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Transitioning from a Local Railway Hub to a Regional Tourism System: The Story of Peterborough, South Australia

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Abstract

This chapter examines the tourism development path of Peterborough, a former single-industry railway town in rural South Australia. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from evolutionary, institutional and relational economic geography, the aim of the chapter is to identify how issues around path dependence influence the abilities of peripheral single-industry towns to operate as part of interactive and collaborative regional tourism innovation systems. The case study documents the difficult transition of Peterborough from a relatively independent major railway hub to a minor tourist transit stopover requiring stronger partnerships within a broader regional tourism destination. The findings identify a range of challenges for local tourism that point to issues around single-industry path dependence and 'lock-in', including: an entrenched dependence on government leadership and investment; a lack of home-grown entrepreneurship willing to address gaps in the homogeneous product portfolio; limited local acceptance and understanding of tourism; resistance to outsiders as new knowledge brokers; and truncated network capabilities within the local system. The chapter also shows how the unique spatial and socio-economic contexts of peripheral 'low-amenity' areas may reinforce path dependence by limiting opportunities to diversify incoming (tourist and migrant) mobilities. Some of the weaknesses within the local tourism system may be bridged by proactive local government and public sector leadership, yet we question the long-term sustainability of such approaches.

Keywords

Single-industry town; Economic diversification; Heritage tourism; Tourism innovation system; Path dependence; 'Low-amenity' periphery

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10.1. Introduction

Peterborough has had it tough. Once a bustling railway hub in South Australia's upper Mid North, the town has suffered substantial socio-economic decline since the winding down of its railway sector beginning in the 1970s. With no obvious alternative industries interested in relocating to the area, the District Council of Peterborough turned to tourism as a vehicle to promote economic and social revitalization, aiming to take advantage of the town's well-preserved railway heritage and its favourable location at the crossroads of major Outback transport routes. This chapter examines the difficult transition of Peterborough from a relatively prosperous and self-sufficient railway hub to a town that had to redefine both its economic identity and its place within the broader region while trying to capture the volatile Outback tourism market. The chapter draws on theoretical perspectives from evolutionary, institutional and relational economic geography to discuss how issues around single-industry path dependence may influence the abilities of peripheral towns like Peterborough to operate as part of interactive and collaborative regional tourism innovation systems (Carson et al., 2014).

The Peterborough community encountered major challenges in its efforts to become a tourism centre, including: an entrenched dependence on government leadership and investment, a lack of home-grown entrepreneurship willing to address gaps in the homogeneous product portfolio, limited acceptance and knowledge of tourism, resistance to outsiders as new knowledge brokers, truncated networking capabilities, and finally the difficult process of responding to change in regional hierarchies as the town has been downgraded from a major regional transport hub to a minor 'transit bit in between'. This case study is based on a wide range of data sources and insights, including over 20 formal interviews conducted with local and regional government, tourism and community stakeholders between 2008 and 2016 (Schmallegger, 2010; Vuin et al., 2016; Prideaux et al., 2016), public documents (e.g. regional or local tourism strategies and development plans, newspaper articles, and tourism brochures), secondary population and visitor statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Tourism Research Australia, 2017), and informal observations from meetings and discussions with locals.

The following section introduces the theoretical background of this study, reflecting on the literature around peripheral single-industry towns seeking economic diversification, the value of 'path dependence' as a concept for understanding the socio-economic development trajectories of peripheral settlements, and the importance of systemic interactions, collaboration and knowledge sharing for regional innovation systems. The case study then introduces the spatial, historic, socio-economic and institutional contexts of Peterborough, and discusses how these characteristics have shaped the town's tourism development path and its relationships with the broader regional tourism system.

10.2. Theoretical Background

The vulnerability of single-industry towns in peripheral areas has attracted substantial academic attention, since the publication of Rex Lucas' (1971) seminal work '*Minetown, Milltown, Railtown: Life in Canadian Communities of Single Industry*' (Bradbury & St-Martin, 1983; Randall & Ironside, 1996; Halseth, 1999; Hayter, 2000; Barnes, 2005; Carson & Carson, 2014; Mitchell & O'Neill, 2016). Peripheral single-industry towns are typically understood as frontier outposts that have evolved around a homogeneous, monoindustrial base, relying strongly on external investment. This economic structure constrains economic

diversity and alternative development and makes communities highly susceptible to economic 'boom and bust' cycles. These towns tend to experience rapid economic and population growth during times when market conditions for their industry are favourable, yet they often face sudden and catastrophic decline (including extensive job losses, outmigration, disinvestment and in some cases even town closure) when the boom ends (Bradbury & St-Martin, 1983; Hayter, 2000; Prideaux, Thompson & Harwood, 2016). Much of the literature on peripheral single-industry towns has focused on towns dependent on natural resource (or staples) industries, most notably mining, forestry and fishing (Randall & Ironside, 1996). Lucas' (1971) work reminds us that towns dependent on transport, such as the railways, may also experience similar patterns of boom and bust.

Fostering economic diversification by introducing new industries to the local economy has repeatedly been promoted as a solution to avoid economic vulnerability. Tourism is often at the forefront of such discussions (Müller & Jansson, 2007; Hall, 2007; Koster, 2010; Che, 2003). Part of the reason is that tourism is commonly perceived as an 'easy' back-up industry that requires little new investment or skill development, and can take advantage of existing infrastructure and redundant industrial heritage by converting them into tourism assets (Prideaux & Timothy, 2010). Despite the alleged popularity of tourism in the discourse of economic diversification, the literature has remained sceptical about tourism's ability to stop or revert socioeconomic decline in peripheral areas (Müller & Jansson, 2007; Hall, 2007; Carson & Carson, 2014). Calls for diversification are usually not seriously pursued until after the collapse of the main industry, meaning that new industrial development is in many cases more of a reactive response to the crisis rather than the result of careful proactive planning (Hayter, 2000). New development efforts are therefore frequently plagued by challenges such as: a persistent dependence on external investors and decision-makers, limited local entrepreneurial and leadership capacities, local resistance to tourism due to an entrenched 'addiction' to the old industry, a lack of economic competence and transferrable skills, lingering social problems and demographic imbalances left behind by the single-industry decline, and increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled and enthusiastic workers, business owners and community members (Hayter, 2000; Markey et al., 2006; Che, 2003; Koster, 2010; Carson & Carson, 2014; Storey & Hall, 2018).

