



“John loves to return these old horses to the families so that a new generation can appreciate them”

a passion for rocking horses

Scone’s John Pratley lovingly restores old wooden horses

His mates used to call him ‘Autumn Leaves’. As a kid John Pratley loved horse riding but had quite a few falls. Now that he is 78 and retired, he’s decided to get out of the saddle. Instead of horses in the paddock, John has horses in his shed in Scone: dismembered horses, some without heads or legs; old wooden rocking horses that he lovingly restores.

John is particularly interested in horses made by F J Roebuck and Sons, the oldest rocking horse makers in the world. The Roebuck family made rocking horses in England from the 1880s and fortuitously a branch of the family ended up relocating to a factory in the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt, where they manufactured horses from 1898 until 1972.

During their peak they employed 30 staff and produced up to 2,800 rocking horses a year and other wooden toys. They also built and operated carousels around Australia – Percy Roebuck operated the Manly Carousel until the 1920s.

Many of these rocking horses found their way to country towns and children clambered into the saddles and gripped the reins, dreaming of being cowboys or cowgirls, of mustering cattle, or of becoming jockeys or equestrian riders. As the children grew up some of these horses, now a bit battered, were retired to the back shed and gathered dust. But then news spread about John Pratley and his passion for restoration.

John loves to return these old horses to the families so that a new generation can appreciate them. Recently he put the finishing touches on a 1920s built rocking horse that had been in the Munro family since the 1930s. Hamish Munro remembers riding it as a child and his kids also loved it to death. “They mutilated it,” he says, “trying to make a polo pony out of it by clipping its tail and mane.”

The restoration process is time consuming and John is fastidious about detail. He isn’t keen on the bright paintwork on some reclaimed horses he has seen because as he says, “the blue paint and big dapples just don’t look the part.” He spent more than thirty hours stripping back the Munro horse, painting it and saddling it in the style of the era.

The Munros are keeping the rocking horse in its restored state ready for the next generation of little Munros. Their grandchildren are a bit young yet but hopefully the two-year-old will be ready to mount it soon.

Most of the early Roebuck horses are hand carved from oregon or pine and when John is restoring one, he uses old pieces of oregon he has collected like a bowerbird and stores in his well-equipped shed.

He has just carved a new nose for the head of a horse that came to him a little worse for wear. One of the children from this family had cut the tail because she thought it would grow again and its eye had been replaced with an upholstery tack. The tailless horse had been hibernating in an old dusty shed in Murrurundi and John believes it is quite an old horse from the period before the 1930s. It is probably the smallest of the six sizes that the Roebuck Company made.

It stands on a low table in his shed, perfectly formed and coated in white artist’s gesso, waiting for the finishing touches – brown glass eyes, white mane and tail and kangaroo hide saddle – all ready for the next little boy or girl to mount and dream as they rock back and forth.

WORDS: PAULA STEVENSON IMAGES: ANTONY HANDS

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