police issues at the monthly meetings. “They’ve just been funny little things,” he said. “Like contractors leaving their flashing amber light on when they drive into town, which we don’t like because it builds complacency amongst people. They see a flashing light and they don’t slow down.”

Onslow’s new police station is near the top of the priority list for a few reasons. One is that it’s current location is in a flood-risk area for cyclones. Sergeant Coulson said: “When a cyclone comes we lock up and go to the SES building, so they want to build a new one for us on higher ground. Onslow is the most hit place for cyclones in the country. We average one striking directly every two years.”

The WA Police Media Office emphasized that the plan to build a new station is subject to funding approval.

Once (and if) funding is approved, they expect it will take about 36 months to acquire a site, get the necessary building approvals and build a new Police Station and Magistrate’s Courtroom in Onslow.
Beth Day has been the caretaker manager at the Onslow General Store for most of 2012. When the previous manager left rather suddenly, the owners asked Beth, who had owned and run several businesses before, to come and help out and manage the store for a while.

Beth noticed the shop struggled at first with the influx of new workers in town, but explained: “A lot of the camps are up and running now, so they’re not coming and cleaning us out like they used to.”

Running out of stock is no longer the problem it was when construction on the camps first began, and according to Beth, the increase in population has led to positive outcomes for the store and the community.

“We’re getting a little bit more variety now and our prices are pretty much the same you’d get anywhere else.

“Freight is a little bit more expensive for us, but it’s only minimal on the cost of goods. Our prices are not exorbitant by any means at all.

“We’ve done all the price checks, comparing them to major retail outlets in Karratha and Carnarvon and we’re just as competitive.”

Beth said that other chains, like Woolworths and Coles, moving in isn’t likely in the short term.

She said: “It’s inevitable down the track, but at this particular point in time the population wouldn’t warrant it.”

That doesn’t mean the Onslow supermarket isn’t preparing for more people: “We will be expanding very shortly. Well, in the not too distant future anyway.

“Plans are in and getting drawn up, and we’re tossing them around to see what we’re going to do.”

With some big developments in the pipeline it looks like busy times ahead, but Beth is eager to resume her retirement in Rockingham.

Although she’s focused on her work now, she laughed: “The job is very demanding, so hopefully I won’t be around too much longer.”
At the Onslow Multi Purpose Centre you can play basketball, netball, tennis, badminton, and indoor soccer. You can also use the rock climbing wall, gym and day-care facilities, do yoga, escape the scorching heat and shelter from a cyclone.

It lives up to its name ‘multi purpose’.

The mega structure was opened by the Minister for Regional Development Brendon Grylls in January 2011 at a cost of $10.9 million.

A large contribution of the funds came from the State Government’s Royalties for Regions program.

“This building is a great example of why the Royalties for Regions program is so important in addressing the long-term needs of regional communities like Onslow which are so often marginalised because of their isolation,” said Minister Grylls.

The area includes shade structures, new footpaths and a water playground, creating a sporting and activity precinct to be enjoyed by all residents.

Onslow community services manager Peta Hayto said that the community had been taking advantage of the complex from the moment it opened.

“We set up a restaurant in the foyer over the school holidays where the youth in our leadership program ran a restaurant for 35 people from the community along with the help of two chefs from Panorama Catering who came up and did a series of workshops leading up to the restaurant. It was fantastic!” she said.

“Yoga for Kids was a yoga class originally created just for the littlies. It has since progressed into adult classes too.

“The Leaping Lizards program, which is funded by the Pilbara Health Network, is aimed at promoting our health and nutrition through our school garden.”

Currently 20 children, aged from 3 to 10, and 20 adults attend yoga classes every week.

The V Swans Program, created by Swan District Football Club and backed by Chevron, uses sport as a tool to engage young people in education throughout the Pilbara. It focuses on improving education, employment, social, sporting and health outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
There was a time when a day at the races was the highlight of the Onslow social calendar. Those days are long gone now and the old race track is rusting away a few kilometres out of town (top two photos). The Shire is waiting for approval from the WA Government to turn the old racetrack into an Enduro Club. Enduro is a type of off-road motorsport consisting of obstacles and challenges.

Onslow Airport (pictured below) is currently undergoing a $30 million upgrade. A 100-man camp was completed in September and upgrades will progress rapidly from now on. The airport is due to be completed by July 31, 2013.
Yes, there is more

To watch the videos, hear the voices, and to see more of Onslow, as it is in 2012, go to www.trackingonslow.net

We’ll be back in February 2013 to hear more of your views and to continue recording the story of Onslow.
This project is a collaboration between Edith Cowan University and the Shire of Ashburton. ECU CRICOS IPC 00279B