

## Dobbin's Extreme Makeover

Local crafts persons and restorers Chris Woolcock and Viktoria Darabi of Renaissance Rocking Horses have had the honour of restoring Mr Dobbins, a 120 year old plus English F.H. Ayres rocking horse that belongs to the Children's Hospital Westmead.

Dobbin has been with the hospital since its beginnings as a 40 bed facility in Glebe, then moving to Camperdown in 1904 and finally to Westmead in 1995. It is not known when Dobbin was christened but it appears the name stuck as it was easy for children to pronounce.

The Occupational Therapy Sister from around 1945 recalls the horse being sent to Richmond for restoration. This was probably undertaken by Cyril & Dorothy Wells who are recorded in rocking horse reference books as doing restorations around the time. You can see how vibrant his dappling is in the 1945-59 photo.

The horse is what is know as a Number 7 size, (horses are numbered 1 to 7 to define size) the largest size ever made by Ayres and corresponds to the size shown in Harrods catalogs of 1895 – stand length 5 feet, floor to saddle 2 ft 11 inches; and they sold for 50 shillings

Dobbin could fetch up to \$30,000 on the international market based on his size, origin, condition and provenance. "I would have thought there could be only one or two such horses in Australia of this size and type, but when a photo and article that ran in the Telegraph recently, we received about 20 calls from people wanting to tell us about their old horses. They emailed photos and asked us to date and identify their horse. From preliminary questioning we have found two other folk that appear to have a horse of the same size and make," Viktoria said.

"Rocking horse makers have distinctive carving styles and the experienced eye can spot a particular manufacturer instantly. The hoof rails, swing iron bracket shape are also distinctive to a maker and sometimes the period. English horses have glass eyes and Australian horses have upholstery pin eyes."

In Australia horses were hand carved at the Roebuck factory in Leichhardt until 1933 when the 12-head copy carver was introduced. Today Renaissance Rocking Horses individually power carve their 200 per year custom made horses and they offer 3-day making classes for the enthusiastic parents or grandparents at their workshop in McGraths Hill near Windsor in Sydney's north west.

"When Dobbin arrived at our workshop, it was very exciting for us. Of the 75 antique horses we restore per year about 5 or 6 would be English and an Ayres Number 7 is a Rolls Royce of rocking horses.

These are the objects that have been rattling around in Dobbin's belly for decades and fished out through his tail hole: an old fashioned cabinet key, a brass thimble, a broken fountain pen, 2 gum nuts, 3 aquamarine rhinestones, a piece of white, pink and green chalk, a large brass pan head nail, a red bean, 2 lead weights, a broken pencil, a broken dolly peg, assorted twigs, a shanked shell shirt button, a glass bead, a plastic bead, fragment of the original timber tail wedge, white crepe paper lasso and fragments of pages from a Maori Adventure story book.

"We are both thrilled and honoured to be restoring Dobbin for free for the Children's Hospital. Knowing it will go on delighting sick children for decades to come is great satisfaction for us. Tally Ho, Dobbin!"

If you would like more information about an old horse you have please phone Viktoria or Chris on (02) 4577-8697.