

THE MAKING OF “BULLSEYE” IN BOURKE 1987

In the winter of 1987, the quiet New South Wales town of Bourke—population barely 3,000—found itself transformed into an unlikely Hollywood-type outpost. The dusty streets that had witnessed everything from paddle steamers to bushrangers were about to play host to film crews, famous actors, and the ambitious production of "Bullseye," a sprawling Australian western that would become one of the most significant film productions in the region's history.

On a vast claypan near Mount Oxley, just outside Bourke, something extraordinary began to take shape. Where previously only saltbush and red earth stretched to the horizon, construction crews erected an entire nineteenth-century township. The prop village wasn't merely a Hollywood facade—it was a fully realized period settlement, complete with weathered timber buildings, dusty main streets, and authentic architectural details that would transport audiences back to colonial Australia.

The construction phase alone turned Bourke into a hive of activity. Carpenters, set designers, and labourers descended on the town, their trucks kicking up red dust as they ferried materials to and from the claypan. Local hardware stores couldn't keep stock on their shelves. The pubs did roaring trade with thirsty construction workers who spent their evenings recounting the day's progress over cold beers.

When filming commenced, Bourke experienced what locals would later describe as organized chaos. The town's modest accommodation infrastructure—a handful of motels and the historic pubs that had served outback travellers for generations—suddenly found themselves operating at capacity. Every room was booked, every bed filled with cast and crew members.

The Oxley Club, the Old Royal Hotel, and other establishments became impromptu green rooms where actors mingled with genuine bushies over counter meals. Local shops experienced unprecedented demand, their cash registers ringing with purchases from film production staff buying everything from sunscreen to stockman's hats. The local service station attendants found themselves refuelling a seemingly endless convoy of production vehicles, equipment trucks, and the personal cars of cast and crew.

For Bourke's residents, the arrival of the film's cast was the most thrilling aspect of the production. The streets buzzed with whispered sightings: "I just saw John Meillon at the bakery!" "Paul Goddard was buying cigarettes at the newsagent!" The venerable John Meillon, already a household name from his iconic Crocodile Dundee performance and decades of Australian film and television, was particularly recognized and admired.

Townpeople found reasons to drive past the motels where the actors stayed, hoping for a glimpse. The local cafes became stakeout points where residents nursed cups of tea while keeping watch. It was innocent, excited attention—the kind

that comes from genuine admiration rather than intrusive celebrity culture. Most of the actors, seasoned Australian performers who understood country hospitality, took it in stride, often stopping for chats and photographs.

Perhaps the most exciting opportunity for Bourke residents was the chance to appear in the film itself. The production company put out a call for extras, and dozens of locals signed up to portray nineteenth-century townsfolk, drovers, and auction attendees. For many, it meant early morning calls, long days in period costume under the unforgiving outback sun, and multiple takes of the same scene—but nobody complained.

Local station hands found themselves particularly in demand, their authentic riding skills and comfort with livestock making them invaluable for the cattle-driving scenes. Some Bourke residents still proudly point to their brief appearances in the finished film, a permanent record of their brush with movie-making.

Aboriginal tracker Jackie Guyula brought authenticity to his role that no amount of acting could replicate, and his presence in Bourke connected the production to the deep Indigenous history of the region.

The story being filmed was itself a remarkable piece of Australian storytelling. At its heart was Harry Walford, a menial station hand played by Paul Goddard, whose frustrations with his lot in life—including his boss Don McKenzie's (Paul Chubb) jealous guarding of his wife Dora (Lynette Curran)—spark an audacious plan.

When housemaid Lily Boyd (Kathryn Walker) receives word of an inheritance in Adelaide, it sets in motion a chain of events that culminate in one of cinema's most ambitious cattle drives: a thousand head of cattle driven across the dead heart of Australia from Queensland to Adelaide, a feat never before accomplished.

The film's plot wove together romance, adventure, comedy, and courtroom drama. After successfully selling the stolen cattle in Adelaide, Harry's reunion with Lily—who discovered her inheritance was merely five pounds and had taken work in Mrs Googe's (Kerry Walker) brothel—was complicated by scarlet fever, police arrest, and a sensational trial back in Roma.

John Meillon's portrayal of the drunken but brilliant lawyer Samuel Merrit provided the film's courtroom climax, his rousing defence of Harry's achievement swaying the jury to an unlikely not guilty verdict. The film concluded with multiple happy endings: Harry and Lily heading off to establish their new station, Don finally finding conjugal happiness with Dora, and even the shifty Purdy (Bruce Spence) and Spence (David Slingsby) getting another chance with their old boss.

The Mount Oxley location proved both challenging and perfect for the production. The expansive claypan provided the cinematographers with vast, uninterrupted vistas that captured the harsh beauty and isolation of the Australian interior. The red earth and endless skies became characters in themselves, emphasizing the audacity of Harry's cattle-driving dream.