These challenges appear to be strongly tied to issues of 'path dependence' and negative 'lock-in' that have so prominently been debated in recent literature around evolutionary and institutional economic geography (e.g. Martin, 2010; Martin & Sunley, 2006; MacKinnon et al., 2009; Essletzbichler, 2009; Hassink, 2010). From this perspective, economic, social, technological and institutional processes tied to the dominant single industry progressively reinforce themselves over extended periods of time to the extent that the economic system becomes "stuck in established practices, ideas, and networks of embeddedness that no longer yield increasing returns and may even induce negative externalities" (Martin & Sunley, 2006, p. 416). The system thus becomes over-attached or addicted to particular industry structures, and prevailing knowledge, ideas, practices, networks and political attitudes become too rigid to allow for novel and innovative paths to emerge. According to Grabher (1993), such lock-in may occur in different inter-connected ways, including cognitive lock-in (through entrenched visions and ideas, common practices, and accepted norms), functional lock-in (through rigid ties and networks that hinder alternative connections), and political lock-in (through rigid power structures and governance approaches).

More recently, there has been increasing recognition that the focus on negative 'lock-in' may be too narrow and ignore the subtle, yet important, processes contributing to a more incremental and dynamic form of path dependence (Martin, 2010). From this perspective, new development paths progressively evolve through processes of 'layering' (e.g. adding new actors, institutions or relations to the system), 'delaying' (removing such system components), 'conversion' (changing the function or purpose of existing components), or 'recombination' (combining old and new components). This essentially means that new economic paths such as tourism, may gradually evolve from the former dominant industry (in our case the railways) as the system adapts or adds new actors and institutions in response to changing circumstances. Such ideas resonate with the literature around 'learning regions' and 'regional innovation systems' (e.g. Doloreux & Parto, 2005; Tödtling & Trippel, 2005; Cooke et al., 2004; Iammarino 2005; Uyarra 2010), which argues that innovation in a region can emerge from interactions between actors, organisations and institutions as they exchange knowledge, learn from each other and consequently adapt their behaviours. These processes of knowledge exchange and learning may ultimately lead to the introduction of new industries, markets, products/services, processes and institutions. For these reasons, relational perspectives on cluster or system dynamics and knowledge networks between a variety of system stakeholders (e.g. private firms, government agencies, community organisations, and external knowledge brokers or decisionmakers) can—in combination with evolutionary and institutional perspectives—offer a more nuanced understanding of how economic change occurs in a region over time (Hassink et al., 2014).

Recent attempts have been made to more explicitly integrate such relational perspectives with perspectives on path dependence and economic evolution in the context of tourism (Sanz-Ibañez & Clavé, 2014; Hassink & Ma, 2017; Carson et al., 2014). In particular, the idea of tourism innovation systems, emerging from networks of interactions between various public and private sector actors bound by path- and place-dependent institutions, has gained increasing traction in the tourism literature (Prats et al., 2008; Hjalager, 2010; Booyens & Rogerson, 2017). Previous work by Carson and colleagues (Carson et al., 2014; Carson & Koster, 2015; Carson & Carson, 2011) has specifically examined the dynamics of tourism innovation systems in the context of sparsely populated peripheral regions in Australia. Their research has pointed to issues of path dependence created by historic resource dependence and the difficult process of introducing new tourism-relevant institutions (such as entrepreneurial practices, knowledge networks, collaboration dynamics, or governance arrangements) into a system desperate to maintain or revive its staples economy. One particular observation was the difficulty of connecting isolated and previously disconnected single-industry communities into a more cohesive region sharing a joint vision and regional identity (Carson & Koster, 2015). On the other hand, new knowledge and institutions introduced by new populations and mobilities (for example, through entrepreneurial lifestyle in-migrants, or the hiring of externally trained tourism professionals) have shown to improve connectivity within and beyond the local system, resulting in new products, processes and markets (Carson & Carson, 2011). Yet, such improved system interactions may be fragile and temporary, and may struggle to persist if primary industries recover or public sector support for tourism is suspended (Carson & Koster, 2015).

The following case study examines the tourism development path of Peterborough, reflecting on how its historic dependence on the railways has impacted on the characteristics of the local tourism system and its interactions with the broader destination region. The unique

spatial, historic and socio-economic contexts of the former railway town provide the backdrop to understanding local practices, institutions and network dynamics in tourism.

10.3. The Case of Peterborough

10.3.1. The Spatial Context

Peterborough has a unique heritage, the agricultural and pastoral beginnings being eclipsed by the development of the railways, influenced by mining. This, combined with its geographical position, has given the town a character distinct from its neighbours in the rural Mid North of South Australia (Woods, 1986, p. 7).

This introductory statement in Wood's (1986) book "*Petersburg to Peterborough: A Journey from 1875 to 1986*" points to the unique character of Peterborough within the surrounding region. As we will argue, this unique status presents both opportunities and challenges for sustaining a viable tourism sector. Located 250 km north of Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, Peterborough occupies a fringe position on the north-eastern edge of the agricultural and pastoral dominated upper Mid North region (Fig. 10.1). The town and its surrounding District Council lie just beyond the 'Goyder Line', a boundary line drawn in the second half of the 19th century to mark the limits of reliable rainfall and separate viable agricultural land to the south from drier and more marginal pastoral land to the north and east (Sheldrick, 2013). The landscape surrounding Peterborough is characterised by sparse and arid vegetation and wide open plains (Fig. 10.2), with no access to rivers or other permanent water bodies. The area has a very different 'look' compared to surrounding regions including the lush hills and vineyards of the Clare Valley and the cereal cropping areas along the Mount Lofty Ranges (to the southwest), and the more rugged terrain of the Flinders Ranges (to the north).

