

# QUILPIE

A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF AN ICONIC QUEENSLAND OUTPOST

INTRODUCTION BY VINCE CHALLENGOR  
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*Cover: Hotel Quilpie, more affectionately known as 'The Brick'  
(Andrew Chapman)*

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# FOREWORD

STUART MACKENZIE, MAYOR

It is a great honour to provide the foreword for this publication, commemorating the centenary of the town of Quilpie. Relative to many towns and cities across Australia, Quilpie is quite young, but 100 years is certainly a very significant achievement. When a small settlement sprang up, just west of the Bulloo River at the end of a just constructed railway line in 1917, there were no guarantees that this tiny hamlet would survive and create such a rich history over its future life.

My great grandfather, ‘Galloping’ Jack Watts, one of Sir Sidney Kidman’s senior pastoralists, was earning his pioneering reputation by helping to manage the vast Kidman empire long before Quilpie came into existence. His nickname came from his propensity to move from property to property on horseback, at speed, and sometimes through the night. There were no trains and certainly no motor vehicles to assist him in his endeavours.

Our indigenous inhabitants’ first visitors were the pioneering families like the Duracks, Tullys and Costellos, made famous in Mary Durack’s Kings in Grass Castles. They were very closely followed by the opal miners, who hastened the development of the surrounding towns of Adavale, Eromanga and Thargomindah. A century later, Quilpie has grown to be the most populous town of them all.

The railway is obviously the key factor in the town’s development. As the railhead became more important to the state’s economy, more and more pastoral development also occurred in the area that the rail serviced.

The wool industry boomed, driving that pastoral expansion. Sadly, this industry has declined in the last 20 years and we have seen a major contraction in our shearing services and subsequent employment.

In contrast, the livestock trucking industry has expanded over time. It initially grew to service the cattle trains, but there are now trucking companies that transport livestock right through to saleyards, feedlots and processors to the east. Primary produce freight, initially wool and now livestock, has always been, and still is, Quilpie’s core business.

The resources industry, notably oil and gas, has sustained our mining heritage started by the opal miners over 100 years ago. The present prosperity of the shire owes much to our resources sector.

Quilpie’s strong fundamentals of endeavour, innovation and hard work have carried the town through the last 100 years and still ensure its future today. Coupled with a positive and inclusive community spirit, this town still attracts young people willing to give life its best and bring up their children with the same ideals.

Prosperous times have been followed by times of extreme hardships but Quilpie, founded in the depths of the ‘Great War’, has continued to grow and nurture its shire through many wars, droughts and industry collapses. The friendly resilience of its people is perhaps the towns greatest asset.

It is with this in mind that we celebrate Quilpie’s centenary year in 2017. We celebrate our history and our people. We celebrate our

indigenous community, the richness of its culture and all that it have contributed to the district. We celebrate the grazing community, our shearers, our drovers and all who have contributed to our pastoral identity. We celebrate our miners – those who have toiled to extract opals, oil and gas. We celebrate all the business proprietors and the service providers. In essence, we celebrate our Quilpie community in its entirety.

It gives me great pleasure to present Quilpie: A pictorial history of an iconic Queensland outpost as a lasting memento of Quilpie’s first 100 years and a lasting guide to the prospects for its future.

Stuart Mackenzie  
Quilpie Shire Mayor





## INTRODUCTION

VINCE CHALLENOR

Aussies love nothing better than something that stirs the patriotic love for their country and for the town and district that has been so much part of their lives. And there is probably no more opportune time for a country town and its embraced shire to celebrate its place in this vast continent and its achievements than the occasion of reaching its century.

For the proud country town of Quilpie, the year 2017 is that important milestone in time. It is the year when the town celebrates its centenary, and it provides a golden opportunity for the present day population to raise their glasses and toast such an important occasion.

While doing so, it is important to take the time to reflect on the past hundred years and more. It is important to recognise the efforts of those gallant, courageous and hardworking people who unselfishly battled so hard against formidable odds, without considering defeat, to achieve their goal. These people were always ready to contribute, yet asked for so little in return.

Incidentally, my contribution is not intended as a complete story of the history of Quilpie and its shire, but merely a gathering of some glimpses into our past, handed down by my parents, grandparents and others from our early days of settlement.

