



George Bender "was so angry," says daughter Helen (with him in November 2014).

# A daughter's TRAGIC CRUSADE

*After battling energy companies for more than a decade, Helen Bender's father took his own life. Now she wants everyone to know why*

**H**elen Bender will never forget the last phone call she had with her dad. For more than a decade, Australian energy giants including Origin Energy and QGC had been mining natural gas on the land neighbouring George Bender's farm "Chinta" in south-east Queensland, causing, he said, pollution of the pristine water, death of his prized livestock and a gradual destruction of the land he had nurtured for decades. By September last year, George, 68, was showing signs of stress and his daughter, who lives in Brisbane, picked up the phone. "I told him how proud I was and how successful he was," she says, wiping away tears. "I told him how much I loved him. And in George's fashion, he hung up. I choked him. He didn't know what to say."

Two weeks later, the father of five took his own life. George's death came while Origin was making moves to take control of his most cherished farmland, some 20km south-east of Chinchilla in Queensland's Darling Downs, for the mining of coal seam gas (see box, p. 45). "He was Australia's hero," says Helen, an engineer and project manager. "They killed him."

Now, Helen, 38, is on a crusade to raise the curtain on the practice of mining CSG on farmland, in the hope of preventing any such tragedy again.

My father was a fifth-generation farmer in Chinchilla, on the Western Downs in Queensland, and had farmed cattle, wheat, cotton and pigs. He was passionate about farming and had won many awards. His contribution to agriculture meant he was well-known and highly regarded in the

region and he would never send or sell substandard produce. He had four boys—Neil, 46, Tony, 45, Brian, 43, and Gary, 40—and me. I am the youngest. The older three boys all went into farming and Gary is a builder. I went to uni after school and studied engineering.

*After CSG was discovered on Queensland's Western Downs, the energy companies swarmed to the region. While farmers like George own their farmland, state governments have the power to allow energy companies to mine on any property, with compensation available.*

Dad was like, "What's this coal seam gas coming to Chinchilla?" The industry and the government were saying, "Oh it's just going to be a few gas wells, a few plants over here and we will have a little pipeline." Dad just

wanted to know what it all meant. He started researching and he came out with the facts. It destroyed him.

No-one seemed to understand at the time that it would be a

24/7 operation, that there were going to be wells every couple of hundred metres on properties where mining was allowed, and that each well was going to have a V8 engine full-bore, full revs going all night. It's not a hum, it's a roar. And no-one knew there were going to be wells flaring toxic concoctions. Your peace and enjoyment in a land where you could once see the night sky and the stars was wiped out, like a bushfire in the sky. On the nights the gas wells flare, we end up with sick or dead pigs. They die within three days. We know there were other families with young children living in the gas fields that are sick.

George wrote to every government official—politicians local, federal and state. He spoke to them all. What he ended



Helen Bender (on her dad's south-east Queensland farmland on Feb. 25) says her father's suicide "needs a royal commission."



Coal-seam gas protestors paid tribute to George Bender outside the Queensland premier's Brisbane office on Oct. 22 last year.



"He kept saying, 'I don't want to sell,'" recalls Bender (on her father's property, which is still owned by the family, on Feb. 25).

## 'THEY DON'T CARE'

"The CSG companies, they don't really care how they treat you," George Bender told the ABC's 7.30 six months before his death. "One representative of the company said, 'Look, if you get a negative effect of CSG, well so be it, cop it and move forward.'" (Origin tells WHO they always treated Bender with "respect.")

"Sometimes you say, 'Oh well, let's go,'" said George Bender in 2015. "But where would you go to find better country?"

## WHAT IS COAL SEAM GAS?

Coal seam gas (CSG) is a natural gas found in abundance in Queensland and New South Wales. It is used to "generate electricity, run home appliances and fuel businesses and industries," according to Origin Energy's website. "CSG provides 90 per cent of Queensland's gas needs." It has been estimated there is the potential for 40,000 CSG wells in Australia.

To extract CSG, energy companies drill wells hundreds of metres deep to the coal seam, and then remove water to create pressure to bring the gas up. The process of fracking can also be employed, whereby a drill bores deep into the earth before a mix of water and chemicals is pumped at high pressure into the rock to force gas out. A fenced CSG well is "generally around half the size of a netball court," states Origin, "and land uses, such as farming and grazing, outside the fenced area can continue."

Farmers and environmental groups argue that point, claiming that the gas wells contaminate the land and groundwater, kill crops and livestock, and create the risk of explosion if anyone digs a hole more than 2m deep in the "exclusion zone." Some farmers, such as George Bender, have accused the energy companies of deploying bullying tactics in gaining access to their land. "I am quite confident that we acted respectfully with George at all times," Origin Energy's spokeswoman Natasha Patterson tells WHO. "And not just with George, but all our landholders. The philosophy is to establish a relationship and trust over the long term and access the land on good terms."

