



●
By Matthew Condon

WHERE COAL IS KING

It's the lifeblood of this central Queensland mining town

Photography Justine Walpole

●

To meet the young Dowie family – Marie and Brett, and their children Audrey, Scarlett and baby Joe – you first have to fly to the coastal town of Mackay, 960km north of Brisbane. Mackay was once famous as a sugar capital, but times have changed. A third of the people waiting for their luggage at the local airport are aglow in lime or orange hi-vis vests when we visit in the weeks before coronavirus halted most domestic travel. Advertisements around the arrivals hall may as well be in another language, spruiking heavy equipment, trucks and tools. Sugar may still be important but Mackay is the gateway to the Bowen Basin, and the Bowen Basin is 60,000 square kilometres of coal reserves – the largest in the nation – extracted day and night by an army of miners. Brett Dowie is one of those miners.

Once you leave the airport you have to drive about 220km southwest to the mining town of Moranbah, via the Peak Downs Highway, a notorious two-lane stretch of bitumen populated with road trains, oversized trucks and prime movers hauling giant mining buckets. Once in Moranbah you take a right into Mills Avenue, the spine that runs through town. This place was built by a US mining giant, the Utah Development Corporation, exactly 50 years ago, and in the early days was described by a visiting journalist as being like “a new outer city suburb that has suddenly been dropped into the Queensland bush”.

The Dowie family live in a relatively recently developed part of Moranbah, in Finch Street, adjacent to Bushlark Drive, not far from Sparrow Lane and Raven Crescent. Their brick house is neat. The front lawn is freshly mowed. This could be any house in Ryde in Sydney, or The Gap in Brisbane, or Watsonia North in Melbourne. But this is a mining house in a mining town surrounded by 34 mines, with more to come. (The Carabella mine near the town of Bluff, Walton coal mine west of Rockhampton, and Olive Downs mine, 40km south-east of Moranbah, to name a few.)

Here, at dusk, with children crying to be fed or wailing for *Bluey* on the TV, mining pervades life. Underpins it. Sustains it.

While our politicians debate and discuss this

important sector, while they use it to score or deduct points, while environmentalists turn blue in the face arguing for mining’s immediate cessation and a switch to renewable energy, while men, women and children stop traffic in the major capital cities of Australia to proclaim their climate change concerns, while countless studies, doctorates and scientific analyses go into mining and the future of the planet, the men and women of Moranbah wake up for their shifts, head off to work, do their job and come home to their family, month after month, year after year.

On a warm Tuesday evening, beneath a dusk sky of electric blues and oranges, the Dowie family have opened the door of their home in Finch Street. To sit. And talk. As Marie Dowie’s delicious spaghetti bolognese bubbles away in the crock pot on the kitchen bench.

Before we get to Finch Street at dinnertime, we’d arranged to meet Marie, 38, and another young mother and friend, Rochelle Bruncker, 31, in the Moranbah Community Workers Club earlier in the day. Marie has been in Moranbah for 12 years. Rochelle for four. Both have three children each, all under eight years. “We’re all in it together, especially as mums,” Rochelle says. “We all experience husbands that are gone for 14 hours a day. We know how hard it is.”

“Our families aren’t here,” Marie says. “Grandparents are in another town. So we lean on each other. We’re all in the same boat.”

While this club might be any club across Australia, there are things that are immediately apparent when you visit Moranbah (pop. 8700). Firstly, it actually is like a large suburb dropped onto the red earth in the middle of brigalow scrub. There is no historic architecture, given it was built from scratch in 1969-70, and the houses are a curious mix of two-level and housing commission, except for newer developments on the edge of town. Also, there are few elderly people. As Marie says: grandparents are out of town. This is glaringly accentuated in the small Moranbah cemetery, a football field-sized plot near the entrance to town. Not only are there hardly any graves, but only a handful belong to the elderly. The rest are young adults and, curiously, infants.

And despite its spacious town centre, with a

library, huge public pool, high school and two primary schools, decent food outlets and golf course, this is still a small town. Everybody knows everybody’s business. Drinking problems. Domestic violence. Poor social behaviour. A lot of young men with disposable cash. And affairs.

