

# The last ones standing

**Western Australia's inns and taverns that have stood the test of time.**

**Words by John W Davison and Moira McDermont  
photography by Jon Davison.**



*Greenhills Tavern*

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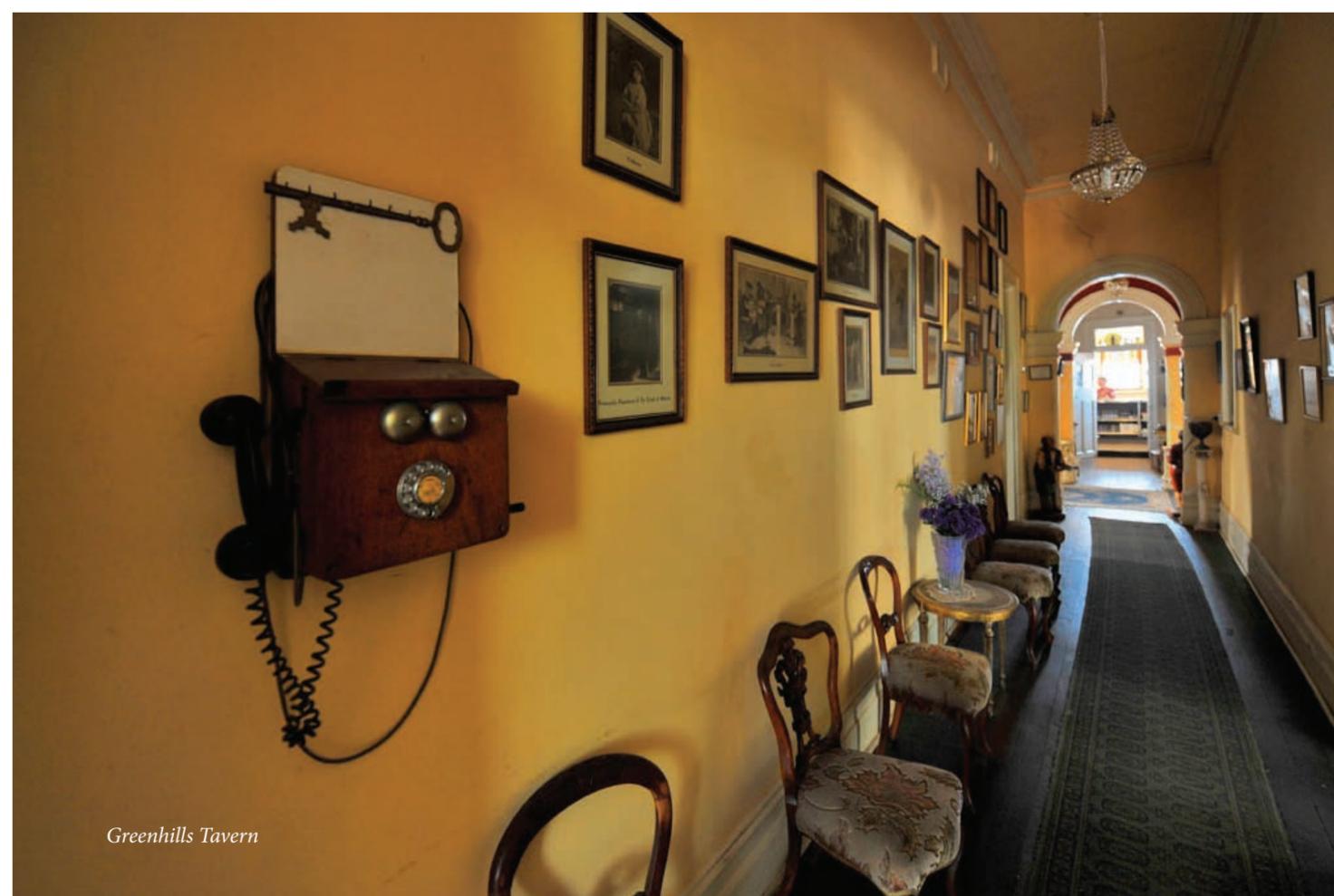
**WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S INNS AND TAVERNS THAT HAVE STOOD THE TEST OF TIME.**