Following George's death last year, Independent Queensland Senator Glen Lazarus called for a "pause" on CSG mining "until we can establish the human and environmental impacts." Says Patterson: "We were really sad to hear about George's passing, and did offer our sincere condolences to the family."

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ABC-TV; RICHARD WHITEFIELD; COURTESY OF HELEN BENDER; NEWSPIX

Bender with baby Helen circa 1978.

up realising is that the government was bought out and they weren't going to help protect him. They were looking at the short-term hit from the royalties and they didn't care that George Bender loses his farm, his life—they don't care.

Dad never accepted their answers. He felt they were cheating him; lying to him and deceiving him. You need to compensate, you need to be fair and reasonable with negotiation. They shouldn't bully and threaten a poor landowner who is trying to make a living for their families.

Origin denies these claims. Says a spokeswoman: "We are extremely confident that we at all times acted appropriately and with respect to our interactions with George and his family."

In July 2015, the company came to George with an offer to purchase his Chinchilla property.

Dad was so angry he couldn't keep his train of thought. He kept saying, "I don't want to sell, I don't want to sell." The offer from Origin Energy was basically an insult to Dad; they were offering him half the price he wanted for the property.

"That offer was double the market value of the property," says the Origin spokeswoman.

In the last five years you could see what was happening to him and you could see his physical appearance and stress taking away his years and vitality.

On Oct. 13, just after 6 PM, my eldest brother, Neil, rang me and he just said, "Dad is in hospital, we don't know if he will make

it through the evening, they may send him down to Brisbane." I was like, "What's going on?" And he told me Dad had tried to take his own life.

When I got that call, I drove to Chinchilla, getting there just after 11 PM. It's a four-hour trip. I walked into his room—my mother was there, my brother Gary was there—and I just went straight over to Dad and he apologised. He said, "I am so sorry, Helen. I shouldn't have done that, my brain just snapped."

He was sweating a lot.

The one thing he wanted when I got there was a shower. I said, "My promise to you is if you make it to the morning I will give you that hot shower," and at 6.30 AM the nurses changed over and I gave him his hot shower. It was nice to nurse him all night.

George died later that day.

He died from a broken heart. To see him on that bed so angry with Origin for wanting to take "Chinta" away from him and he knew he didn't want to sell. You can put it down to the Origin contract being the final straw.

## "He started researching, and it destroyed him"

I could just walk away, but I really do love Australia and I love the farmers. I am a farmer's daughter. But I don't think the nation understands what is going to happen. They have been lied to. I can guarantee you the nation doesn't know the truth and I think they deserve the truth.

No-one told Dad there were going to be vents that emit methane

straight into the atmosphere. No-one said there would be drains that would continuously

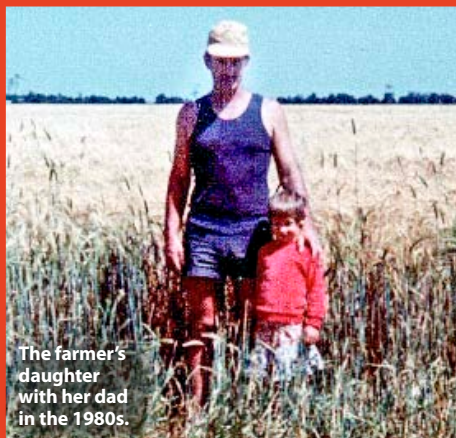
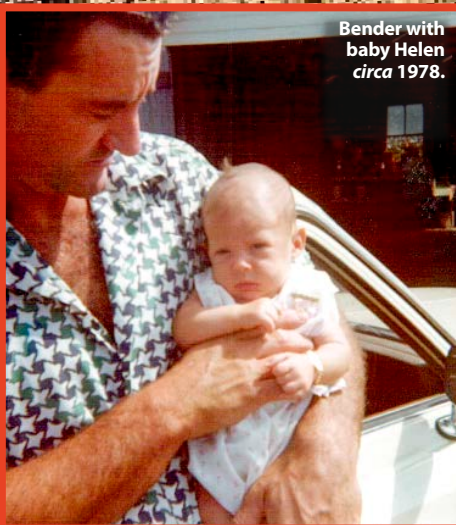
leak salty brine water all over the land. These companies have no restrictions. You could be sitting there thinking you own your place and then one day you get a knock on the door. My end game is to have landholders keep their rights. We have got to protect our agricultural land. Otherwise, we won't be able to feed ourselves.

■ By Emma Martin

For help with depression, contact Lifeline: 131 114; [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

## SPEAKING OUT

On an episode of ABC's Q&A, held in Toowoomba, Queensland, last year, Helen Bender (right) asked the panel, "When will farmers be given their right to say 'No' to CSG companies coming onto their land?" Said Labor MP Joel Fitzgibbon: "The extraction of those resources are too significant to the national economy."



The farmer's daughter with her dad in the 1980s.