Fig. 10.1

Location of Peterborough (created by authors)

Fig. 10.2

Typical semi-arid landscape surrounding Peterborough

(Photo Doris A. Carson)

The nationwide transition of many passenger and freight tasks from rail to road post-World War Two hastened the withdrawal of rail services and triggered the decline of many rail towns including Peterborough. As of 2017, the only remaining vestige of passenger rail in Peterborough is the weekly Indian Pacific transcontinental railway service that passes through the town but does not stop. The town remains well connected to Adelaide and interstate regions by road and sits at a crossroads connecting to Broken Hill in Outback New South Wales (via the Barrier Highway), the port towns of Port Pirie and Port Augusta on South Australia's Upper Spencer Gulf, the Clare Valley to the southwest, and the Flinders Ranges to the north. The nearest airports are Port Augusta which operates a limited number of short-haul commuter flights and Adelaide which has an international airport with regular national and international connections. South Australia is highly urbanised with over three quarters of the state's population living in Adelaide. This has led to the emergence of Adelaide as the state's main 'core centre' where political power, economic activity, and service infrastructure have increasingly concentrated. Regional urban centres close to Peterborough, including Port Pirie (~14,000 residents) and Port Augusta (~13,500), have a rather limited role as intervening service centres for the region.

10.3.2. The Historic Context

The area around Peterborough and the greater Mid North were originally home to semi-nomadic Aboriginal people, the Ngadjuri, before European settlement in the mid-19th century started to push north and greatly decimated the region's Aboriginal population. Peterborough emerged relatively late in the settlement history of inland South Australia. The

first European settlers were pastoralists and graziers in the 1850s. They were followed in the 1870s by farmers who sought to take advantage of cheap land and the colony's early 'wheat boom' (Woods, 1986). As part of its policy to open the state's northern interior for agriculture and mining, the South Australian colonial government began to invest in a northern railway system during the 1870s and early 1880s with the objective of connecting the new inland settlements with the coastal ports. The township of Peterborough (then Petersburg) was proclaimed in 1880 and became the site of a four-way railway junction connecting to Port Pirie in the west, Quorn in the north, the new mining towns of Broken Hill and Silverton across the New South Wales border in the east, and Terowie to the south. The line south of Terowie extended to Adelaide after a 'break of gauge' where freight was transhipped from the narrow northern gauge system to the broad gauge system running to the south. Peterborough subsequently became a national railway crossroads, with the intersection of the Transcontinental line from Sydney to Perth and The Ghan line from Adelaide to Alice Springs. In the mid-1920s, Peterborough became the administration hub of the northern gauge railway division of the South Australian railways, and the most important railway hub with the largest railway depot outside of Adelaide (McNicol, 2013). While agricultural settlements in the vicinity of the town struggled to survive in the harsh dry climate, the railway town prospered. Rail traffic continued to increase, with over 100 steam trains passing through Peterborough daily between the 1920s and the 1950s. At its peak, the railway employed around 1,300 staff, most of whom resided in Peterborough. The town's population peaked at approximately 4,000 residents in the 1950s (Woods, 1986).

Despite some signs of early economic diversification (at its peak Peterborough boasted a meat works, a butter factory, a flour mill, printing shops, several hotels, banks, retail shops, and many other services), the fortunes of the town came and went with the railways. Major changes in railway operations began to impact on the town from the late 1960s. Increasing mechanisation and the conversion from steam to diesel locomotives meant that fewer operational and maintenance workers were needed on site, leading to a substantial decline in local railway employment and subsequent outmigration of residents. The concurrent growth in private car ownership and improved road-based transport technologies led to a fall in the demand for rail freight. Standardisation of the national railway system to 'standard gauge' during the 1970s further diminished Peterborough's importance as the hub of the northern 'narrow gauge' system. By the mid-1980s the railway workforce had declined to fewer than 300 workers (Woods, 1986). Most of South Australia's inland rail network was closed during the 1980s following large-scale rationalisations made by the Australian National Railways which took control of the state government railways during the 1970s. As part of this rationalisation the south-north line from Adelaide to Alice Springs was rerouted bypassing Peterborough. The closure of the Peterborough railway depot in the 1990 exacerbated the decline in local employment leading to further outmigration. By the early 2000s, Peterborough's population had dropped to under 1,700 residents (ABS, 2017), resulting in high unemployment, low housing prices, and low local self-esteem. As one local councillor observed: *"We were on the brink of becoming a ghost town"*.

10.3.3. The Socio-Economic Context

As of 2016, Peterborough's population has dropped to around 1,400 residents (ABS, 2017). Around 7% of the town's resident population were Aboriginal, compared to around 3% in the Mid North region and around 2% in South Australia as a whole. In terms of socio-economic indicators, the town still lags behind other similar sized towns in the Mid North, and South Australia in general. In 2016, the town's unemployment rate of 16% was twice that of the

state average and the number of working age residents not in the labour force was 55% compared to the state average of 36%. Household income was also considerably lower than the national median household income (ABS, 2017). Housing prices were amongst the lowest in the state, and efforts to attract new in-migrants to stabilise the population have largely focused on promoting the town's cheap housing market. While this strategy has stimulated migration from both South Australia and interstate, it has also led to Peterborough being considered as a 'low-amenity' zone that has attracted a different cohort of in-migrants compared with other settlements in the Mid North. A recent study by Vuin et al. (2016) showed that in-migrants were primarily attracted by low housing costs and had markedly different socioeconomic characteristics compared to those migrating to more popular, amenity-rich towns closer to Adelaide. While small towns around the Clare Valley and the Southern Flinders Ranges have increasingly attracted counter-urban lifestyle in-migrants, including creative class in-migrants and lifestyle entrepreneurs, this phenomenon has not occurred in Peterborough. Instead, in-migrants were much less entrepreneurial and more likely to be unemployed or not in the workforce (Vuin et al., 2016). Unlike in higher-amenity destinations, few of Peterborough's in-migrants have sought to become self-employed or involved in tourism, suggesting that in-migration has contributed relatively little to diversifying the town's economy through new entrepreneurial activities. However, many in-migrants have become involved in existing community groups and volunteer organisations (Vuin et al., 2016), suggesting that new arrivals may contribute to maintaining embedded local values and structures rather than changing or diversifying them.