Moranbah has gone through severe cycles of boom and bust since the Utah Development Corporation first turned a sod in this town. Only now is it recovering from the great slump of 2011. There is a distinct perfume in the air now – of money. As Rochelle points out: “I always say to my friends, if you want to buy a caravan or a four-wheel-drive just come to Moranbah and you will see every make, every colour, every model...”

As for politics penetrating the bubble of Moranbah, you can forget it. It doesn’t exist. Does news of coal mining and climate change and last year’s street protests gain any traction with Moranbahrians? “Not at all,” says Rochelle, who is training to drive big trucks in the mines. Her husband Brodie is a multi-generational underground miner. “Not realistically,” says Marie. “I think the majority of people just roll their eyes and go, ‘They’re at it again. If they’re not picking on us, they’re picking on somebody else.’”

Rochelle: “Standing in the street and blocking the street in Brisbane doesn’t affect us. It’s just stupid. You’re just being annoying. You’re not achieving anything.”

“They need to come out here,” says Marie. “We will welcome you with open arms. Come and breathe our air and eat our food.”

Stop Adani signs appeared in the town and lasted less than 24 hours. “I think it would be nice to be better understood,” Marie says. “I love our environment too. And you won’t get someone that recycles more than I do. I do my bit for the environment. They’ll eventually run out of coal. There’s only so much coal in the ground. But we won’t see it in our lifetime.”

“It won’t be in our lifetime and I don’t think it’ll be in our children’s lifetime,” adds Rochelle. “We need to look after the environment well beyond us. Like, you know, I’ve planted trees in my yard that we’re not going to be there to see grow. You need to think of the future. If I thought it was going to affect my great-grandchildren, I wouldn’t be here.”



When the Utah Development Company tested for coal in the area in the 1960s, it discovered vast reserves in the Bowen Basin. It decided to build a township between its two projected coal mines in Goonyella and Peak Downs. In September 1970, Tom Newbery, then Country Party member for the seat of Mirani, which took in the Bowen Basin region, crowded in the Queensland Parliament about the emergence of magical Moranbah. “The town plan possesses all the necessary features to make Moranbah a pleasant town to live in.”

From the outset, Moranbah was referred to as “Utah’s Utopia”. By 1977 it had a population of 4500. Workers were attracted to the healthy wages. Reporter Arthur Gray wrote in *The Canberra Times*: “if you are thinking of rushing to take up the Utopian life and get away from the cold Canberra winter, you had better join the queue. All the mines are substantially automated and the staff turnover is minimal. There is a healthy waiting list and the Utah recruitment is very selective.”

In 1977, too, the ABC’s *Four Corners* journalist Paul Lyneham landed in town. He interviewed some of the local families about life in a purpose-built mining town and it is remarkable how little has changed in more than 40 years. Lyneham said there was “a subtle social structure of the town that outsiders take a while to understand”. One worker told him there was an American-style “class distinction” underpinning Moranbah. Another said: “You’ve got class discrimination. My wife finds it very difficult to live here at times.” She in turn said she was constantly asked about what her husband did in the mines – code for, what sized house do you live in? They cited the elitism of Arkana Terrace, the exclusive cul-de-sac where the mine’s top managers and supervisors lived. The houses were huge, the blocks spacious. It was known as “Snob Hill”. They told *Four Corners* there were no grandparents in town, and very few relatives. Lyneham also noted the town’s “unusually large number of children”.

All of those facts hold fast today. Talking to locals, we encounter almost identical sentiments. “Have you seen Arkana Terrace yet?” they ask. They say it is (still) the “snobby” part of town. They bemoan the absence of grandparents and family. And yes, the primary schools are packed with small children. History seems to repeat itself in tight cycles here, because it’s the only history Moranbah has.

Before the last big slump nine years ago, the median house price was \$750,000. The rental market was similarly inflated; a modest house for \$3000-\$4000 a week, a single room for \$1000 a



Looking up: Peak Downs mine; Marie with Scarlett and Audrey



week. Then came the downward slide in coal prices. The workforce contracted. Fly-in, fly-out workers filled the breach. Moranbah emptied out. The town heaved under the weight of debt.

Today, there is a tangible optimism around Moranbah. The pendulum may have swung. Things are looking up. Utah is long gone. Today, the big boss in this region is BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA). According to the Queensland Resources Council, the coal sector contributed \$52.5 billion to the Queensland economy during the 2018-19 financial year, and directly employed 34,667 workers, creating a further 226,887 jobs in other sectors related to the industry.