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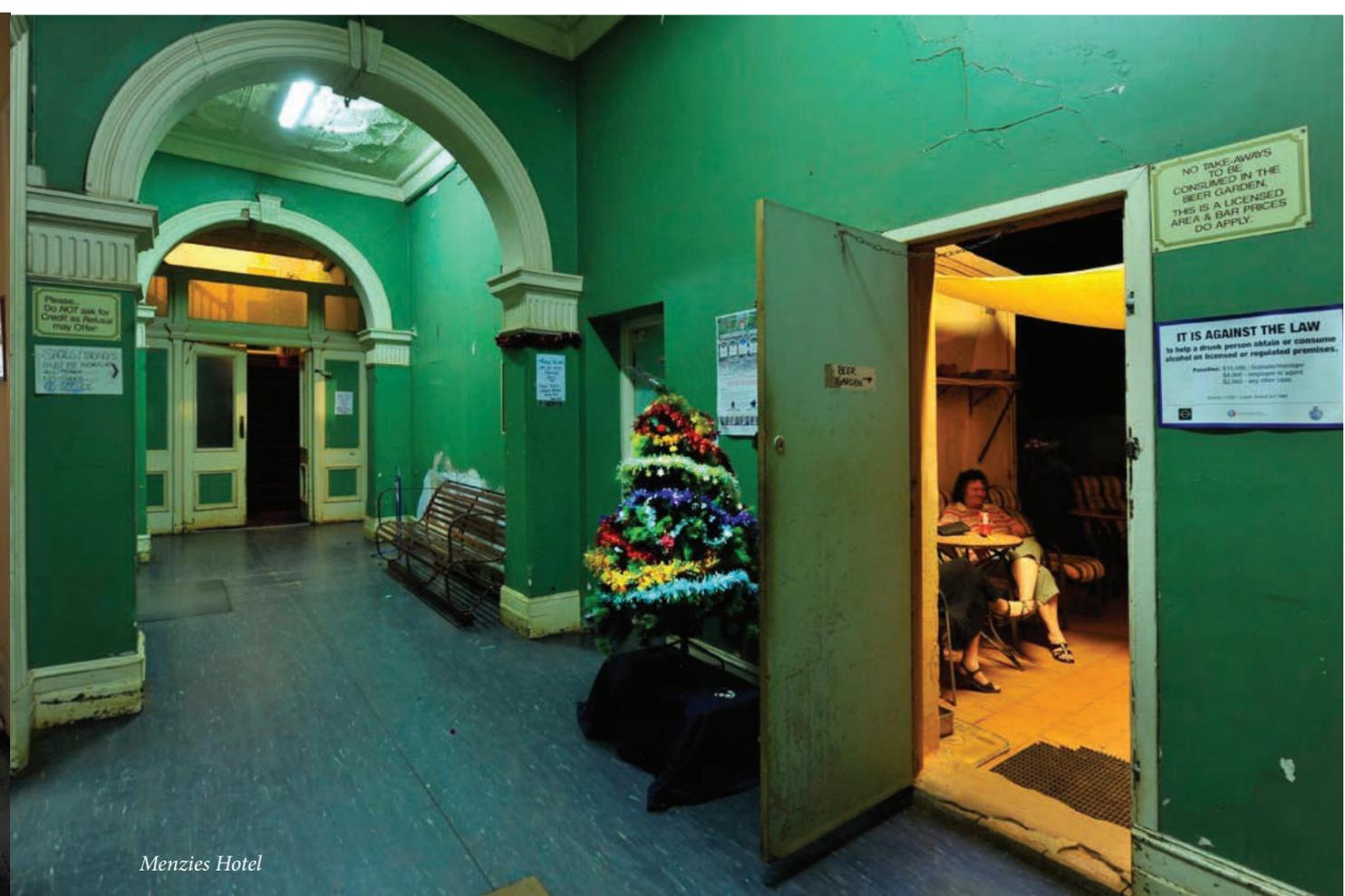
You can take away the railroad, you can even take away the town and all of the infrastructure, but it seems you can't take away the local tavern.