In recent years, the public sector (including public administration, health, education and social services) has emerged as Peterborough's main economic sector, employing almost a third of the town's workforce (ABS, 2017). Apart from a small manufacturing sector relying on a large export-oriented abattoir, retail (14%) and hospitality services (13%) are the largest private sector employers and serve as a proxy for the increasing importance of tourism in the local economy. Employment in primary industries (including agriculture, forestry and mining) lags behind other areas of the Mid North and rural South Australia, suggesting that Peterborough is not necessarily part of what has been described as South Australia's 'resource periphery' (Carson et al., 2016).

10.3.4. The Tourism Context

In response to socio-economic decline, the District Council of Peterborough turned to tourism as a pathway to revitalize the town's ailing economy and to arrest population decline. Capitalising on the town's railway heritage, the district council adopted the ambitious goal of creating a major tourism attraction, culminating in the development of the Steamtown Heritage Rail Centre (Fig. 10.3). In a 2008 interview (Schmallegger, 2010), the CEO of the Peterborough District Council stated:

Tourism has got a high priority for Peterborough now, not just from an economic view but to lift self-esteem within the town. For too many years, since the railway has closed down, Peterborough has been going backwards. And we now have an opportunity to change that around with the development of Steamtown. So, we as a council and a community, have decided to develop Steamtown as a tourism destination. We will be spending initially at the order of about AU\$1.1 million to get it up and running.

Fig. 10.3

Peterborough's main tourist attraction—the Steamtown Heritage Rail Centre

Tourism based around the town's railway heritage was not a new idea. Already in the early 1980s, the Steam Town Preservation Society commenced operating a steam-hauled tourist train on the Peterborough-Quorn railway line. The Society was formed in 1977 by ex-railway employees keen to preserve the town's rail heritage and rolling stock. Staffed by volunteers, the tourist rail service was run as an infrequent volunteer activity, rather than a commercially oriented tourist product, and soon the Society began to struggle financially. Despite financial support from the District Council, declining volunteer numbers, a lack of professional management expertise, increasing deterioration of the track, and escalating costs for public liability insurance and infrastructure maintenance forced the closure of the tourist train service and shortly after, the dissolution of the Society in 2002 (McNicol, 2013). The District Council subsequently acquired much of the Society's rail assets and invested substantial resources into renovating the railway roundhouse (see Fig. 10.3b and c) and various historic exhibits. Any hopes of re-opening the tourist train service were quickly dismissed by external consultancy reports suggesting that tourist numbers were simply too low for it to break even (The Flinders News, 2004). Instead, a plan emerged to redevelop the precinct into a static museum with rail heritage displays, an interpretive 'Sound and Light Show', a souvenir shop and café, and conference room facilities.

The development of the new Steamtown Heritage Rail Centre was jointly funded by the local, state, and federal governments. The initial project cost of approximately AUD\$1million was one of the largest single tourism attraction investments in rural South Australia at the time. The District Council recognised that local planning expertise was limited and engaged

external experts to advise on the development of the Steamtown precinct (Sunday Mail, 2001). The District Council also engaged external tourism managers with substantial tourism marketing expertise to oversee daily operations. The centre piece of the development of Steamtown was a 'Sound and Light Show' centred around a documentary movie played at night in the historic roundhouse prescient. The movie tells the history of the railway in Peterborough and features old locomotives, sound, steam and fireworks. Tourists watch the spectacle from a refurbished carriage (Fig. 10.3c).

The project quickly became a popular tourist attraction, and visitor numbers to the centre, as well as the number of tickets sold for its 'Sound and Light Show', exceeded initial expectations. Recognition of the quality of the Steamtown experience resulted in the attraction being awarded several South Australian regional tourism awards. By 2015/16 annual visitor numbers to the centre exceeded 12,000, a considerable increase on the several thousand recorded in the early 2000s following the cessation of the tourist train service (The Flinders News, 2011). In a move to professionalise its services and create a more integrated local tourism hub, the District Council relocated the town's visitor information centre from the town's main street to Steamtown. Even though the visitor information centre subsequently achieved formal accreditation (and thus funding support) from the state tourism organisation, this move has been widely criticised by members of the town's business community.

Despite continuous efforts by the District Council to develop and promote tourism as the new big game in town, a number of issues have continued to undermine tourism's potential to stimulate economic rejuvenation. One factor that has stifled tourism development is the limited extent of private sector tourism entrepreneurship, and the failure to develop complementary tourist products and services to increase length of stay and expenditure. Due to the town's former role as a transport transit hub, there are ample facilities for the typical transit traveller, including three standard drive-in motels, a caravan park, and several pubs and take-away bistros that target budget travellers and locals with cheap meal deals. Yet, there is limited variety in the range and quality of accommodation, cafés and dining, as well as tourist shopping (e.g. souvenirs, arts & craft, local produce etc.) that would be expected from a town or tourist centre of this size. This reflects a very homogeneous market focus that has reinforced the 'transit' character of the destination. While local tourism promotion efforts aim to convince visitors to 'Stay An Extra Day' (Peterborough's tourism slogan), the available products and services do not provide the standard and diversity of experiences required to encourage tourists to extend their stay.

