



Past reborn: Connie and Craig Kimberley have turned the Herberton Historic Village into a labour of love.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS HYDE

Labour

Call it destiny, but when Connie and Craig Kimberley stumbled on an abandoned historic village in Herberton, they decided to put their hearts and souls into reviving it. DENISE CARTER speaks to the powerhouse couple behind fashion chain Just Jeans

There's no doubting the economic potential of the newly opened Herberton Historic Village.

A glance at historic villages around the country shows myriad benefits to their local communities.

On the larger end of the scale, take Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, the re-creation of an 1850s goldfields township.

Open now for 38 years, it employs about 200 staff as actors, tour guides, maintenance, gardening and administrative staff, and even horsemen. It contributes an estimated \$35 million annually to the local economy.

Morpeth, on the banks of the Hunter River in New South Wales, was once a thriving port, but became a virtual backwater when it was bypassed by the Sydney-Brisbane rail line.

However, because of its isolation it retained many of its old buildings, is now listed with the National Trust and is thriving as a tourist town.

Could such wonders happen to Herberton?

Once the richest tin mining field in Australia with a population of about 8000 people, the town was home in the early 1900s to 20 hotels, two local newspapers, 17 pubs and a brewery.

Recently it's been more of a commuter town of just 1000 people.

But the reopening of Herberton Historic Village, which closed in 2003 because of the expense of public liability insurance, may change all that.

Already it has employed about 40 local tradesmen who worked to have it ready for its reopening on April 5, and afterwards it should employ about 10 people on an ongoing basis.

Craig and Connie Kimberley say they are merely custodians of the village.

"We've bought it but really we're just trying to keep it there for people to come and see," Connie says.

"It's for future generations to see how people lived."

They say all kudos for the 30-year-old collection, which was open to the public for 26 years, must go to the original owners, Harry and Ellen Skennar.

It's clear, however, that Craig and Connie have spent a considerable amount of time and personal effort in revitalising the collection.

Although it might be seen as a business venture for the Just Jeans founder and his wife, a prominent businesswoman, you get the impression Herberton Historic Village is as much a venture of whim and passion as anything else.

For starters, they never had any intention of buying the place and it was only by chance they even noticed it.

"We were driving through in June of last year and Connie said to me, 'what's

that?'. We looked and did a wheelie, came back, and it was all these lovely old buildings, but it was all closed up," Craig says.

"We ended up going to the mining centre and we came down and went to a real estate agent and said, 'What's cooking here?'"

They found out the village had been closed for six years and wasn't for sale.

Five months later they received a phone call to say it was available and they bought it.

We've bought it but really we're just trying to keep it there for people to come and see. It's for future generations to see how people lived.

"We just pulled out and sat in the car and looked at each other and said, 'What have we done?'," Connie says.

Their reaction is not surprising when you consider that after 31 years developing Just Jeans, they're back where they began as small business owners.

"My daughter, when we told her, she thought we had dementia because she thinks why would we do something like this at this stage of our lives," Connie says.

"It's a lot of work but we feel very excited."

Any trepidation about starting again seems to have been overpowered by their light-hearted approach and the sense of fun they have with their new venture.

Connie calls it an ongoing project because only part of the village – around 30 of 42 buildings – is ready for public viewing, because of the sheer volume of restoration work they had to do.

"We've put in new drainage, new electrics, new spoutings, a lot of timbers have been replaced, it has been repainted and reroofed," Craig says.

"Connie is very artistic – she's made the displays breathe a bit and brought them to life and I think we've made it more practical to walk around the pathways."

Connie adds: "And we've re-posted the fence around the front and put down lawn."

The couple reminds me of scenes from the movie *When Harry Met Sally* because of the way they seem to always finish each other's sentences.

"There's a school, a bank, a presbytery and a large Salvation Army house," Connie says.

"A clothes shop, butcher's shop," Craig adds.

"A worker's lunch room, which