Wherever people have been making a living from the land for generations, you will find a traditional inn or pub not too far away. That is not a new concept in itself, nor is it unusual. What is unusual however is the number of places in Australia where the traditional pub is the only building left standing, testimony to the fact that there was once a thriving community nearby. Quite often you will find a solitary pub standing in the middle of a field, surrounded by crumbling bricks, overgrown rail cuttings and piles of stone,

a visual legacy of where a town once stood. Western Australia, due in part to its mining history and vast areas of farming, has more than its fair share of places like this. Other countries like Brazil, Canada, South Africa, and the United States where towns sprang up after precious metals or minerals were discovered during the 19th century, also have their share of similar ghost towns. But Western Australia is unique in that these locations were more often than not hubs for farming communities. The towns grew due to the transportation networks needed to shift the vast amounts of harvested grain and other produce. So the towns evolved around railheads, terminuses, grain bins etc. Workers settled and families grew. When the transportation changed or became obsolete through technological advances, or simply by not being financially viable for whatever reason, then the communities suffered. In most cases this meant abandonment of the town as families looked for work elsewhere. But



Greenhills Tavern



Menzies Hotel

local farmers who had to adapt, and could, endured the transition and stayed on. This meant that out of a fairly large community that often supported up to three taverns or inns, only one of these may have a chance of surviving and plying their age-old trade.

Towns that had evolved due to a local mine site, by their very nature, were probably destined to disappear when the precious metals ran out or became uneconomical. If you go searching for some of these old inns, finding what kept them going and who their patrons were, you will find that they are still the centre of a community, even though that community may be now scattered for up to a hundred kilometres in every direction. The pub, inn, or tavern is still part of the essential life-blood that binds the community together. Quite often the

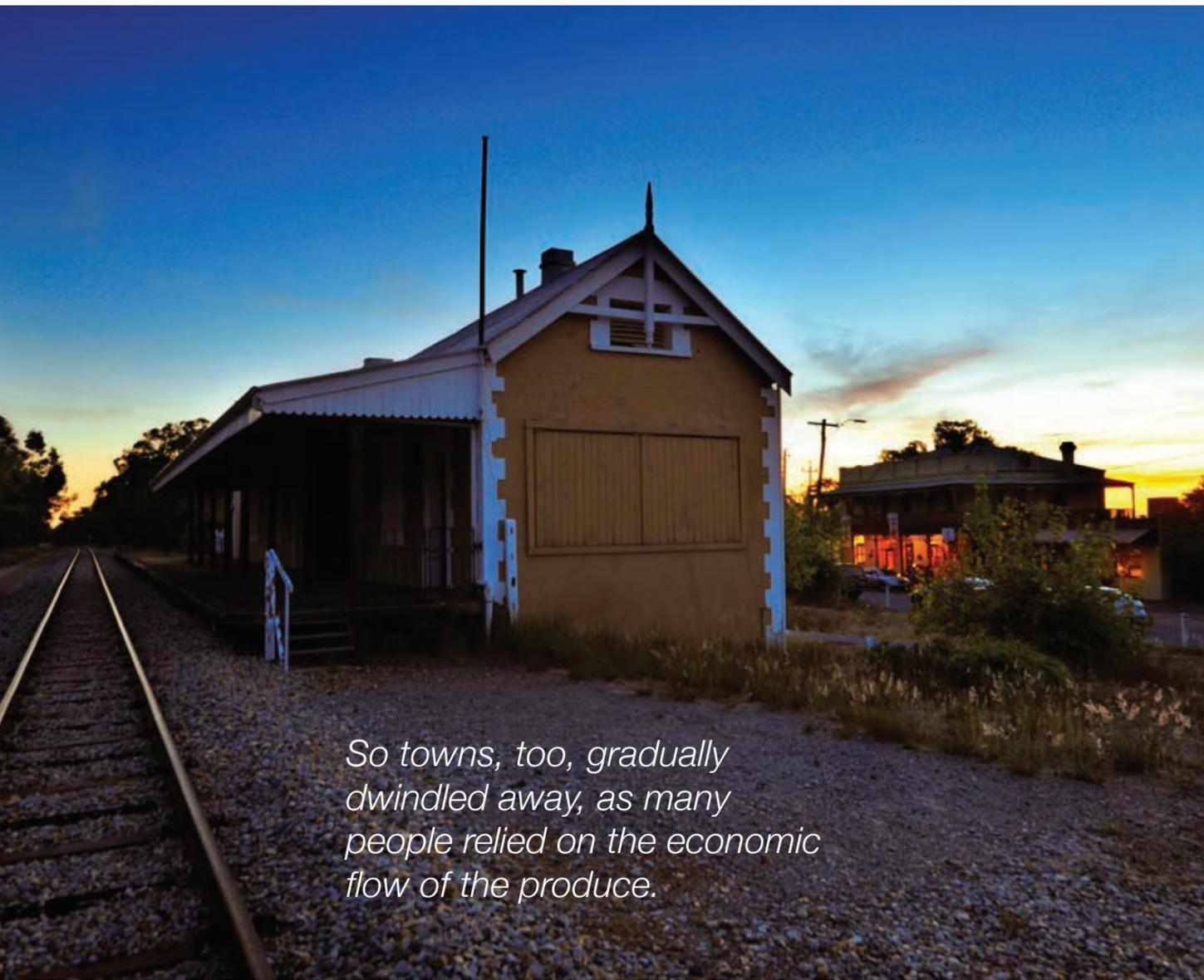
community now consists of a colourful mixture of diverse people that probably would have never gravitated there in the first place. They may be made up of fossickers seeking gold, or people who simply want anonymity, there are artists, healers, small farm holdings etc.

