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With These Hands

THE ANCIENT CRAFT OF SADDLEMAKING IS
ALIVE AND THRIVING IN THE YARRA VALLEY

In a world of the ready-made and the disposable, the ancient craft of saddle making might be thought a dying industry, but with more than thirty year's experience as a saddle maker and saddle fitter Paul Buckland has never been busier. His workshop, located at the family home, a relaxed 40-acre property in Yellingbo in the Yarra Valley, is a hub of activity. Saddles in various stages of repair line the walls, leather offcuts and tools rest on the large central worktable. The smell of leather, a smell that everyone comments on and seems to hold precious, is ever-present in the air. On a saddle stand sits Paul's latest project. A stunning black half-breed saddle, custom made to order to the exact specifications of client and horse, a monument to the tanning, cutting, stitching, moulding, stretching, shaping and finishing that makes each one of Paul's saddles a work of art.

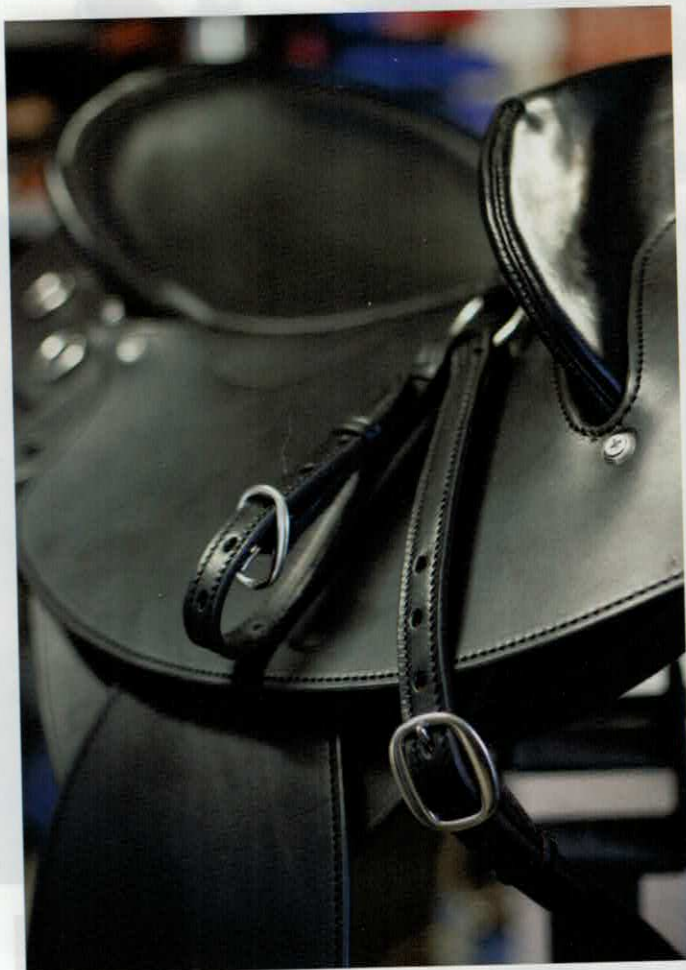
Only about eight people every year are the lucky recipients of a Paul Buckland Saddle, each one taking around two months to make and at least 40 hours of handcrafting. Some of the tools in his workshop are 100 years old, others he has conceived and made himself. With each saddle, there is something new to learn. No piece of leather yields to his hands the same way, each hide a product of climate, tanning technique and source.





As he turns the cowhide in his hands he looks for the soft suppleness or the stiff resilience that makes that section a great seat or the softest underside. His fingers instinctively seek out the inevitable 'scarring' on the hide, the mark or imperfection that makes each saddle bespoke, one of a kind. "It's not something you can be taught," he says. "It comes with years of experience handling leather in all its variations and forms."

Outside, the family horses graze serenely in the bush-rimmed paddocks. Forest is Paul's Warmblood quarterhorse cross. At 17.2 hands, the bay gelding is confident in his largesse, the perfect companion for Paul, who still regularly competes in eventing competitions. Paul first discovered a passion for horses as an 11-year-old boy when a riding school opened across the road from the family home in Cockatoo. "I worked after school and Saturday mornings cleaning up at the local butcher shop and earned \$1 a week," says Paul. "It cost me 50 cents to hire a horse on the Saturday afternoon." When the riding school offered him a job, he was thrilled to be able to ride for free. His family embraced horses and his mother, from whom Paul has inherited his 'get stuck into it' attitude, became a teacher at the local pony club. An accomplished rider from a young age, Paul has competed in many events including the military activity of tent pegging. His tenacity brandishing a lance and a sword while swooping down sideways to skewer a peg from the ground while galloping at 40 kilometres an hour is evidence of his riding skill and his bravery.



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As a teenager, Paul loved the 'hands-on' feel of trades such as carpentry. When his application to the police force was rejected he saw an advertisement in the local newspaper for an apprentice saddle maker at Olympic Saddlery in Coldstream. "My mum used to say some things are meant to be," he recalls. "I went to the interview and thought I will never be able to make such a beautiful piece of work as these saddles. I was given a piece of leather and told to have a play with the tools. I got the job."

Once qualified, Paul and his wife Carolyn moved to Wangaratta in the mid-80s to set up a saddle shop and repair service. "I honed my craft over many years and many saddles. I learnt on the job by pulling saddles apart and putting them back together, always looking for a better way." They returned 'home' to the Yarra Valley in 2010 to what Paul calls 'the horseworld mecca'.

Paul's saddles have become icons of beauty and comfort, practical in their simplicity. A signature logo stamp is often the only embellishment. They speak for themselves.

"Seeing saddles I've made years later, that have been looked after, makes me happy. These saddles are the kind of investments people save for, knowing they are buying something that can last longer than they will!"

"Leather is such a versatile material and I often find myself using it to repair all kinds of unusual things –

beyond saddle and bridle repairs to replacing straps on artificial legs, or making bearing covers for vintage cars. Leather has been a valued and useful material for thousands of years."

Between Paul's mobile fitting service, which sees him travelling all over the state, and workshop projects he is an avid fisherman, and has a sixth Dan black belt in karate. "Saddle making is the kind of work that I can still be doing well into my 80s. I plan to take on an apprentice and hand on these skills and knowledge... one day...when I get closer to retirement!"

He runs his hand slowly over the sweeping curve of the cantle of a deeply burnished brown leather saddle and then marvels at the soft weightlessness of the reins he has just finished. "There must be a sense of comfort when you sit in the saddle, of pleasure, so you look forward to riding the next time," he says. "And the right saddle made and fitted correctly will encourage a horse's development and movement. This can be vital for the wellbeing and performance of the horse."

There are now thousands of horses and riders Paul has fitted, and there is a quiet sense of pride that his work helps in a small way. There is a timeless feel to his work that mass produced saddles, even with the advances of technology, struggle to match. Horses relax around Paul, and you can only believe they appreciate his craftsmanship as much as his clients do. •



Paul and his wife Carolyn