

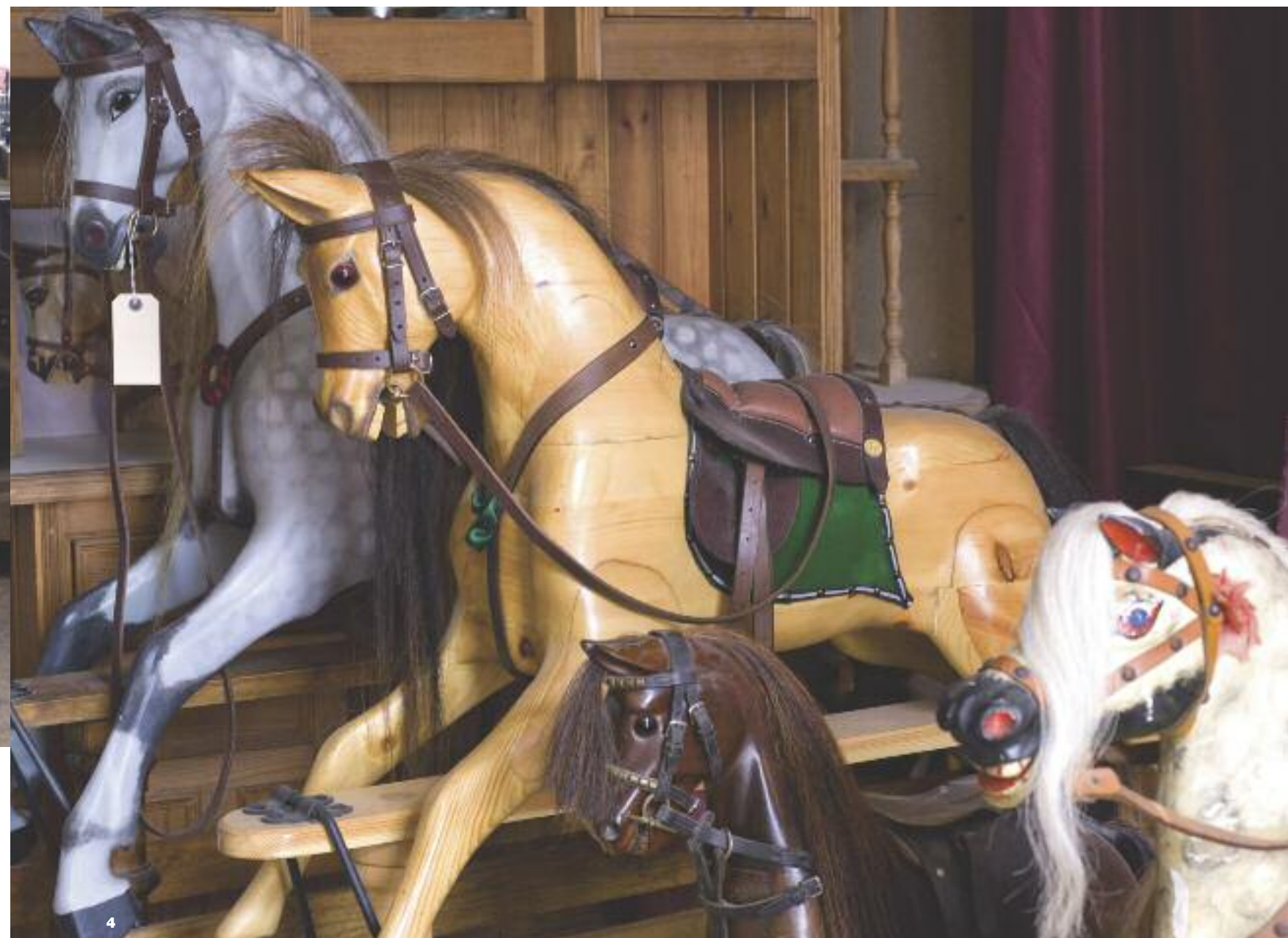


# Rocking around the *Christmas tree*

What child doesn't dream of receiving a rocking horse for Christmas? We take a look at the craftsmanship behind this most iconic of Christmas presents

Steve and his assistant carefully carve and sand the rocking horses in their workshop near Stroud





**W**hen a child sits on a rocking horse, they are halfway way to another world: as the horse moves, they are off riding the moors, flying in the sky, galloping through history. And as rocking-horse makers Steve Bulcock and his partner Bea know from their customers, these classic nursery creatures unleash something in the imagination that can last way past childhood.

'The horse is whatever their rider wants it to be,' says Steve, owner of Tetbury Rocking Horses, in Stroud, Gloucestershire. 'They have a power about them – their eyes, their flared nostrils, the carved, realistic heads. Dogs are a bit nervous around them and small children aren't always sure if they are real or not. That feeling stays with you throughout life.'

Steve, originally an engineer, made his first horse over 30 years ago as a gift for a friend's child. His workshop then was a narrow-boat that he had made himself.

'I had no idea how to make a boat, but I used to go and watch one of the surviving narrow-boat builders in Birmingham,' says Steve. 'I learnt just by observation. And that is how I teach the two young people who work with us. If someone has the ability to observe properly and see the little nuances they will learn to do the same.'