Filming in such a remote location presented logistical challenges that would have defeated lesser productions. Everything—from camera equipment to catering—had to be transported to the site. The Australian summer heat (though filming occurred in winter, temperatures could still be extreme) tested equipment and endurance alike. Dust got into everything: cameras, costumes, lunch boxes, and hair.

Yet the isolation also created a sense of camaraderie. Cast and crew, far from the distractions of city life, bonded over shared meals and evening gatherings in Bourke's pubs. The town itself became a character in the production's story, its genuine outback atmosphere seeping into every frame.

For Bourke's economy, the film production was a significant windfall. Money flowed through local businesses for weeks—accommodation, meals, fuel, supplies, and services. Some residents found temporary employment with the production, earning wages that provided welcome relief in an era when rural economies were often precarious.

But beyond the immediate economic benefits, "Bullseye" left Bourke with something more valuable: a story. For years afterward, locals would recount tales of the filming—the day John Meillon bought everyone in the pub a round, the time a bull escaped during filming, the scorching afternoon when shooting had to be delayed because the heat made the equipment malfunction.

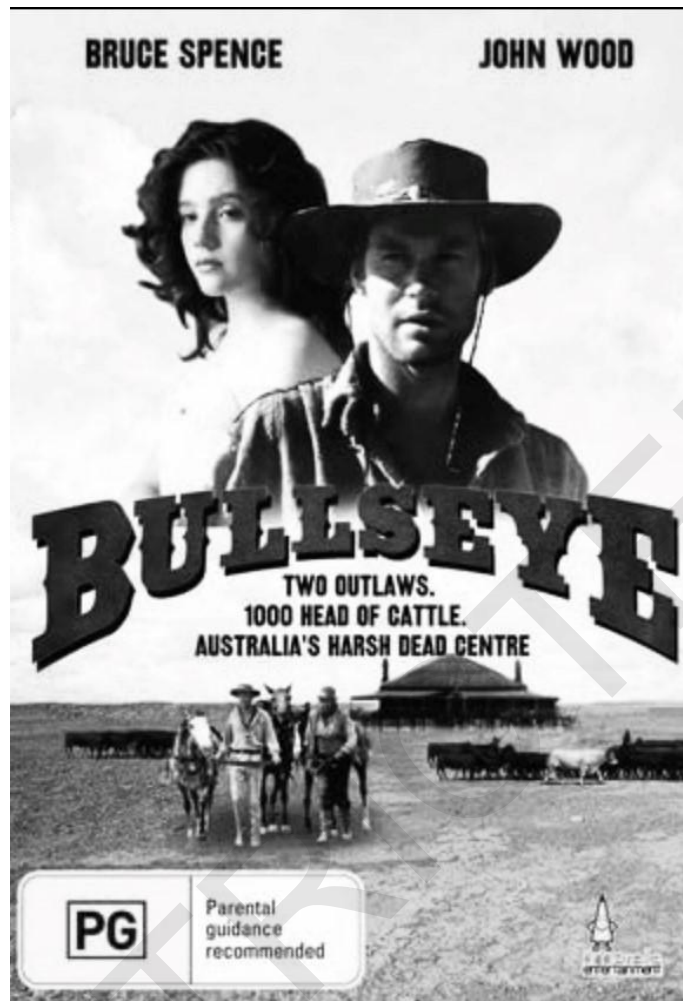
The winter of 1987 represented a unique moment in Bourke's history—when the isolation and authenticity that defined life in the outback became the very qualities that attracted filmmakers. In an era before digital effects could conjure convincing landscapes and when audiences still craved genuine location shooting, places like Bourke offered something irreplaceable.

When the production wrapped and the crews departed, the claypan township near Mount Oxley was dismantled, leaving barely a trace. The actors returned to Sydney and Melbourne. The trucks carrying equipment rolled out of town for the last time. Bourke returned to its regular rhythm—but the town was changed, even if only slightly.

The residents had seen their home through Hollywood's eyes and discovered that their ordinary lives—the red dust, the endless sky, the harsh beauty of the landscape—were extraordinary to outsiders. They had welcomed strangers, shared their town, and become part of a story larger than themselves.

For a brief, shining moment in 1987, Bourke wasn't just a dot on the map or a place to pass through on the way to somewhere else. It was a film set, a story, a place where cattle thieves could become heroes and where dreams as big as driving a thousand head across the dead heart could come true—at least on screen.

The film "Bullseye" may not have become a blockbuster, but for Bourke, its legacy endured in memories and stories, in photographs kept in family albums, and in the knowledge that once upon a time, Hollywood came to town.



Poster for the Movie



Town Setting on the Claypan near Mount Oxley



Scene in the Township



Filming the Movie