In Queensland, coal was also responsible for \$4.4 billion in royalties last financial year. Dale Last, LNP member for the Burdekin and opposition spokesperson on the mining industry, can feel an optimism too. Almost every major coal mine in Queensland falls within the boundaries of his electorate. “It’s going full steam ahead out in that country,” Last says. “Those long coal trains you see off the highway when you drive into Moranbah? That’s \$110,000 in royalties to the state government. Every one of them. Each train. That’s just money in the till for Queensland Treasury. If it wasn’t for coal royalties, this state would be broke. They’re really going ahead in leaps and bounds. This pandemic may slow

things down but there’s still going to be that worldwide demand for coking coal. I tell you what, out in that country, coal is king.”

It’s early afternoon and Marie Dowie – who only three weeks earlier gave birth to baby Joe – is back at work, albeit sporadically, with Moranbah Real Estate. She has an hour to squeeze in before she has to pick up Audrey from preschool. Marie is joined in her office by her boss, the effervescent Bella Esposito, who has been a Moranbah resident since 1977. The town was seven years old when she arrived, a university-educated woman from the Philippines who would look just as at home on the streets of London or New York. She is immaculately dressed with gold-studded red stilettos and Chanel pearl drop earrings, a triple strand pearl necklace and a large diamond ring.

“What kept me here?” she says. “I ended up falling in love and getting married and had two gorgeous children and after that, I just love living in Moranbah, and they still ask me now [when I go to Brisbane], ‘Do you really live in Moranbah? Because you don’t dress like you live in Moranbah.’ I said it’s what you make of Moranbah, it’s very safe, and now there are more investors purchasing property. They are people who want to be here.”

Moranbah real estate looks after about 500 company and private investor rentals in town. Its latest listing advertises everything from a standard three-bedroom home for sale for \$225,000 to an “executive home” with four bedrooms and fully air-conditioned for \$439,000.

“Moranbah is a town where you can turn anything into everything,” Bella continues. “I did not know how to cook and I opened a coffee shop here. I owned a baby and maternity shop. I did not know anything about sewing and I did not have any children [at the time]. And I’ve had 33 years in real estate... I’ve never been bored.”

Later that afternoon I arrive at Finch Street as the kids are getting ready for dinner. Little Audrey, five, appears at the front door as a purple-clad princess. Her sister Scarlett, two and a half, is rousing from a deep slumber and baby Joe is getting a feed from Marie. Brett Dowie, 40, the miner in the family, is on annual leave and has been at home helping to take care of the kids. Inside, the lounge-room walls are heavily decorated with moody black and white framed photographs of Paris and other European destinations, mostly taken by Marie. They are windows into a world completely unlike the small, flat, utilitarian place that is Moranbah, this little pulse of life

surrounded by great tears in the earth, giant machinery, mountain ranges of coal and trains that stretch for two kilometres. Through the sliding doors of the lounge is a covered back deck. A television is set to a horse racing channel. There is a jukebox. And an esky and beer nearby.

Brett, originally from Blackall, near Longreach, has worked in and around mines his entire adult life. After school he took up a carpentry apprenticeship and “followed the construction circuit” throughout the mines in central Queensland. Regularly on the move – from Blackall to Emerald to wherever there was work – he lived a wild life in the mining camps. “I was a feral,” he says honestly. “I lived there 10 years straight, and by the end I was a heavy drinker, that’s the culture. You work long hours, you come home, you have a few beers... everyone does the same.

“I was always on \$100,000 plus a year. I had the dough. You’re young. You had no kids. You had a nice car. You had all this disposable income. Yeah, I was a punter.” Then he met Marie and they first rented a property together in Moranbah. It got Brett out of the camps and changed his life. “When Marie said it was time to go, I wasn’t sure... but it’s the best decision I ever made.”

Brett is employed by a subcontractor as an apprentice electrician in the wash plant of a coal mine north of Moranbah. “The wash plant washes the coal,” he says. “It comes from underground, onto a conveyor, then it goes through the plant and gets washed, then it gets stockpiled then out on a conveyor, onto a train and out to the bay. Our job is to make sure everything runs... you make sure the plant is going.” He says he likes the mining industry because it’s a satisfying workplace. “It’s not so much the job security,” he says. “Mining can go up and down in a night... with coronavirus they might put off a heap of blokes until things turn around, you just don’t know... but it’s always just been a good place to work. If you turn up and do your job and you do everything right you know you’ll have a job there tomorrow.”