There is also a noticeable gap in new activities that could broaden the experience portfolio beyond the dominant railway theme and Steamtown attraction. The opening of a number of new heritage attractions (including a historic printing works museum, an old motorcycle museum, a mural display depicting the history of the town, and a historic railway carriage in the main street that showcases the town's history) has not succeeded in encouraging tourists to stay for more than a day, indicating that these attractions are too small and too few to retain tourist interest. Arguably, they do not diversify the visitor experience beyond a somewhat 'passive' and 'free' sightseeing based heritage theme (Fig. 10.4). In addition, many visitor experiences are run by volunteers, and not as professional and commercially-oriented businesses. While one could argue that local attachment to the town's cultural capital is high, as evidenced by locals volunteering to preserve and maintain heritage assets (maybe also a sign of trying to retain past glories), there have been few entrepreneurial attempts within the

private sector to capitalise on the town's heritage assets by introducing new commercial tourism products.

Fig. 10.4

Passive and free sightseeing themes dominating the town's tourism experiences

(Photos Doris A. Carson)

Peterborough's location as the last outpost on the Barrier Highway has been both a blessing and a curse for tourism. Located 280 km west of Broken Hill, it is the first logical stopover for self-drive travellers from the eastern states, and an estimated 300,000 vehicles pass through Peterborough each year. This enormous flow-through traffic has obviously generated ample opportunities for businesses servicing the needs of transit travellers. Yet, it has also created a sense of complacency among many local business owners who do not see a need to innovate or upgrade their products since travellers *"have to come through Peterborough anyway"*, as one local accommodation operator explained. Many businesses servicing road-based travellers do not necessarily see themselves as operating in tourism, since leisure tourists appear to only comprise a small part of the overall transit traffic, and non-leisure travellers are seen as an easier and more lucrative market. In contrast, leisure tourists are often perceived by local businesses and the local community as a low-yield market that does not spend much in town. This is partly exacerbated by the fact that other traditional leisure tourism markets, such as coach tour groups, have largely disappeared over the past decades due to changing long-haul touring patterns in Outback Australia (Holyoak et al., 2009;

Carson & Taylor, 2009), leaving transiting self-drive tourists—in particular caravanners and older grey nomads on low budgets—as the main tourist market (Fig. 10.5).

Fig. 10.5

Peterborough tourism relying on transit self-drive travellers

(Photos Doris A. Carson)

There have been palpable tensions among the business and resident community over local government support for tourism in recent years. While the District Council has continued to explore various avenues for extending tourists' length of stay and expenditure, many local businesses and residents consider this as a waste of money, and do not support or engage with new tourism-related projects established by the local government. As explained by the local economic development officer:

We need to give people a reason to stop. Steamtown was one way to try and do this. Another recent project was the new RV Park across the road. People can stay there for free for up to 72 h. Again, the idea was to convince people to stop in Peterborough for a night or two, so they can then spend money in town... but once the fish come in it's up to the businesses to do something with it. That hasn't happened yet, the local businesses don't really seem to pick up these opportunities.

As illustrated by the quote above, the District Council opened a free camping site for Recreation Vehicle (RV) travellers on the outskirts of the town, opposite Steamtown, to give tourists an incentive to stay another day in Peterborough and to visit Steamtown (Fig. 10.5b). This caused substantial upset among several local businesses who saw this as a government move to take away customers from existing accommodation providers and encourage even less spending in town. In addition, Steamtown is locally seen as the government 'pet project' that has soaked up most of the local government's tourism budget and political attention, thus creating jealousies among some tourism and community stakeholders who feel that their businesses or community organisations are missing out on local government support. Some locals have criticised Steamtown as being overly focused on the volatile tourist market, without providing any additional benefit to local residents. Such impressions are exacerbated by the fact that Steamtown is located on the outskirts of the town, meaning that from the perspective of business owners in the main street, tourist traffic (and spending) has been diverted away from the town centre. Tensions like these have made it difficult for the District Council to justify funding for tourism, and have created a disconnect between the publicly funded tourism attractions and marketing campaigns and the privately run tourism services.

Despite such resistance to local government tourism initiatives, local tourism development (and economic development more broadly) remains clearly reliant on government leadership and investment. Entrepreneurial spirit in general has been described by many interviewees as being quite low. According to census data, the self-employment rate in Peterborough is considerably below that of other settlements in the region (Vuin et al., 2016), and general employment has been to a large extent dependent on government and the public service sector over the past decade. This has been linked to the town's long history of relying on a single large employer, whereby government has replaced the railways as the main engine for employment. The legacies of single-industry dependence are also still present insofar as there seems to be an ongoing hope within the community that a new large-scale investor would ultimately put the town back on track. This inherited 'dependency culture' has created a dilemma for the District Council. On the one hand, the District Council feels the need to take leadership for the sake of economic development, for example by driving tourism as a new industry in the absence of any other major industries on the horizon ("*...because nobody else would step up and take the lead otherwise*" as explained by one local government representative). On the other hand, they face resistance from a community that does not see the value of tourism and demands more attention to other large investment projects instead ("*The locals don't see tourism, they only see the trains or the meatworks, or they got all excited when there were talks about mining in the area...which never came.*"; local government representative).

Other interviewees blamed the lack of action and local support for tourism on the long period of depression and negativity following the closure of the railways. According to one local resident, many laid-off workers remaining in town (usually older males) have struggled to find work and hold a grudge against local government trying to stimulate tourism, which is "*(...) only good for creating a few jobs for cleaners and waitresses*". Such groups were often quite vocal in venting their frustrations in public and contributed substantially to a rather negative vibe and sense of discontent in town. Over the years, this has drained the town of energy and created a certain 'whining mentality' that has stifled new development efforts and dampened emerging enthusiasm. The town's social stigma had also limited local self-esteem to the extent that locals often could not understand why tourists would be interested in visiting and spending time in a 'dying' town. In particular, changes promoted by external experts (e.g. consultants or tourism managers employed by the local government) were sometimes met locally with suspicion and resistance, as explained by the economic development officer:

It's hard for people here to accept positive change, with everything having been so bad for so many years. They probably feel that 'their' town has failed, that everything they had been working for has failed. And then suddenly outsiders come in and say 'Hey, you can do all these wonderful new things with tourism!' I think a lot of people find this difficult to accept.