For example, in 1903 the thriving goldfields town of Kookynie, 75 kilometres north-east of Menzies, had over 3,500 people and more than four hundred buildings. There were eleven hotels (seven of which were licenced), swimming baths, a school, two blacksmiths, a hospital, a brewery, and the usual array of retail and commercial businesses. Four trains a day came to Kookynie from Kalgoorlie, each half an hour apart.

These days the town is more or less a ghost town, with a population of about a dozen locals. The tourists, prospectors,



Cuballing Tavern



*So towns, too, gradually dwindled away, as many people relied on the economic flow of the produce.*

fossickers, mining and exploration companies, pastoralists and locals now congregate at the Grand Hotel, which offers an eclectic collection of historical photographs, antique bottles and memorabilia from Kookynie's past. In the worlds of one bearded fossicker, 'You know I wander around these ruins at different times of day and night, and I tell ya, I swear sometimes ya hear strange things, ya know like the town is talking. I ain't seen nuttin, but I hear 'em. It's spooky but I like it. I keep coming back.' This seems to be a common thread amongst people who visit these places, it seems as if these old ghost towns do in

fact have 'something' that lingers. In many rural areas the railway was the lifeline which brought a community together. A station was needed to load and transport produce, whether this was grain, timber or wool. Sometimes, the junction of two railway lines was where the settlement evolved. One of these, Spencer's Brook, about 95 kilometres from Perth, in the 1880's, was the junction between the Northam line and the Great Southern Railway. Nothing remains of the railway tearooms, the water tower for the steam trains, or many of the original local houses. The Spencer's Brook Hotel, which once



**Opposite:** Gingin Hotel and nearby railway station.  
**Top left:** Greenhills local.  
**Above centre:** Grand Hotel Kookynie.  
**Above:** The old bakery, Greenhills.  
**Right centre:** Cuballing Tavern.  
**Right:** Greenhills dining room.

*The Federation-style Greenhills Inn, Built in 1906, for example was one of three watering holes for the 3000 people who lived in the town.*



*Above left: Rusting pitchfork, Greenhills.  
Above right: Abandoned dunny, Greenhills.  
Above right: Last drinks sign, .  
Centre: The Greenhills Inn at dusk.*



*The Bolgart Hotel.*



**Top:** Mumballup Tavern.  
**Centre:** The crumbling remains of the abandoned station platform in front of the hotel, Jennacubbinne.  
**Above:** The Chidlow Inn.

accommodated miners and travellers right opposite the now-derelict railway station, is one of the few remaining buildings.