As for politics, he says it makes no difference to him. He’s even uncertain about the identity of his local Federal member of parliament (it is the LNP member for Capricornia, Michelle Landry).

The disconnect between mining communities and the rest of the country was never better exemplified than at last year’s political rally fiasco in the nearby town of Clermont. In April last year, in the lead-up to the federal election, an anti-Adani coal mine convoy led by Bob Brown, former parliamentary leader of the Australian Greens, rolled into Clermont, the closest town to the planned



Security: Marie at work; with Brett and the kids



Adani mine in the Galilee Basin. Miners and their families from the region converged on Clermont to defend their livelihoods. They lined the main street and reportedly “jeered” Brown’s crusaders. Rochelle Bruncker was one of them. “We have the Liberals, the Nationals and the Labor Party standing arm in arm, on the balcony of a pub that’s been there for 100 years, saying, ‘We need this’ and I thought, ‘There is power in the people,’” she recalls.

Dale Last was also there. “Have a look at Bob Brown’s convoy last year, and I was in Clermont, the infamous Clermont rally when he drove into town, they howled him down, he’s lucky he wasn’t tarred and feathered and run out of town. That just brought all those coal mining communities together in a way that has never happened before.”

But for Brett Dowie, politics is just “white noise”. He says none of his mates talks about it. Nobody at work talks about it. Politics is “non-existent”. “We’re all just here paying the bills. You turn up and do your day’s work and you get paid at the end and everyone’s happy.”

Scarlett is seeking her father’s attention. “Dad, Booeey,” she says, looking at the television. “You want Bluey on?” Brett is nursing young Joe while Marie ducks out to show a house to a prospective client. He ordinarily works “eight and six” – eight straight days, six days off. The money is good, though he won’t reveal his wage. Others, though,

talk of a base wage for apprentices of \$85,000 upwards, and underground miners and truck operators earning \$150,000 to \$200,000, or more.

Dale Last adds: “Look, we do mining in Australia really well. It’s safe, it’s reliable, it’s consistent, we have the highest quality coal, some of the best quality coal in the world, and it’s in high demand. They work long hours in pretty tough conditions but at the end of the day they are remunerated well. For a lot of those miners it’s their start in life that they need to get themselves established.”

It’s a theme echoed throughout the Moranbah community. It’s a place where families come to get a “start” in life. Part of that equation is an exit strategy. The Dowies have a plan: they will leave Moranbah when Audrey is ready to go to high school in seven years’ time. They want to move to Queensland’s Sunshine Coast to be closer to family. Brett wants to stay in mining. Would he become a FIFO? “I’ll have to stay in the camps,” says Brett. “Blokes at work fly in from the Sunny Coast. They seem to do it. I don’t know how we’ll go, relationship-wise. I see what it does to families. It’ll be a tough decision when that does happen.”

Very little worries the stoic mayor of the Isaac Regional Council (which takes in Moranbah), Anne Baker. She was recently returned to office unopposed. But then the coronavirus pandemic stopped her in her tracks. She is deeply concerned about the virus and its potential impact not just on Moranbah but the entire coal industry, given its reliance on a fluid, highly mobile workforce. “An outbreak in a single mining operation will shut down one site. Outbreaks in mining communities shuts down an entire industry.”

Since the outbreak, national coal production has actually risen. In Queensland, the volume of coking coal shipped through the Hay Point port in Mackay in January and February was 11 per cent up on the corresponding period last year. And the price per tonne of coal has risen globally on the back of some foreign coal exporting countries suspending mine production because of coronavirus.

One Rockhampton-based miner tested positive last month but in the Bowen Basin the mining industry continues apace despite a gaggle of new health-related protocols and plans. Only crucial FIFO workers from interstate are allowed to travel into Queensland. Mine rosters have been changed, with longer shifts reducing the number of workers travelling to and from mines. While the nation was hunkering down, coal production and prices went up. Out in this country, coal – at least for the time being – is still king. ●