10.4. The Institutional Context: Local versus Regional Network Connectivity

A major issue for Peterborough's local tourism system has been the persistent disconnect and lack of networking among local tourism stakeholders. The already small cluster of local tourism and hospitality businesses has a very limited history of collaboration and collective thinking. Again, the town's transit legacy appears to play an important role in this, as complacency around guaranteed flow-through traffic seems to have reinforced inertia and

limited the need for local interaction, networking and sharing of ideas and resources. Another reason for the rather disjointed local tourism cluster is the overly homogeneous character of the accommodation and F&B sector. As economic conditions deteriorated, the various motels, pubs and bistros began seeing each other as competitors rather than potential collaborators, particularly since opportunities for complementary forward or backward linkages at the local level were limited. While a local tourism association had existed since the 1980s, its operations were primarily run by volunteers and local government representatives. Involvement and leadership from private businesses has in turn been limited, thus compromising its utility as a networking platform for industry members. In addition, efforts by subsequent tourism managers to create and coordinate collaborative product packages between the local tourism businesses and Steamtown have had limited success and poor buy-in from the private sector.

Limited business networking not only affects tourism, but has been a more general weakness of Peterborough's private sector. The town's private sector had struggled for a long time to establish a viable business association, and more recently required funding and coordination support from the regional development agency to establish a more open, interactive and collaborative platform for local businesses. One interviewee described the lack of proactive local business networks as a result of the historic dependence on the railways, with businesses being used to operating independently and in isolation from one another (*"A lot of the businesses in town were just contractors to the railways, or they were servicing the railway workers. Business was safe as long as the railways were still going, so they never really needed a business network to lobby for their interests."*). Without the railways, increasing competition, distrust and a notorious lack of communication suddenly dominated the local business mentality. In addition, tensions between the town's private and public sectors have kept many businesses from joining the government-supported business association or from participating in public networking and consultation meetings. Limited private sector participation in such activities has in turn frustrated local government employees, who then often decided to go ahead with new development proposals on their own in the absence of inputs from the private sector or other community groups. This has created a 'vicious circle' of limited public-private-community consultation and engagement and has deepened local distrust and resistance to new projects driven by the local government.

The public-private divide was also reflected in the ongoing struggles experienced by the externally recruited tourism manager in becoming accepted by the local business community. Despite bringing important new skills, project ideas and market knowledge to Peterborough's tourism system, the support from local businesses for new tourism projects has been limited. In the absence of a vibrant, interactive and collaborative local system, the tourism manager has instead focused on strengthening Peterborough's position within the regional tourism system. In the past, Peterborough's tourism system had been largely disconnected from regional partners, a result of the town's geographic isolation from the rest of the Mid North, its different industry legacy, and its different tourism product. It was never really clear where Peterborough belonged from a regional tourism perspective, as explained by one local government representative:

Peterborough has always been very isolated in South Australia. We are the last outpost on the Barrier Highway. And we used to be a railway town, not an agricultural town, so we were quite different. We are not really in the Mid North, because we are at the northern edge, we are the Upper Mid North. We have always been facing more towards Broken Hill because

of the train connection. (...) So we had to do some soul-searching to find out – who are we, and where do we belong from a tourism point of view?

When the state tourism organisation created regional tourism destinations for marketing and administration purposes in the 1980s, the 'leftover' parts of rural South Australia that lacked significant attractions or tourist flows were merged into large regional conglomerates, with Peterborough being assigned to the 'Mid North'. However, Peterborough residents felt that they had little in common with the rest of the Mid North. Also in terms of visitor itineraries, Peterborough has been somewhat disconnected from the rest of the Mid North. Visitors travelling through Peterborough are mainly from interstate on east-west itineraries, while other towns in the Mid North have traditionally relied on traffic from Adelaide heading north (Carson et al., 2014). Before the redevelopment of Steamtown into a major tourism attraction, Peterborough received very limited recognition in regional tourism plans and marketing strategies developed by the state tourism organisation. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, regional tourism brochures (of the Flinders Ranges, the Mid North, and later the Clare Valley) usually featured Peterborough's railway heritage and visitor services as a side note on their back pages, indicating its role as a minor attraction that received limited attention in state government funded marketing activities.

As a result of changes in the state government's tourism priorities during the 1990s, regional tourism boundaries were re-designed, and the 'Mid North' destination was split up so that the lower Mid North would join the region that is now known as the Clare Valley (characterised by wineries, copper mining and agricultural heritage), while the upper Mid North including Peterborough would join the Flinders Ranges and Outback destination (characterised by more rugged landscapes, pastoral stations, camping and four-wheel- driving, Aboriginal culture, wilderness experiences and national parks). To make perceptions of 'the region' even more complicated, Peterborough was at times included in different regional development zones. Originally included in the Northern Regional Development Board responsible for the state's expansive Far North, it was later reassigned to the zone administered by the regional development agency responsible for the Yorke Peninsula and the Mid North (RDA Yorke & Mid North). One could argue that shifting administrative boundaries for both tourism and regional development support have further confused Peterborough's regional sense of belonging. Some local stakeholders have, however, argued that changing boundaries did not make a great deal of difference, simply because the town suffered from a general lack of regional thinking, no matter what the regional boundaries would ultimately look like. Accustomed to functioning as a relatively independent and self-contained 'hub', local stakeholders had little experience in establishing networks and collaborations with regional partners (whether they were in the Mid North, the Flinders Ranges or in Broken Hill). For example, regional tourism managers and development consultants in the Flinders Ranges region often remarked how difficult it was to encourage Peterborough stakeholders to become involved in regional tourism development initiatives (such as a cycle tourism development initiative in the Southern Flinders Ranges, or a geo-tourism project in the Central Flinders Ranges). Part of the reason was that Peterborough stakeholders did not see their local railway heritage product reflected in regional tourism strategies (Schmallegger, 2010). In a similar vein, an attempt in the early 2000s to form a collaboration with Orroroo and share a tourism development officer between the two district councils ultimately failed due to conflicting marketing priorities. As explained by one of the consultants for a regional tourism development strategy in 2009:

They [Peterborough and Orroroo] had the tourist train for a while, they also had a joint brochure and a joint tourism officer. But that didn't really work out. Too much parochial thinking, and what they were trying to promote wasn't really connected. Peterborough only ever saw the trains and the railway heritage, whereas Orroroo has been more into nature, four-wheel-driving, camping, and so on. Orroroo wants to link more into the Flinders Ranges product, whereas Peterborough has isolated itself a bit...as this railway heritage centre that doesn't really fit with the rest.

Regional relationship building began to improve once Peterborough's District Council commenced hiring external tourism managers who recognised the need for external connectivity, and who had both the knowledge and experience in managing such connections. In recent years there have been a number of efforts to build stronger relationships with tourism stakeholders in the Clare Valley and Broken Hill in Outback NSW to firmly embed Peterborough as a 'gateway' and 'must-do' stopover in the marketing activities of those destinations. There have also been efforts to re-connect Peterborough more strongly with the Flinders Ranges, for example by joining the Flinders Ranges Tourism Operators Association and hosting regional network events in Peterborough (The Flinders News, 2016). Another recent initiative by the tourism manager centred on the development of a themed touring route for self-drive tourists. The Heritage Rail Trail from Broken Hill to Port Pirie (<http://www.daytrippa.com.au/heritage-rail-trail>) required collaboration between four local governments and towns across the Southern Flinders Ranges and Outback NSW.

Connections to the state tourism organisation—notorious for its focus on supporting large-scale 'signature developments' to grow tourism in the state (Schmallegger, 2010)—have also improved, thus increasing Peterborough's prominence in state funded marketing activities. The scale of the Steamtown development, and its 'cutting-edge' design in terms of heritage interpretation, have put the town on the South Australian tourism map, as it has finally provided the state tourism organisation with a product that in their view is worth promoting on a broader national level. Linking this product more overtly to the Flinders Ranges destination has also been a welcome move within the state tourism organisation, particularly since the Flinders Ranges has become one of the priority tourism regions in the state following its designation as one of Australia's iconic National Landscapes in the mid-2000s. As explained by one representative of the state tourism organisation in 2011:

It's good for Peterborough to integrate more with the Flinders. Flinders Ranges is clearly a hotspot for the [South Australian Tourism] Commission at the moment, there is a lot of buzz, a lot of activity, and Peterborough can tap into that buzz. They've got Steamtown, which is a huge attraction for South Australian standards, at least for Country SA. So they've got this huge asset now, and that makes them all of a sudden more interesting for the region, and for us as well. Now they can bring something to the table, whereas previously it was more like—'Yeah, Peterborough, an old railway town. So what? There's many of them in Australia.'

Despite improvements in regional collaboration, it is clear that Peterborough will continue to remain at the margins of the Flinders Ranges and thus secondary to more prominent tourism hotspots further north. Peterborough's location and physical geography, its entrenched transit legacy, its passive sightseeing heritage product, its lack of alternative amenities, as well as its homogeneous and not very proactive local tourism cluster, seem to have locked the local system into the role of serving as a short stopover 'gateway' to other destinations. As the local system continues to struggle to establish Peterborough as a successful overnight destination

in its own right, negative local perceptions of tourism as being a waste of time and money may continue to intensify. This may also reinforce local feelings of inferiority and 'not being good enough' in comparison with other towns and tourism hotspots in the region, thus raising the question if tourism can truly serve to revitalize the town's self-esteem in the longer term. Such sentiments were reflected in the comments of several local residents, as illustrated by one local business owner who remarked:

We'd be kidding ourselves to think that we are going to be this great new destination that tourists from all over the country will want to visit. We won't. We don't really have enough to offer, there is not much to do around here. (...) Most tourists coming here don't come because of Peterborough. They come because they are on the way to somewhere else, somewhere more interesting like the Flinders or the coast. We are just a 'drive-through', and we can't even stop enough people on the way because there's hardly anywhere to get decent coffee.

Another consideration is that, despite the system's improving regional connectivity, issues around limited local connectivity remain. The recent focus on external networking has to some degree neglected the need for local network building, causing in turn more tensions within the local system. Hence, even though important regional tourism connections have emerged, these have remained dependent on the mediation of local government employees, while at the same time local divides have deepened and compromised a proper integration of local stakeholders into a more interactive and collaborative regional system.

10.5. Concluding Discussion

This chapter has documented the development path of tourism in Peterborough, a former railway town located in South Australia's Mid North periphery. The case study findings emphasise that tourism in Peterborough has been clearly affected by path-dependent evolutionary processes and institutional legacies stemming from the town's historic dependence on the railways as the main local industry. Even though tourism may be considered a new development path (indicating a break from the town's previous pathway), the struggles in establishing tourism clearly point towards issues around cognitive and functional lock-in among local stakeholders and 'sticky' behaviours inherited from the railway days. The most striking examples included the inherent culture of dependence on local government leadership, the ongoing lack in entrepreneurial ambitions to diversify and complement existing products, and the limited ability among local stakeholders to form and maintain collaborative networks at both local and regional levels. A certain lingering addiction to a large-scale industry and employer, and perceptions that tourism cannot fill the economic gaps left behind by the railways, have meant that the local community has not been able to fully accept or embrace tourism as a new industry to this date.

