

## **CHRISTOPHER WOOLCOCK ROCKING HORSE MAKER - BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

### **Childhood**

As a child with working parents, Chris was left from the age of 1 year, in the care of his grandfather, a merchant seaman who took to woodwork following his retirement after WWII. During their time together and until Chris was about nine years old, he would carve toys that belonged to another generation -boats with square bows and upright funnels. It wasn't long before he absorbed the skills which would one day prove to be his stock-in-trade.

### **Youth**

Chris' parents guided him towards the security of an academic career and his studies in environmental science were eventually successful in 1971, but the dream lingered on of being his own man. In order to keep his hand in, Chris began making toys as an educational aid for handicapped children on a small commercial scale. As a young primary school teacher in NSW in the early 70's, he had a group of children who needed special graded equipment. Since very little was available he decided to make it himself. Some time later he then went to the UK and taught disadvantaged children in the East End.

### **In Tasmania**

Back in Tasmania, in December 1982 after his contract as a temporary teacher ran out and was not renewed, there was little prospect of another teaching job in the area, and there were no more excuses not to start his own business. When he started his business he was selling toys to schools and toy shops in Tasmania. Within nine months, Woolcock Toys was established in a former boat-building factory and Chris was employing a number of handicapped people. Woolcock Toys were then marketed nationally through the David Jones Group where his horses retailed for \$3000 each.

### **How the Rocking Horses Began**

Many folk ask Chris how he became a Rocking Horse Maker. He tells the story like this. Some time in the early 80's I was working away in my toy workshop one day in Launceston, Tasmania, and a lady came in with a rocking horse full of woodworm and rot asking if Chris could repair it. Chris said he'd give it a go and as he stripped the paint off, it started to disintegrate until he was left with only the legs and belly. He took patterns of the old pieces and proceeded to rebuild the horse. When it was horse-like once more a chap happened into the workshop, saw what he was doing, and in great excitement exclaimed, "At last I've found a rocking horse maker! How much are they?" Not wishing to disappoint him, he said \$500 and thereupon he gave him a \$200 deposit and said, "I will be back in a fortnight to pick up a horse." Chris experimented with three horses before he was happy with the result and presented the final product to the beaming man two weeks later. The rest, as they say, is history...

### **As the Ross Village Toymaker**

During his time in Ross, Chris featured in many tourism catalogues and magazines as a tourist attraction in Tasmania and became so well known that people from all over the world and Australia made Ross a special stop in order to visit the Rocking Horse Maker. During this time he also did a morning local TV children's program on traditional toymaking and some National segments for ABC TV.

### **The Charms of a New Apron ...**

Chris undertook many country and interstate shows at which he always wore (and still does) his trademark leather apron and Akubra hat. He soon discovered the mystical lure of the leather apron, for wherever he wore his leather apron, young women would engage him in deep conversation about the vicissitudes of their lives. This has been put down to a rare (and as yet undocumented) phenomenon called the "Leather Apron Santa Syndrome" or LASS.

## **Restorations**

Chris has restored old and broken horses - even with major body parts missing or severely damaged. Quadruple Hip Replacements, Head & Neck Transplants, Ear & Muzzle Reconstructions were his most common surgeries. The oldest horse he restored was about 200 years old. At any one time in his equine waiting room, he may have had fine English, Australian or grandad-made horses dating from 1860 to 1980's and has even restored some of his own horses. His restorations were sympathetic to the era of the horse. Where possible he preserved and/or replicated the original finish and patina. He replaced missing or old plastic tack with leather and missing, mop or nylon rope manes (yes!) and tails with genuine cow tail. The price varied depending on the amount of work required, but were usually around \$695 if there was no structural work. Restored rocking horses are returned to you with a "Certificate of Restoration" which is signed by Chris. You may also note the date and person the horse was restored for.

## **Renaissance Rocking Horses at Vineyard , NSW**

Chris' horses come in a choice of colours, but the most popular are Bay, Dappled Grey and Chestnut with White Socks. He uses plantation grown NZ radiata pine, knot free, a relatively inexpensive timber (keeping the price of the horses down for his customers) easy to work and light to carry. Chris mixes his own colour stains in order to get just the right bay or chestnut the customer is looking for. Each horse is unique and comes with its own signed "Certificate of Authenticity" and brass signature plaque on the stand. Horses take an adults weight and will last a lifetime and appreciate beautifully, if cared for properly. In 2003 Chris released his 90 minute instructional DVD "Horsin' Around with Power Carving".

## **Renaissance Rocking Horses at McGraths Hill, NSW - Rocking Horse Lodge**

In June 2004 the business moved to McGraths Hill on the Pitt Town Road. Chris immediately built a teaching workshop and 3-Day Power-Carved Rocking Horse Making Classes commenced in February 2005. Students from as far away as WA, far north QLD and New Zealand have graduated from Rocking Horse Lodge University. On the Sunday students leave beaming with a completed horse of their own making, with many returning to make a second and even third horse. There is also a growing trend toward mail ordered kit horses.

There is an French style, antique-bedecked Bed & Breakfast in the Loft of the Homestead, which has been furnished entirely from garage sales, op shops, second hand dealers, auctions and council clean-up day finds and features vintage pieces from childhood and porcelain dolls.

Chris's partner, Viktoria has an antique/vintage pram collection (dating 1890 to 1970), which she shares with the over 50's and car rally groups that come for an old fashioned morning or afternoon tea tours of the property about 2-3 times per month. The groups also enjoy visiting the black face Suffolk sheep and assorted ducks, chooks, geese and turkeys to collect eggs.

Renaissance Rocking Horse featured as guest demonstrators at the Royal Easter Show in the Arts Pavilion in 2007 and 2008. The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney will also feature one of Chris's special commissions in an upcoming exhibition entitled "Toys in the Attic".

Plans are progressing for the official launch of the 8m diameter Victorian Carousel Pavilion which has been erected in the front grounds of Rocking Horse Lodge where both students and tour groups will be able to enjoy refreshments. It will also be hired out for wedding, formal and children's photography and can be used as a muse for artists and artisans. Three of the six static carousel horses have been carved and we are contemplating six local artists to design and complete a portion of a floor-mosaic are underway with a launch planned for 2009. Watch this space. Visit our website for more details [www.rockinghorses.com.au](http://www.rockinghorses.com.au) or phone (02) 4577-8697

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