

rock on



*Fiona Collins meets
the Yorkshire
woman keeping
alive the centuries-
old craft of making
rocking horses*



When you think of wooden rocking horses you tend to picture the classic dapple-grey horses so popular in Victorian England. These nursery favourites often survived the attentions of their energetic owners to become treasured family heirlooms. Some even included secret compartments in which small trinkets, coins and photographs were carefully hidden for future generations to find.

Actually, though, the tradition of wooden rocking horses pre-dates the Victorian era. The UK's earliest surviving example is thought to have been made around 1610, when a sickly child was recovering from rickets and in need of a means to exercise his legs. That child would grow up to become Charles I, and the horse – which now looks more like a piece of battered gymnastics equipment than a traditional rocking horse – is on display in the V&A Museum of Childhood in London.

But you don't need to take a trip to London to discover what it looks like, because a life-size replica of the historic royal plaything sits unassuming in the corner of a Yorkshire showroom. Here at The Rocking Horse Shop in Farglass near York, skilled craftspeople have been keeping alive the tradition of hand-carving rocking horses for the past 46 years.

Horses for Courses

Jane Cook, owner of The Rocking Horse Shop, is proud to show off her King Charles rocking horse to anyone who cares to visit. What she is even prouder of is the fact that her small company is one of the country's few remaining centres of excellence for a traditional craft that had all but died out in Britain by the 1920s.





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Businesswoman Jane took over The Rocking Horse Shop from the company's founder, Anthony Dew, in 2003, when she was looking for a new venture to manage. Little did she know how easily she would get sucked into the enchanting world of rocking horses. "I had always been involved in small businesses, and I had always been passionate about horses," she says. "Very quickly I became passionate about rocking horses too."

That passion is plain to see. From their bustling rural workshop, Jane and her ten-strong team lovingly create and restore hand-carved rocking horses at the rate of about one a week. Quality is paramount, and the beauty of hand-making everything on-site is that no two horses are identical. What's more, horses – whose prices range from £300 to £4,000 – can be customised as required.

"If somebody wants a little chair horse for a baby, we can do that, and if somebody wants a big bespoke horse that looks like a pony they once owned, we can do that too," says Jane. "We even have people wanting a horse that will match the Farrow & Ball paint on the nursery wall!"

On the day of my visit I watch as one of the team brushes and sorts clumps of real horse hair before sewing it into 'tails' on an ancient-looking, but very robust, Singer sewing machine. Elsewhere, someone is working in the metal room, cutting rods from which to create rocking mechanisms.

But it's the meticulous level of workmanship that goes into carving and painting the horses themselves that really astounds me. I had imagined the process would be heavily mechanised but, apart from a couple of lathes and hand saws, there is nothing high-tech here. Instead benches are strewn with chisels, gouges, planes and mallets. 'Hand-made' means just that, and part-made ponies, in various colours, shapes and sizes, stretch as far as the eye can see.

Rocking All Over the World

I am shown an old horse that has just arrived for restoration, its paintwork ravaged by time and its woodwork cracked and crevassed like a rotten branch. Then I see a finished restoration, and the transformation is astounding. Each dapple on the horse's rejuvenated body has been hand-painted with a tiny sponge. Its wooden limbs have been repaired, and smoothed to glossy perfection.





Its glass eyes have been polished to a lifelike sheen, and its leather tack has been re-stitched or replaced to look brand new.

But the Rocking Horse Shop isn't just about selling and restoring horses in a bid to keep the art alive. They also sell thousands of plans and kits each year to hobbyists around the world, as well as accessories, books, DVDs, tack and tools. "We say that what we do is an inch wide but a mile deep," muses Jane. "Anything to do with rocking horses, we do it."

The team also run a series of sell-out three-day carving courses that attract clients from across the globe. "We get a real mix of people and they all get a real buzz from it," says Jane. "It's lovely."

Given her obvious devotion to maintaining the profile and prestige of her traditional craft, I ask if Jane's passion was fuelled by blissful memories of her own childhood rocking horses.

"As a youngster, my only experience of a rocking horse was of one in my classroom at school," she says. "If you were very good you



were allowed to ride the horse on a Friday afternoon. I think I was a bit of a naughty child and probably wasn't quite as clever as the teacher wanted me to be, so sadly I was never allowed to have a go."

Now, with thousands of rocking horses across the globe bearing her company's name, I'd say that a certain naughty schoolgirl is having the last laugh!

For more information about The Rocking Horse Shop go to www.rockinghorse.co.uk, or visit their showroom in Fangfoss, York YO41 5HH.

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