



On the trail of fortune

The twists and turns of *A Fortunate Life* can be traced along the Albert Facey Trail in the Western Australian wheatbelt district of Wickepin.

Story and photos **ORIEN HARVEY**

It's 8:30am and a haze of warm light begins to graze along the small cluster of shops lining the main street. No more than three cars sit idle to the side, and a lone figure strolls beneath the deep overhang of the Wickepin Hotel. He continues past the post office, a turn-of-the-century building whose stern and resolute face hints at history.

Wickepin is situated 210 kilometres south-east of Perth in the West Australian wheatbelt. The town, as well as its surrounding district, is the setting for much of Albert Facey's acclaimed and well-loved novel *A Fortunate Life*. Facey's own autobiography not only stands testament to an ordinary Australian's perseverance in the face of hardship, but also celebrates life's ups and downs.

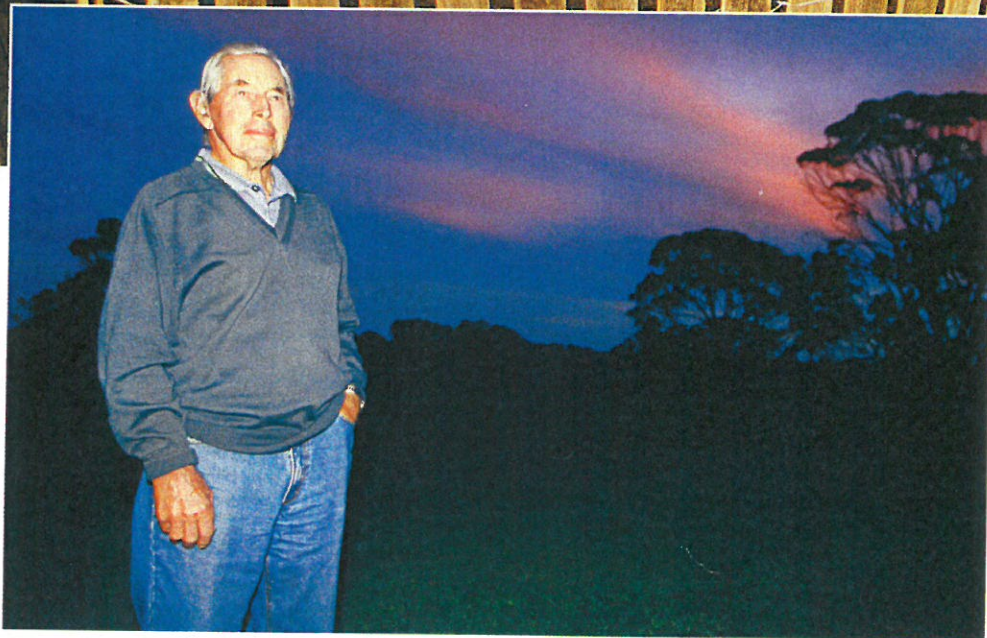
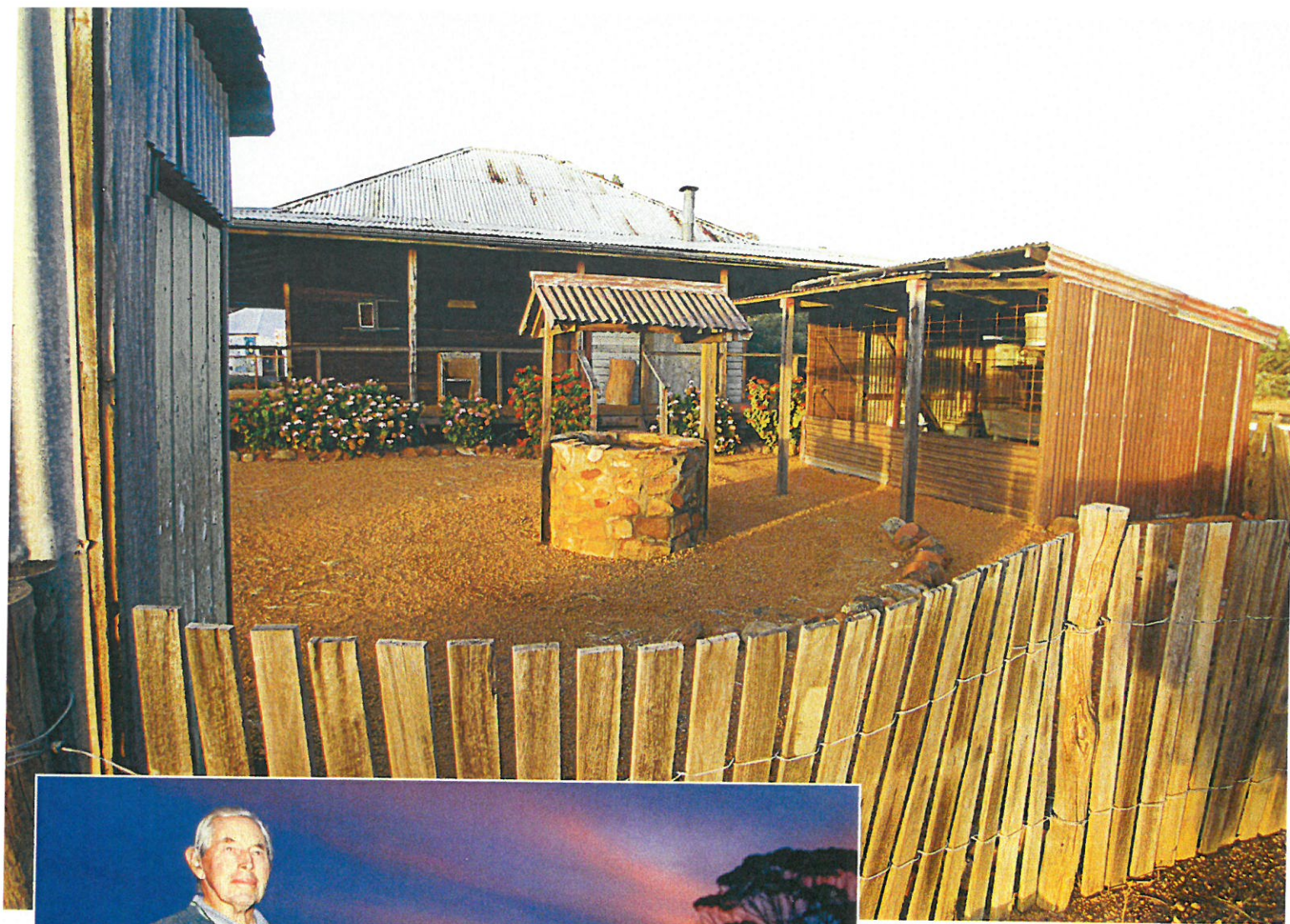
During Facey's youth, the Wickepin district was home to just a scattering of white settlers; now, however, Wickepin and its surrounds has a population of 800 primarily wheat and sheep farmers. It was an altogether different time; as Facey testifies, "There were no aged pensions in those days, nor were there any free doctors, hospitals and medicine, nor baby bonuses or endowment payments". To make matters worse, "many people had little feeling or sympathy for those in need".

