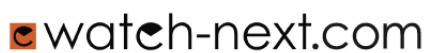




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Village life in modern times



Beset by an ever-quickening pace of life, city-dwellers sometimes lament the loss of simpler times and contact. They needn't, writes village-dweller Marguerite Winter.



The heritage listed village of Wollombi in the south-eastern corner of the Hunter Valley. **Shane Lennard**

city folk, along with a retirement option as well. Every state has its equivalent of the NSW Southern Highlands, where holiday homes became the places people retired to and substantial towns grew up around them.

But there are those rare few others, which centre on a village rather than a town and offer gently calibrated differences that can enhance the latter years of our lives. Their advantages are many, as 21st century life in one tiny hamlet in the south-eastern corner of the lower Hunter Valley might illustrate.

Over the past 50 years, historic Wollombi (circa 1830) has gone from a predominantly agrarian population to become a retirement (and semi-retirement) stronghold of the Sydney business and professional community. The influx has changed village life irrevocably, but the permanent community of around 400, old and new and still predominantly Anglo-Saxon, has a social vibrancy and coherence that defies its recent creation and the many backgrounds of its members.

The change began when, in the 70s and 80s, the Wollombi Valley passed through its hippie, proto-environmentalist stage, with the likes of teachers deeply committed to nature taking up old slab huts as weekenders, and potters and other artists and artisanal craftspeople moving into retreats in the hills to establish their studios. The band Midnight Oil had its piece of wilderness up on Billy Bourne's Arm in those days; that sprawling ridgetop holding is now owned by a North Shore accountant.



Panino is a favourite coffee haunt of the local retiree population.

And accountants and their ilk figure strongly in village life these days. A valley floor road through one of the prettiest arms of the district is known locally as CFO Drive, its small pastoral properties largely peopled by former (and one present) chief financial officer(s) of some of Australia's biggest companies. Among them, some of those early artists have hung on here and thrived; one of the country's leading sculptors lives in the valley and there's enough talented artists around for nearby Laguna to mount a pretty serious art show once a year and the five local wineries to hold the widely respected Sculpture in the Vineyards.

IT INVADERS

But by far the largest single industry cohort among this most recent wave of invaders is from the first-wave IT boys, who began work in the fledgling industry domestically and around Asia in the late 60s and 70s and who began retiring over the past decade or so.

They were a new kind of retiree and what they wanted was to break new ground. Not for them the likes of nearby and prestigious Yarramalong, with its string of high-profile names but with no real heart or centre. It doesn't even have a tavern, a prime requisite for enjoying the communal possibilities of real village life in the 21st century.



Friday night sees a big local turnout at the tavern.

And its modest general store could never pass for a kafeneion, which Bruno Giagu's Panino café can and does. The gathering of old boys talking politics, the ASX and sport at this warm and sociable Wollombi trat most mornings is proof positive of that. Wives tend to join this coffee klatsch on weekends, with the amiable Sardinian who runs the place not shy of giving a laconic opinion on the subject of the day, be it the demise of Tony Abbott or a Melbourne Cup result.

And that is the point about village life versus one of splendid isolation on acreage far from any communal gathering place, where social opportunity is limited to invites to dinner at other people's homes, people just like yourselves. By contrast, Friday night at the Wollombi Tavern sees patrons from all backgrounds jesting and shacking or exchanging important information about the possibility of rain or bushfires and debating the issues of the day.

Village life reminds us that we live in a country where Jack is as good as his master, as a pretty affluent bunch rubs shoulders and shares a drink with those who work their properties, tend their gardens, run their errands and generally keep the place going. You get to chat with members of the volunteer fire service, which is comprised equally of ex-city folk (and occasionally their children) and what we might term "the locals".

But not every social pursuit is shared across the community. The bridge club, as you might expect, is patronised entirely by the more recent arrivals and is just one of 40 associations or activities villagers can now join, from tennis to Pilates to the gardening club. Stitch and Bitch, on the other hand, is a band of knitters that appears to be drawn from across the social spectrum.



Sculpture in The Vineyards for NEWS Director of Sculpture in the Vineyards Tara Morelos with The Listrumpet by Sue Roberts at the Undercliff Winery in Wollombi. **Kitty Hill**

THAT KIND OF PLACE

A number of this latest wave of residents draw upon wider social options by maintaining a Sydney or overseas residence or doing a lot of travel. But most are home in Wollombi for special occasions, be that an important rugby match where, for example, 45 of us dined at Bruno's to watch Australia beat New Zealand in the Bledisloe Cup in August; or New Year, when the dinner is a grand affair programmed for a break before dessert so that diners can amble down to the tavern for the splendid 9 o'clock fireworks. Many hundreds of people of all ages from throughout the region attend this event and police have never been called nor sighted. It's that kind of place.

Not a few of Wollombi's 'city types' are deeply committed to their new home and have expressed a wish to be buried here. It's useful then that we have a funeral director from an old North Shore family firm to see to such matters. (Our undertaker has a small vineyard and his wine label is mordantly titled "Deceased Estate"). Late last year

a lot of us attended a funeral of a much-loved Sydney academic and poet who had commuted to the village for more than 20 years.

The little Anglican church designed by Edmund Blackett (who built Sydney University) was bursting with people as Father Graham, who ministers to all faiths and non-believers alike, led the service. Afterwards, the congregation walked to the cemetery at the other end of the village and the long procession of mourners stretched from church gate to graveside. Few of us had ever experienced anything like that quietly moving ritual of old village life and we were all the better for it.

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