At its height, the Holden plant at Elizabeth had its own kind of gravity.

Each day it would call out across the Adelaide plains, reaching as far north as Gawler, as far south as Enfield, and summon the region's best sons and daughters to work on its production line where together they built the Kingwoods and Commodores that once defined the Australian way.

I grew up in that orbit, spending 23 years in the same house, in the same neighbourhood about five minutes south of the factory, depending on traffic. By then, Holden's best days were done, but you still always knew whose daddy worked at the plant by the car they drove or the house they lived in and because people told you he did. He was Holden, they said, and on a good wage, though you didn't really understand what that meant because you were too young to spell the word "mortgage".

Autowork, for what it's worth, was never really in my family's blood. Concrete pumped through my father's veins, but even my family couldn't fight the inevitable. Holden gave my grandfather, my mother's father, his first job when he came out to Australia and needed work fast.

Mum keeps an old black and white photo of my grandparents around the time they came over, he a Cypriot immigrant from Paphos, she a working class English girl from west London who together had moved their young family out to the end of the world as Ten Pound Poms.

The factory may have been loud and noisy and a constant blur of movement, but to this day the old man insists in his heavily accented English that the 18 months he spent driving forklifts at the plant was a good job. My mother still remembers the Christmas parties the company would throw for the toys they gave the immigrant children.

This has always been the way of things with Holden. It was a way of life that you were always a part of, like it or not. If you didn't work at the factory, either your ancestors had to give you a better life, or you made your money off those who did. Many Australians have a connection to the car factories and the shipyards and the smelters like that.

It's also something you don't understand while living through it. It only comes into focus by looking back. Holden was there, always going to be, a fixed point by which people navigated their lives. An Elizabeth without Holden would be Sydney without its bridge. Losing it was impossible.

Elizabeth is one of those Middle Australian towns the rest of the country pretends doesn't exist and South Australians like to laugh at for its troubles.

About 80,000 people live there along Adelaide's northern edge where open plain hits brick, another place where a housing development can go up overnight, but there is hardly a well-paying job left that doesn't involve stacking supermarket shelves.

It has not always been this way.

Once upon a time, Elizabeth had been one of the most talked about, written about and photographed places in the country.

It was one of the first serious attempts at urban planning, a city of 25,000 people in the original vision, where every need would be met.

Its wide streets and infinite blue sky would

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END OF THE ROAD

The loss of Holden is an economic disaster for South Australia, but for the generations of workers who built their lives around the car plant it is like the world has turned upside down

WORDS ROYCE KURMELOVS

be nothing like the dirty, grey industrial towns of pre-war Britain.

Only no-one had ever given any real thought to what industry what would drive the local economy of Adelaide's newest satellite town. Thomas Playford solved that problem when he sold General Motors, then the largest manufacturing company in the world and the embodiment of American muscle, on the idea of building its new factory out at Elizabeth.

Overnight the compact city of 25,000 was supersized with a workforce brought in from places like Britain, Germany, Greece and Italy to work in a factory that quickly became their birthright.

And when they came in for a job with the factory, Don Ellis was the one they would talk to. His job was in payroll and hiring, and for a time he knew the first name of nearly everyone on the factory floor.

Sitting in his living room, beneath the mantle clock Holden gave him for 25 years of service, he tells how he had transferred from the Woodville factory to the Elizabeth plant in 1960 and watched it grow. Don was there when in 1963 the Queen visited the town which bore her name and when the company started running tours through the plant, he was the first guide. After 27 years of service, he retired in 1983. He was 55.

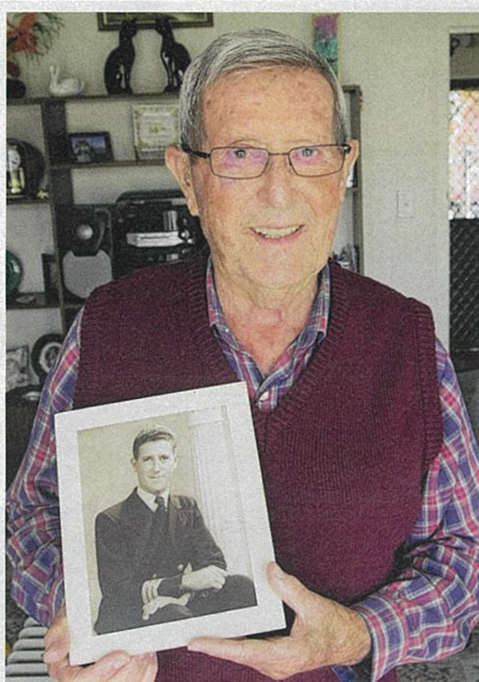
"It's a marvellous thing overall how they make a motor car," Don says. "Just to see from pieces of metal, what they can do with them, paint them and put them together on the assembly line. How they're built. The way they are built."

The plant was a job for life and it was that way for three generations, which is exactly the story as Nick Pettina lived it. Talking to him mid-shift at the aged care facility he worked at after taking a voluntary separation package in 2009, he still remembered the exact day he started: Monday, 17th January, 1977. He wasn't quite 17.

In those days he was a muso and his dream was to be a rock star, which lasted right up until his father sat him down and told him to get a job. His father worked at Holden, as did his uncles, so he followed the call of the factory and went down to get himself an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner.

"Holden was bigger than the Roman Empire," he says. "It would never fail. But then the Roman Empire failed as well, so there we go."

