

Meanders IN Maryborough

A spoonful of magic brings this historic town's memories to life.

I'm holding two pictures simultaneously in my mind.

The first is the scene before my eyes. The Mary River winds peacefully between banks festooned with vegetation. There are lush palms, spiky silver ornamentals, dark mangroves, and big-leaved cotton trees. Recent rain has been good to the land, and the dense masses of plant life it supports display every imaginable shade of green. On the curve of pale blue water that runs through the centre, a dozen masted boats ride at anchor, the white of their hulls matching the wisps of cloud in the sky overhead. The colours are clean and clear, the air silent, the atmosphere beautifully serene.

The second picture is the mental image I've carried with me from the nearby Bond Store Museum. Through old black-and-white photos, original artifacts and eye-witness verbal accounts, the museum depicts Maryborough as it was in the 1860s, 70s and 80s – a thriving port connecting Queensland to the world. Instead of holding small pleasure craft that bob gently in the breeze, the river was crammed with ocean-going ships, all jostling for position near the railhead to load or unload their cargos. For, astonishingly, this riverside settlement was once one of Australia's busiest international ports.

Exports from the Queensland hinterland – wool, timber, rum, gold, and sugar – poured out of the town; barrels of wine and spirits, chests of tea and coffee, and supplies of tobacco and opium poured in. On all these imports excise duty was payable, creating plenty of work for the customs inspectors. The wharves would also have thronged with

disembarked passengers. In the last third of the 19th century many thousands of European immigrants, mostly from Britain and Germany, landed here to begin new lives in Australia – only Sydney received a greater number. Other ships came from the Pacific Islands, bringing 'Kanaka' labourers to work the cane fields, often in conditions little better than slavery; their story is told, too, both at the museum and in a separate memorial.

Such a bustling scene, filled with drama and greed, hope and despair, and populated with characters from all corners of the world, formed the backdrop to an event that is now Maryborough's greatest claim to fame. In 1899, a little girl called Helen Lyndon Goff was born in a room above the Australian Joint Stock Bank, where her father was the manager. Helen went on to travel the world, had a succession of careers, and finally settled in London where, under the pen-name P. L. Travers, she wrote a story about a sharp-tongued, unsentimental, and magical nanny called Mary Poppins.

With her shiny shoes and parrot-headed umbrella, the unpredictable and independently minded Mary Poppins blows in on the east wind to take her charges, the Banks children, on a series of marvellous adventures. The life lessons she teaches are unconventional: she 'never wasted time in being nice', she always does exactly what she wants – and she also 'always does what she says she will'. It seems that Mary Poppins reflects quite a few qualities of her creator, the little girl from Queensland who took on the world with nothing but the power of her imagination.



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Maryborough's newest museum, The Story Bank, splendidly honours the town's Mary Poppins connection. Housed in the bank building where Helen Goff/P. L. Travers was born, the highly interactive museum opened in 2019 and is a model of hands-on engagement. There are drawers to open, phones to answer and bookshelves to browse. You can also waltz down Cherry Tree Lane, discover your 'shadow' side, or join a yarnning circle.

The Story Bank is a joyful place for adults and children to learn about the Mary Poppins books and their author, while also exploring their own potential as writers or storytellers. Inspired by prompts placed throughout the house, visitors are encouraged to create their own stories and deposit them in The Vault. The more story notes you deposit, the more your bank balance grows!

When P. L. Travers's father managed this bank, deposits were of cash earned from local farming, trade, and industry. Now the deposits are flights of fancy, treasures of the imagination, hopes, dreams and memories. That seems fitting, because imagination is the currency of a new tourist economy in Maryborough, built from its rich literary and historical associations.

In addition to its museums, Maryborough's public spaces are filled with installations and artworks designed to stimulate the imagination and unlock stories of the town's past. There are no less than 34 murals dotted around the streets, each one of which

reveals an amazing fact or unique character from Maryborough's history. Meanwhile, an ambitious sound-and-sculpture installation at the entrance to the Queen's Park botanic garden recalls the individual experiences of local soldiers who fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front in the First World War.

The downtown retail precinct also carries many imaginative flourishes. Lights at pedestrian crossings take the form of little Mary Poppins figures in green or red. Small sculptural objects unexpectedly adorn benches or railings – a bronze pair of gloves, perhaps, or a hat and handbag c. 1910. Even the empty shop windows that are to be seen so often, alas, in country towns, are stages for creative displays that provide insights into aspects of Maryborough's past or present culture.

Memory lives here, suffusing the very fabric of the town, but it's the magic of the imagination that brings the past to life, and that's the quality that makes Maryborough such a special place. Mary Poppins would certainly have approved.

ROSLYN JOLLY

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