There has also been resistance to new knowledge, ideas and institutions imported by external experts and local government employees, indicating that the local system may have been too closed off for too long to absorb such new connections and knowledge inputs from outside. Closed local systems are not uncommon in peripheral areas, and their lack of regional connectivity can in part be explained by their historic isolation and economic disconnectedness within the region, resulting in a narrowly-focused sense of local parochialism (Carson & Koster, 2015; Hall & Stern, 2009; Markey et al., 2006). The shift in regional hierarchies (i.e. from being a self-sufficient transport hub of high political and economic importance in the state to being a relatively minor player in a large peripheral

tourism region), along with the depression and loss of self-esteem following the withdrawal of the railways, may have further truncated the extent of external connection-seeking and regional collaboration efforts among local stakeholders. Yet, the case of Peterborough also demonstrated a considerable internal disconnect within the local system. This suggests that the problem may not only be about the legacies of historic regional fragmentation, but a more general limitation in local networking capabilities that appears rooted in single-industry dependence.

While the District Council has demonstrated the vision and ambition to drive tourism, and has taken active steps towards breaking the lock-in (e.g. by promoting new ideas, importing new expertise and leadership, or encouraging new networks), local distrust and resistance have stifled the formation of productive public-private partnerships. Hence, even though processes of 'layering' (Martin, 2010)—e.g. by adding new actors, institutions or relations to the system—seem to have occurred on a local government level, such layering has not (yet) created any spillover of knowledge, ideas and resources from the public sector to the rest of the local tourism system. This has clearly limited the extent of 'learning' and innovative change within the private and community sectors, to the extent that tourism in Peterborough continues to be a predominantly government-driven economic development strategy with relatively little buy-in and collaboration from the local industry and community. Interestingly, new mobilities (for example through in-migration) have so far contributed little to changing entrenched ideas, habits and practices locally. The particular physical, historic and socio-economic contexts of the place appear to have attracted populations that are more likely to maintain previous practices and institutions (e.g. dependence on government, limited entrepreneurial thinking, limited networking capabilities) rather than injecting new ideas and attitudes. This calls for a need to pay more attention to the path-dependent nature of mobility and migration trajectories in peripheral areas, and how these interact with local economic change (Carson & Carson, 2014). Future approaches to local economic development and innovation in places like Peterborough may have to consider more explicit strategies to change such mobility trajectories, for example by targeting more population diversity and attracting a more independent entrepreneurial class.

The spatial context and physical geography of places like Peterborough clearly challenge the extent to which tourism and tourist mobilities can be diversified. The lack of natural attractions and scenic amenities, the isolated location at the edge of the desert, and the distance to major access transport infrastructure such as airports, mean that available tourist markets for Peterborough are relatively small and homogeneous (typically transit self-drive travellers on long-haul interstate itineraries). Prideaux (2002) reminds us that introducing unique and large-scale attractions can help peripheral destinations overcome the tyranny of distance. Yet, the extent to which heritage sightseeing attractions, such as Steamtown, are able to attract new markets and change entrenched visitor itineraries may be debatable. Special-interest heritage tourists, such as railway enthusiasts, are arguably a very small market that is unlikely to support the local (tourism) economy on its own. Instead, the priority for Steamtown has been to stop visitors who are already passing through Peterborough, meaning that it has not been able to change the role of Peterborough from a short transit stopover to a destination in its own right that can attract and retain tourists for longer periods. This would most likely require a stronger, more diverse and more proactive local tourism industry willing to develop new complementary tourism products that could attract new markets or extend the length of stay of existing markets. On the other hand, one could question whether Peterborough should actually strive to become a more prominent overnight destination, or whether the town would be better off focusing its energy and resources on

trying to better capitalise on its location and transit character. Instead of trying to change visitor itineraries through extensive local government funding and marketing, resources could be used to strengthen Peterborough's reputation as a short 'must-do' stop for transit travellers, encouraging people to spend more money (e.g. with better café/dining experiences and better shopping opportunities) during the short time that they are in town. Still, this would require a change in mindset among local business owners, recognising that the current range and standard of products and services needs to be improved to attract more tourist spending.

A more proactive and independent tourism industry would also be required to make the local tourism system less dependent on public sector investment and leadership, and thus less vulnerable to potentially changing funding schemes in the future. As government support for tourism in peripheral areas is often dependent on short-term funding cycles, support for attractions, marketing or government employed tourism managers can quickly disappear if (local, regional, or state) government priorities change (Carson & Koster, 2015; Carson et al., 2014). Though Peterborough currently has a very pro-tourism local government, this could change quickly in the future, particularly if tensions within the community over local government tourism spending continue. Similarly, state government support for regional tourism in South Australia has been relatively volatile over the past decades. With South Australia's resources and manufacturing industries experiencing a significant downturn in recent years, tourism has been high on regional development agendas. Still, the problem for Peterborough is that it is no longer a priority playground for the state government (or any external large-scale employers), and as such does not attract the same level of political attention and support as other ailing resource or manufacturing hubs in the state. This means that the town may find itself competing with other, more prominent, settlements in regional and remote South Australia for ongoing tourism and economic development funding in the near future.

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¹ This estimate is based on traffic counts and does not reflect the actual number of tourists. Tourist numbers for Peterborough are difficult to ascertain, as the visitor surveys conducted by Tourism Research Australia do no longer provide specific statistics for the Peterborough local government area. A change in Australia's Standard Geographical Classification in 2011 meant that the District Council of Peterborough was merged with the neighbouring District Council of Mount Remarkable for statistical purposes. However, these two local government areas do not share the same tourist markets and visitor itineraries, and thus such statistics become meaningless. Data collected prior to this reclassification between 2001 and 2011 suggest that an average of 22,000 tourists visited Peterborough each year (just under half of them for holiday/leisure purposes).