Present day generations have witnessed televised images of man kicking dust on the moon, astronauts speaking back to earth in a very relaxed style, while scientists work on the seemingly inevitable human mission to mars, which is no longer a fantasy of the sci-fi world.

Technology has changed our lives in many ways. A small Bakelite instrument pulled from the hip pocket or purse presents instant communication

with family or friends, whether they be down the road or in Berlin or New York. And if we are short of cash, a small card inserted into a slot in a device on the wall, followed by the typing of a PIN, results in you being presented with a fist full of fifty dollar notes.

An early morning breakfast in Brisbane before boarding a jet airliner for Britain can be complemented with a late lunch in London the following day. These things that people take for granted today are worlds apart from the living standards endured by the earliest of settlers at Adavale and Quilpie.

It might be difficult for today's generations to comprehend how basic life was when our marvellous forebears battled to create town centres and pastoralists developed their grazing properties and suitable homesteads.

Adavale was the first township developed in the northern Bulloo area, with Blackwater Creek at its front door, providing an essential water supply so necessary for a town to survive. As the township developed, so did small businesses. Grocery shops, a saddlery and a blacksmith's shop appeared, and like all bush outposts the town soon boasted several Hotels. This enabled the town to live within itself, at the same time suffering the total absence of essential services such as medical, dental, ambulance and hospital services as we know them today.

The people lived in isolation, fully aware that serious health failures



could confront them at any time, conscious of the fact that the only possibility of full hospital and medical care was by way of horse and sulky to Charleville, one hundred miles away over a bush track. Telephone services did not exist.

My grandparents, Bill and Emma Hall, lived in Adavale in its early days of settlement. My grandfather was a stockman on Milo station, a huge pastoral holding, which shored as many as 700,000 sheep in one year.

Bill and Emma could quickly recollect their lives spent at Adavale, sometimes touching on sad happenings, sometimes on serious ones, sometimes recalling humorous goings on.

In those days, housewives usually accepted Monday as their wash day, with whites, fast colours and soiled clothes boiled up in a copper boiler fired up by a hot Gidgee fire. Tuesday was ironing day, and with no electricity available the ironing was done with flat irons or Mother Potts irons, heated up by placing them on the top plates of a wood stove.

Some women used the dreaded petrol iron, which consisted of a polished steel iron with a small petrol tank as its base. To this were attached parallel pipes, cradled within the base of the iron and suitably holed to create the flame necessary to heat the iron. The petrol supply necessary to fire the jets was pressurised by pumping air pressure into the tank by the use of a small pump. There was always fear of a fire at any time when these irons were used.

My poor old grandfather became involved with one such fire incident in Adavale. A neighbour, Mrs French, was ironing with a petrol iron when it burst into flames and she screamed out for help. Grandfather Bill responded to her call, rushed to her and quickly surveyed the situation. He grabbed a blanket from a bed nearby, proceeded to wrap the iron in the blanket, then tossed the lot out into the front yard, only to be verbally abused by Mrs French for ruining her good iron. I guess grandad might

subsequently have pondered the adage: "You win some, you lose some."

Adavale grew as a town and was eventually governed by its own elected Shire Council. Everything looked positive for further growth when government authorities abandoned their proposal to extend the Western Rail Line from Charleville to Adavale, with possible future extensions into the Central Division. The new location for the railway was initially identified as Quilpeta but was later changed to Quilpie.

The creation of this new settlement, which would become the terminus of the Great Western Railway Branch Line, would see a new town grow while spelling the beginning of the end of Adavale, which over the following decades would become a ghost town. Well known families associated with the town of Adavale would leave to take up the challenge of the new life at Quilpie. The Hall, Richardson, French, Wildy, Larkins, Pegler and Doneman families were just some of those that moved. These names that would be, in time, well known in the newly settled town.

There are buildings still standing in the main street of Quilpie that were hauled from Adavale by teamsters with their teams of Bullocks straining on their yokes and harnesses attached to suitable skids.

Before the advent of rail services to the western regions of Queensland, the only method of transport of heavy goods was by the means provided by the teamster, sometimes called the bullocky, with their huge wagons hauled by teams of bullocks suitably trained to pull heavy loads over all sorts of ground under variable conditions. Horses and camels were also used to do the same job.