1 This vintage sign in the workshop reminds Steve and Bea that Christmas is never far away

2 A basic horse shape is made from blocks of wood, ready to be carved into a sleeker equine form

3 This handmade teddy in the foyer is stuffed using the woodshavings from the pretty dapple grey horse it rides

4 Steve and Bea's rocking horses can either be painted or simply varnished to show off the beauty of the wood

5 A multitude of different tools is needed to turn a basic wooden block into a realistic horse's head

For Steve and Bea, the day begins when they light the woodburning stove and make a cup of tea in their warren of riverside workshop rooms; often the only leisurely part of their day. Business – both making new horses and restoring and repairing antiques and old family favourites – is thriving.

'It's daunting, in a way, how it has taken my life over,' Steve says. 'At Christmas time, our busiest period, it is seven in the morning to seven at night, seven days a week, and we have to get extra staff in to cope.'

The work – creating his own templates (drawn first in chalk on the stone floor), assembling the block shapes of head and body; the transformative process of rough chain-sawing and then fine carving the form

and line of the horse and bringing character to the face – is physically demanding, but the love of his craft and the history behind the business drives him on.

'The very early examples of the rocking horses I've seen were equipped with knives carved into the woodwork; so with a military bent originally,' he explains. 'Then they became an equestrian training device for the middle-classes, who rode everywhere, and their kids had to learn to ride: it was a compulsory part of the nursery.'

'In our work, we look at the original Victorian horses and try to reproduce that. You are always trying to make the most beautiful horse – 30 years on and I am still learning. It is nice to work on ▶





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antique horses, too; these are little time capsules from the past and you have the privilege of looking after them and giving them a new life. I like that.'

The cosy foyer of the workshop resonates on the hour with the chimes of a grandfather clock, and stables a collection of horses: a gorgeous grey ridden by an old-fashioned teddy bear (hand-made by a Somerset toymaker and stuffed with shavings from the same horse), a shiny chestnut and a large dappled beauty of a specimen.

'If someone asks if they will take adults, I climb on and say: Yes, they do,' says Bea, who trained as a carpenter, and makes the stands (in pine, oak or cherry), sands and paints the horses (traditionally dapple grey, but also

sepia), and 'finishes' them with her handmade saddles, adds the eyes, mane and tail, bridle, rosette and stirrups.

'There is a pattern to our work,' Steve explains. 'In January, alongside all the restoration work, we are planning for next Christmas and starting to make rocking horses to build up the stock that goes into the store room for a year to acclimatise. When a customer orders a horse, we put gesso over the body and sand it down; they are then painted, usually in the traditional colours, but every customer wants their horse painted uniquely.'

What about the all-important movement - how is that achieved?

'The way the swing-iron is angled is quite crucial,' he says. 'It affects the quality of the



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ride. When the horse hangs properly, it will kick right back up and kids love that - it gives a sense of galloping, riding high.'

The labour is intensive, meticulous and often heads-down, and both Bea and Steve enjoy the social breather of meeting clients and hearing their stories.

'About half of the business comes from grandparents buying horses for their grandchildren,' says Steve, 'You then get grown-ups who had a rocking horse in the family and it disappeared and they've pined for it ever since. Often what happens is they have their own family, then when their children leave home, they get a rocking horse again, for themselves. They are retirement presents to themselves. ▶

1 Most rocking horses are mounted on safety stands invented in North America at the end of the 19th Century  
2 As well as making new horses the couple offer a comprehensive restoration and repair service for antique horses  
3 A selection of horses in various stages of being painted  
4 The leather bridles are all hand sewn and come with brass bits and can be decorated with fabric rosettes  
5 Real horse hair is used for the manes and tails, although some makers use cows' tails  
6 Bea carefully adds a luxurious mane to this horse before it is fitted with its tack



1 Now fitted with its tack this small horse is ready to be mounted on its rocking stand

2 Since Victorian times this type of dapple grey rocking horse has been the most popular and traditional



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'We had a woman who came in recently and said: "It may sound very strange but I'm 76 and have always missed my rocking horse and now I can afford one." So we've made her a lovely dapple grey.'

Prices for these covetable creatures – Steve also does an increasingly good trade in unicorns and zebras - range from around £1,000 for a small, smooth-bodied horse to £3,500 for a five-foot-high oak model, complete with hand-carved musculature.

'I think seeing it go from a plank of wood all the way to the finished product is the most

rewarding aspect of it for me,' says Steve. 'There is the element of being part of the power and majesty of the horse and trying to tame it.'

'I also like knowing that in between there are so many processes involved for all the details – silver-platers, brass polishers, iron foundries, wood-yards, leather merchants... bringing together all these different trades into one article and seeing the delight on the customers face when they receive their horse.'

There is, he adds, also the reward of

seeing the horse set off in motion.

'Up until the time when you mount the horse on the metal bars, it is static; then you fix the swing irons in place and it rocks into life. Clockmakers have a similar experience when they complete their work: they put all the cogs together, they wind up the clock and watch it tick. For me, that moment when the horse first moves is always a little magical.'

**For more information and ordering details visit [www.tetburyrockinghorseworks.co.uk](http://www.tetburyrockinghorseworks.co.uk) or call 01453 873853 or 07852 156626.**