The Gingin Hotel, about 83 kilometres north of Perth, is situated in one of the oldest towns in WA. Originally a stopover for early pioneers travelling from Perth to Geraldton, and was built in 1891, not long after the States first settlers arrived and of course the surrounding areas immediately prospered. The historic, restored train station is right across the road from the pub which served refreshments to weary travellers on their way north. Though the rail no longer carries passengers to Geraldton, the pub still exists.

The same is true of many others such as Chidlow, Bolgart and Jennacubbinne. Occasionally a church is still nearby, or a tiny CWA building, as in Jennacubbinne, but the abandoned railway sidings, old

cars, house foundations, farm machinery and others that are left, are usually overgrown and decade by decade slowly return to the earth. Yet on some weekends at Jennacubbinne, in the middle of apparently 'nowhere', they cater to over eighty people for Sunday lunch, and the Spencer's Brook Hotel's accommodation is often booked out.

When railways or wheatbins were closed, houses were simply left and fell into decay, or dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere.

The Federation-style Greenhills Inn, Built in 1906, for example was one of three watering holes for the 3000 people who lived in the town. The town developed as a rail terminus, with repair sheds, watering towers, engineering shops and everything else that was the lifeblood for the railway workers, townsfolk and visitors alike. But when the grain rail line was extended

to Quairading, the town quickly dispersed and, in a fairly short time, the inn deteriorated. Then after years of neglect it was de-licensed and its doors were finally closed, being used instead as a church camp, with hostel style accommodation and other uses. It was not until 1995 when it was carefully restored and enjoyed a thriving renaissance. As in many old hotels of the same vintage, Greenhills has exquisite antique furnishings throughout the hotel that add to the magic of the majestic old building. It became very popular, gathering a wide audience and was the scene of memorable Cup lunches, St Patricks Day feasts, weddings, murder mystery weekends, car club rallies, culinary classes, product launches and many more colourful activities.

However, economic reality once again forced a possible closure unless a new buyer could be found. The few locals still left were looking glum at the prospect of their one remaining neighbourhood gathering place closing down, but luckily someone stepped in to keep the pub going, and it's due to people like custodians Bill and Gail Hart, with a passion for our heritage, that taverns like Greenhills will continue to survive.

So ... why do the pubs survive? It may just be for the simple reason that 'people always like to drink', as one astute bar worker observed. But perhaps it's more than that. Like a fireplace in a home, a hotel is a centre, a hub of human drama and interaction. As Kevin McCloud the architect has observed, 'Buildings are the embodiment of human energy'. The



local pubs were where it all happened ... celebrations of gold discoveries, victory in sporting events, wedding receptions, birthdays, dinners, debutante balls, and wakes. As the social centres of isolated towns, pubs were the magnets that drew

**Opposite:** Mundaring Weir Hotel.  
**Top:** Cuballing Tavern breakfast 'sports' room.  
**Below:** Spencers Brook Hotel Pool room.  
**Above:** Dart board, Cuballing.

people in and give them a focus in their community, no matter how scattered and isolated the surrounding farms and settlements were. And even long after the industries have left, the farmers have walked off the land, the mines have closed, the main highways have bypassed the towns, and the railways that originally brought the towns into being have gone, the pubs have survived and are often the only buildings still fulfilling their original purpose. Technology, especially the Internet now means that people can survive and work in places like this without having to leave the town for work. So now a more eclectic range of people make up these once abandoned towns. Perhaps, again, it's that intense

concentration of energy, the dramas of all the lives that gravitate to local pubs, that gives a certain strength and spirit to them. And maybe that is why, long after towns which once had several pubs, schools, wheat bins, mines, churches, hospitals, and hundreds of inhabitants have dwindled into small remnant settlements of only a very few houses ... long after all those other buildings have disappeared or fallen into disrepair, the pub is still the last building standing.

Jon Davison and Moira McDermont