People can get some sense of just how much things have changed in the Wickepin district by visiting the Albert Facey Trail. Running some 60km, the trail visits many of the sites mentioned in *A Fortunate Life*. The centrepiece is the homestead, a century-old time capsule, lovingly restored and

relocated to the main street from its original location 30km south-east of town. According to Julie Old, a member of the Albert Facey Homestead Management Committee, "The homestead has seen over 10,000 visitors since its opening in 2000 and has given the town a real focus. We get a whole mixture of people through here; we had a couple come all the way over from the eastern states, specifically to see it." She goes on to explain that Wickepin sees a lot of international visitors due to the popularity of Facey's book overseas, "I remember a couple from Germany who stopped by because, a few years before, their son had taken a copy of *A Fortunate Life* back home with him".

Julie is keen to point out that people shouldn't expect a museum experience: the homestead is not cluttered with numerous historical objects – "We've kept it just as you might have found it in the 1920s". Indeed, it is definitely not over-furnished. By modern standards the homestead is tiny and spartan and it is hard to believe that six people once lived within its walls. A typical weatherboard and tin construction, it has two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen. Light burns through the single lace-covered window in the kitchen, reaching in and giving form to the shadowed implements of everyday life: teapots, a bread tin, a kerosene lamp. Even more interesting is the recycled furniture typical of the Depression era: rectangular kerosene tins laid horizontally have one side cut out to form the drawers of a cupboard.

This was a time when little was thrown out; rather it was transformed and used in other ways. Facey describes how his family used to "hunt miles around" to find discarded food tins



Clockwise from above: The weatherboard and tin Albert Facey homestead, with a well in the backyard; Colin Lang's story is not unlike Facey's; wheat stubble in the Wickepin district.

that the gold prospectors had left behind. These were then melted down over a fire. "A fairly large heap of tins would be worth about 30 shillings." Today's throw-away mentality has no place in Facey's world: the homestead is an example of the bare essentials, containing nothing more sophisticated than a wood-fired stove.