Every bar stool economist has a different idea about how the decline started. Maybe it was petrol prices, or falling tariffs, or just the will of the market. Some argue the whole thing was dead as far back as the eighties when John Button started cutting the tariffs that protected the Australian industry by making foreign cars more expensive. Button wanted fewer local models, and a more efficient industry. Others blame "greedy unions" and cheer their downfall. The only thing everyone can agree on was that once the compact between labour, industry and government started to break down, the rot set in. It's a story told by numbers. At the start of the eighties, manufacturing employed 100,000 South Australians but by 2011, that had fallen to 74,000. It started with the other factories, when textiles went offshore. Then the people who made refrigerators and other white goods went next and by 2010, Holden was the last left standing.



Main, the 1,000,000th Holden rolls off the line in 1962; and, above, Don Ellis with a photograph of his younger self. Picture: Royce Kurmelovs

In the space of three decades, Elizabeth had gone from a town that made a lot of different things to a one company town.

And when Holden's turn came, Darryl Waterman was going to be one of the first to know. Every few years, the company organised an international factory tour to put Elizabeth in its "global context" as new people rose to senior roles. As a senior Australian Manufacturing Workers Union official, he had been invited to join the last one before the announcement was made.

Walking through the Vauxhall plant in the UK was impressive, but the GM partner plant in Shenyang was the one he remembered. Just like everyone else, Darryl went in expecting sweatshops and faulty cars. Only what they found was a huge factory with happy workers, capable of pushing out hundreds of thousands of cars a year. The same year Holden announced it would end local production, China made over 18 million vehicles. Australia made 210,528.

"That's when we sort of thought, shit, we are in a bit of trouble," he said. What finally brought it all down was the high Australian dollar. Parity in manufacturing is what drought is to agriculture and while easy money from the mining boom made Australia rich, it drove up the price of the dollar to a point where imports were cheap and exporting was expensive.

The company had asked for $70 million in extra support to get it through and the response from the federal government was embodied by federal treasurer Joe Hockey who three months after a federal election seemed to dare GM to leave.

Two weeks before Christmas 2013 GM pulled the morning shift out to tell them the whole place was shutting down and the last car would roll off the line at the end of 2017.

Merry Christmas, Elizabeth.

Once Holden went, Toyota went too but with three years before the crunch the closure wasn't real. Then during May 2015, Holden started chipping away at the workforce when it sacked 270 people.

The next round of layoffs are expected for October. A year after that, when the speeches are made and the last car rolls off the line, a skeleton crew will stay on to put the place into mothballs. The machines will be auctioned off to China, or Indonesia, or Thailand, dismantled and put on a ship. Then everyone will go home for the last time.

Last time we spoke, Darryl was talking about becoming a counsellor when it was all over. "It's not like there's a lot out there at this stage," he said. "It's not like there's any real industry to take up the slack.

"When this place goes, all those people, all the suppliers, and all the people coming out of school are all going onto the employment market with no sign of any industry to replace the hole that Holden will create."

Holden was never going to pull away clean. When Dr John Spoehr of Flinders University ran the numbers he projected 23,903 people in South Australia would feel the crunch as 2017 closes.

About a third of the 400 to 600 companies that make everything from screws to car stereos for Holden are expected to shut down. That will leave a few thousand more people looking for work. Unemployment in Elizabeth is already very high – 34.5 per cent according to the federal government's Small Area Labour Markets report for the March 2016 quarter.

Australia has never seen what happens when an entire industry concentrated in two states shuts down in such a short space of time. The best comparison is Wollongong in the eighties. That took 20 years to stabilise. By the end of 2017, the car industry will have closed over just three years.

Some say it will all be fine. Car factories have closed before. What's new? Those people should go out to Clovelly Park and Reynella and talk to those who used to work at Mitsubishi where a third of the car workers laid off did not work again. They should go to places like Norlane and Broadmeadows and Dandenong in Victoria to hear what some of this country's strongest people have to say about making the best of a rough time.

I have. It's in these places that I met people like Kat Lee, 58, of Woodville Gardens, where the scars left when Holden closed its Woodville plant can still be seen.

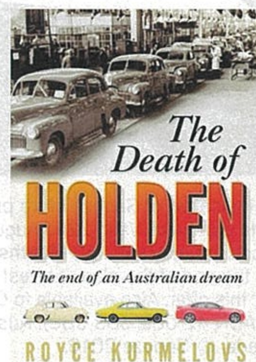
Kat's parents had moved into the neighbourhood during WWII when her father went to work in the ammunitions factories making bullets and bombs.

"When the munitions factories closed it became a ball bearing plant and dad used to bring them home and they were my marbles because we couldn't afford to buy marbles," she said. "I grew up here. I've watched this area die, change, go through different stages."

These days, a Bunnings stands on the site of the old Holden factory and Kat spends 50 hours a week running Food For The Community, a charity that delivers food hampers across Adelaide. She also survives on welfare and pays 70 per cent of her income in rent, but the hours she works at the charity aren't enough to satisfy her obligations because it is run from her home.

Things have been this way since her husband left her as a mother of seven in the late nineties. All her kids have grown up and moved away now, but the 17-year-old friend of her youngest son is still here. She looks over at him while we talk in her backyard about the future. "The sort of person I am, I will find some way to get by," she says. "What about the next generation? They don't know what it was like. What are we leaving them?

"This is normal. This is what they know." •



The Death of Holden by Royce Kurmelovs, Hachette Australia, September 2016, $32.99