Teamsters had serviced the freight needs of Adavale and would include Quilpie in their delivery points as the need for materials and equipment rose. Such deliveries were necessary for the construction of the earliest buildings in the newly planned settlement.

The life of the teamster was at times as tough as it can get. When they



*Quilpie main street, 1912*



*Sinking of the town bore, 1933*



*Above: Pelton wheel at bore head*

*Following page: Mustering sheep, 1915*



left their home base, sometimes their wives and children with them, they knew they would be on the road for weeks. They were not certain of what weather conditions might confront them, and they were fully aware that at any time they or members of their family could be struck down with serious health problems. With no such thing as a telephone to contact the outside world, and often being 50 miles from the nearest help, one can only guess the fear and anxiety that might ensue.

They had to stage each trip making certain to find camp ahead with suitable feed and water available to camp their bullocks. Children would sometimes follow the wagon on foot until the going got too tough or they tired out. In this case, they would sometimes be rested in a wire netting hammock, known as a 'carry all', slung between the front and the rear underframes of these huge wagons.

Imagine the fear experienced by a youngster resting against a bag of potatoes, aware of the squeaks and grinds of the ten tons of cargo just above him or her. Things also about the noise made by the 20cm steel rims on the two-metre diameter wheels – each wheel weighing about as much as today's family motor car – as they crunched forward over sticks, stones and anything ahead. On top of that was the dust that rose from the 26 bellowing bullocks as they worked so hard to haul the huge wagon, urged on by the crack of the bullocky's whip.

My late father-in-law, Alf Heinemann, together with his wife Florence, operated a teamster service out of Charleville during the early days of Adavale and Quilpie. It was quite an experience to sit and listen to their recollections of life on the road with bullocks and wagons, and hear their stories of hardship, anxiety and grief.

They lost a small child to sudden illness when miles from anywhere. Like others before them, they were forced to dig a shallow trench, roll their child in a blanket and bury the child where they were, then move on

the next day. Imagine the sadness and grief carried in their hearts from that day forward.

I recall one of their recollections from the days on the road: a stockman, Dick Geppert, rode 12 miles on horseback from another camp hoping that the Heinemanns might have something in their emergency box to help ease his throbbing tooth ache. They were not able to help him, having used their last tablet or treatment. Mr Geppert thanked them anyway, climbed back into the saddle and rode off back to his camp. Just how tough were those people?!

The need for the service by teamsters began to reduce from the April 11, 1917, with the official opening of the rail service into Quilpie. The first station master was J Kalinowski, and the crew of the first train into the town was Gordon Duthie (driver), Paddy Broadie (fireman) and Harry Thomas (guard). The first appointed maintenance ganger was Duncan McConnell.

Teamsters would continue to haul freight and wool to and from the new Quilpie rail head until the advent of motorised road vehicles and graded dirt roads.

Quilpie can boast about being one of the few towns in Queensland situated adjacent to a river that will never experience a flood. The site chosen for the town had, through the decades, been a campsite and resting spot for the teamsters as they journeyed through Adavale, south along the Bulloo River as they urged their teams to eventually turn west to Eromanga. The site provided a permanent supply of water from the nearby Bulloo River, open grazing for their animals on the river flats and ample availability of mulga scrub if and when required.

Had it not been for the teamsters and their knowledge and experience, Quilpie would not be sited where it is today but on a site approximately four miles (seven kilometres) to the east on Wanko Station, today owned by the

Hamlyn family. Surveys had begun at this site when teamsters advised the powers-that-be that during the bigger floods in the Bulloo River the site being surveyed would be under flood water. The authorities listened and the present site of Quilpie was chosen.

The town of Quilpie was proclaimed on the April 29, 1917, the same year that my father, Jim Challenor, journeyed from Thargomindah and purchased a small blacksmith shop from Mr George Espie, which had been used to service the construction of the rail line from Charleville to Quilpie.

The following year, Jim Challenor established a blacksmith and wheelwright business on the corner of Chulungra and Boonkai Streets, continuing in business there until he retired in 1968. His father, Richard Challenor, worked in partnership with him for 15 years, and the need for their trade soon became evident as Quilpie and its pastoral district began to grow.