Wickepin's historical precinct lies barely a stone's throw from the homestead and forms the first section of the Albert Facey Trail, the Yarling Walk. This includes the Road Board office and hall, the station master's house and the railway station. In Facey's day, the station was particularly important as it was considered essential for a settler to be no more than 15 miles away; any further and it would have been impossible to cart wheat to the rail and return home in the same day. The Narrogin to Wickepin line began operation in 1909 to carry passengers, grain and other supplies. With the ascent of the

automobile, the rail began to lose its importance. Wickepin Station has been closed since 1981 and the line is used to freight grain. The rusted brown tracks stretching into the distance, as well the station's boarded-up windows, peeling paint, and bolted door remind us that the rail's heyday is past.

Situated 12km west of Wickepin, just off the Narrogin-Wickepin road, the next stop on the trail is Tarling Well, a once significant township, serving as a watering stop for weary horses and travellers. Now, there is only a rusted water trough lying barren next to a well of stagnant water among the crackly undergrowth. Testament to the railway's importance, the township dissipated when the line skirted east to Wickepin.

The trail visits another five places of interest, including the site of Archie Macall's farm and Inkie Pinkie School. Just as evocative are the vast wheatfields stretching off to both sides. One of the owners of these vast tracts of land, Colin Lang, at 77 years of age, is the oldest of four children and a second-generation cereal and sheep farmer in the area. His story forms many parallels with Facey's and he now speaks of massive change. As a child growing up on a farm outside Wickepin, Colin had to milk the family's cows before sunrise and help his



Clockwise from above: The spartan kitchen with its Depression-era furnishings; all that remains of the Inkie Pinkle school, where Albert was enrolled; remnants of a bush shed, situated near Archie McCall's farm on the Albert Facey Trail.



An old horse-drawn plough standing outside the homestead seems positively archaic – a relic from another time. Some would say that ever-greater technological change represents a double-edged sword, with productivity gains posing a sustainability challenge (for example, the expanding dryland salinity that is a wheatbelt farmer's nemesis). While agriculture in the Wickepin area has profited from technological advances, challenges to rural folk manifest in other ways. There is now an economic imperative to increase farm size in order to survive. As Colin points out, "Today's farmers have to be smarter to be viable and many are faced with having to increase their size for the property to carry on another generation".

The experience of surviving is not unique, nor is it a thing of the past. Facey undoubtedly endured a lot, including a wartime experience in Gallipoli, as well as the loss of both his wife and his son. He bore all this with a remarkable lack of bitterness and he considered himself fortunate. Like Facey's autobiography, the Albert Facey Trail echoes with the sounds of the wheatbelt's past.

father after school. "It was a hard life, but most people were the same," he says. "That's the thing about these hardships, people would cry something terrible these days."

Times have certainly changed since Colin first began farming. "What has happened in my lifetime is absolutely unbelievable," he says. In the post-war period, technology began making huge inroads for farming communities – in particular, increasing productivity. Bob believes that the "greatest [farming] achievements have been in the use of chemicals, either to control weeds or to add to soils ... the other is machinery and the development of better grain". The other obvious advantage is time saving. "With modern machinery I can put in a crop in about three weeks when it used to take six."

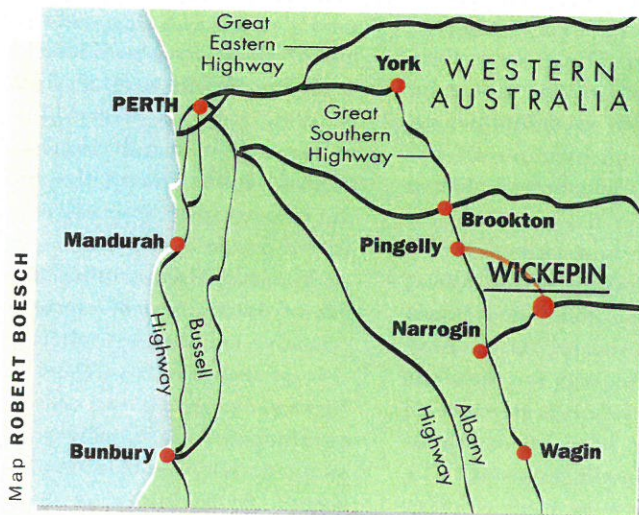
ALBERT FACEY TRAIL

Wickepin is 210 kilometres from Perth via Brookton Highway.

Albert Facey Homestead, opening times 10am-4pm. From March-November seven days a week. From December-February – Friday-Sunday. Adults \$2.50, children \$1. Tour and school group prices available.

For more information, phone (08) 9888 1005

A Fortunate Life by A. B. Facey, Penguin, RRP \$24.95.



Map ROBERT BOESCH

