

## + FOUR CORNERS

Helen Fincham-Putter



NICOLA FEENEY

## COURT OF LAW

A match made in Middlemarch.

**M**iddlemarch township is set in sheep country on the outskirts of the Dunedin borough. Local farmers are hurting in the big dry, but the Otago Central Rail Trail has been booming – not to mention the local nudist colony, the Orchard Sun Club.

Helen Fincham arrived 13 years ago on a two-year posting as the town's sole-charge constable (her nearest back-up is 45 minutes away). She fell in love with the town and a local, Le Roux Putter. Now a senior constable, Fincham-Putter has no plans to leave.

On April 4, on the night of the Middlemarch Singles Ball, she won't be plodding the beat but whooping

it up with 699 other guests in a marquee parked in a paddock for the match-making event of the year.

The first ball was held in 2001 to find a nurse for the local area. With bachelor farmers outnumbering eligible singles, the concept caught on and it's become a biennial event. Fincham-Putter came on board in 2003 and now heads the organising committee. "Meet your perfect match," screams this year's racy poster of a couple canoodling, under the (somewhat incongruous) heading, "Tartan and Tweed".

At \$80 a ticket (\$40 more to catch the "Love Train" from Dunedin), the ball is always sold out and attracts plenty of outsiders, too – from as far

afield as Auckland and Invercargill. Spin-offs include the Cocky Cook Off, where local menfolk compete to "wine and dine" a blind date, and the event has even inspired a play.

Fincham-Putter says several weddings have been celebrated among couples who first met at the ball. And Middlemarch is quite the happening place. With a permanent population of just 300, the town has its own indoor swimming pool, library, nine-hole golf course, museum, annual A&P show and numerous sports clubs.

None of this would exist without volunteers like Fincham-Putter, who seems involved in almost everything here. As well as running the singles ball, she's head of the Dunedin Police Blue Light initiative – organising rail-trail trips, camps, discos and fishing for at-risk youth. She's active in the Volunteer Fire Brigade, Plunket and local Playcentre, plays for the local hockey team and helps organise numerous fundraisers. She also owns and operates The Lodge in Middlemarch, providing accommodation for rail-trailers. LeRoux, a shift worker at the local Macraes gold mine, is a volunteer fireman, too. Then there's their three-year-old daughter, Stevie.

She must have some time-management tips, surely? "If it goes in the diary, it happens," she says.

"I do have my fingers in a lot of pies, but there are other people in the district who do as much, and many do more than me. In the end, if you don't get off your bum and make something happen, then it won't. And we have to make our own fun!"

Fincham-Putter has a ready smile and a wild cackle that erupts unpredictably, as when she talks about speeding tickets. She's never met her quota. "The money goes to central government," she says. "If it went directly to the police, and the cops got a cut, we'd be positively Nazi!"

Or would she? Lynnore Templeton, who heads the local promotions group, sings Fincham-Putter's praises. "She's fully engaged; both her professional role and her personal life play a big part in our community."

PETER FEENEY