Quilpie would grow rather quickly as a new town centre. It remained under the control of the Adavale Shire Council until 1930, when administration was moved to Quilpie and it became the Quilpie Shire Council.

The first chairman was HG Pegler with Councillors FB Rutledge, W Patterson, L Rutledge, E Gibson, J Wade, EJ Pegler, W Hall and EA Sherwin. The first shire clerk was AS Narracott.

Prior to being granted its own local government entity, the fledging town suffered a disastrous setback. In 1926 a terrible fire destroyed most of the southern side of the Brolga Street business centre. In a short time, however, the businesses that had been lost were replaced and local confidence was restored.

Early life in Quilpie was very basic, with no town electricity available and no connected water supply. Until the 1960s, in a shire of 26,000 square miles, there was a total absence of bitumen roads.

The Great Depression in the late 1920s and '30s was followed by

World War Two, which slowed progress and growth for everybody, whether in the town or out on the properties.

However, on October 7, 1933, the local artesian bore gushed forth its first release of crystal clear water, which enabled planning for piped water throughout the town and a sewerage system. This resulted in Quilpie being able to boast that it was one of the first towns in the Commonwealth to have a complete sewerage service instead of having to rely on septic tanks.

The next step forward in town comfort came about with the installation of electricity throughout the local community, a contract granted to Ray Svensson, who with his small team of “sparkies” worked throughout 1951 and early '52 in time for an opening in April 1952. The power was generated from a local power house, and the first electrical engineer in charge was Jack Farrell.

This change spelled the end of some tough parts of life, as we were able to dump the kerosene and carbide lamps, the charcoal cooler, the wood stove and the copper boiler – not forgetting the canvas water bag, of course.

Education was always a priority following the proclamation of Quilpie as a town, and early representations by parent groups were successful in having a state school provided and officially opened on September 10, 1918.

In 1950 the Sisters of Saint Joseph opened a convent school in Quilpie, which included the provision for out-of-town boarders. Both schools continue to operate today.

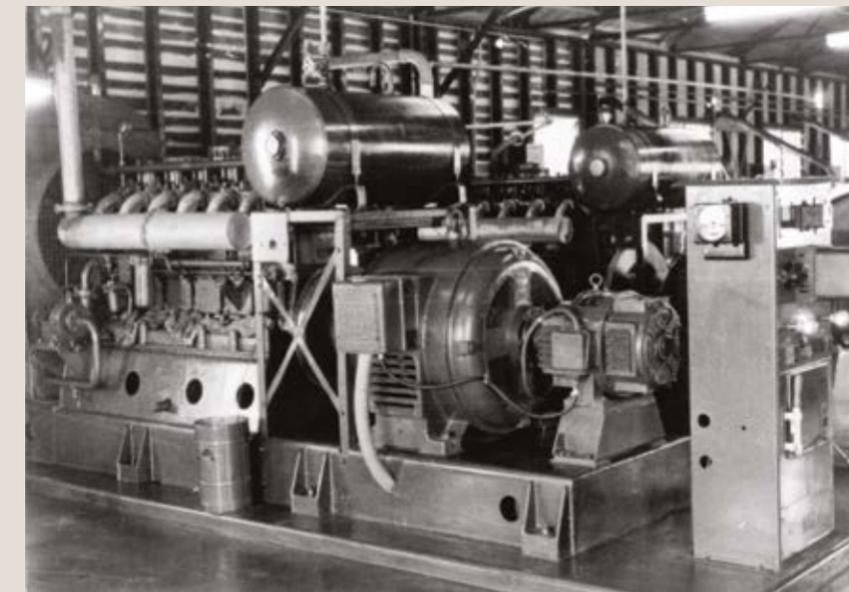
Those of us who attended the state school during the 1940's recall a basic wooden building with front and side verandahs, fully gauzed for fly reduction. There were no such comforts as ceiling fans or air-conditioning, no ventilation at the east and west aspects of the school, and our water dispensers consisted of canvas water bags hanging on several nails on the inside structure of the verandah.



*Unloading goods from a camel train, 1941*



*Challenor family's blacksmith shop*



*Quilpie powerhouse*



*Quilpie powerhouse*