



Master craftsmen

Traditional craftsmen are masters of specialist skills and trades that have been passed down for centuries. But cheap imports and mass production are putting these skills at risk, writes EMMA CLARK

IMAGES: NEW WORK PHOTOGRAPHY (COURTESY OF TRADITIONAL STAINED GLASS), AMY TANNER.

Transport yourself back 200 years, and imagine you are enjoying a cup of tea in a traditional 19th century home. Almost everything you can see has been made by hand, using materials that were most likely sourced locally. The clothing you wear was handmade by a tailor, from hand-woven fabric made by a weaver. A cobbler made your shoes. The table you sit at was handcrafted by a furniture maker, and a potter made the mug you drink out of. The house you live in? A veritable team of craftsmen helped build it: thatchers, stonemasons, woodcarvers, carpenters, glaziers and plasterers, not to mention the blacksmiths who made the tools, the bricklayers who made the bricks and the lumberjacks who cut and milled the timber. The list of trades hasn't changed much, but the methods, tools and techniques used today are quite different.

By the end of the 19th century, the industrial revolution saw major changes in manufacturing, transport and technology and transformed the

way that many people lived and worked. The introduction of steam and electrical power was revolutionary, but it was the beginning of the end for many traditional skills and trades. Handmade candles were cast aside for electric lights, factory-made clothing was favoured over handmade outfits and mass-produced furniture began appearing in homes. This pattern continued until the present day, when machines in a factory can build a house and a small team can have it assembled onsite in several days using electric nail guns, click-together pipes and disposable factory-forged tools. You can now head to any discount department store and pick up a new outfit with change from ten dollars, while low transport and labour costs mean that trees grown in Russia are processed into wood pulp in China, then turned into furniture in Thailand which is sold in Australia.

Modern conveniences may make our lives easier and more affordable, but what does this mean for traditional craftsmen? While many

trades have gone the way of the toad doctor (a 19th century 'doctor' who used live toads to cure ailments), there is still a market – albeit a niche one – for traditional building trades, as well as handmade skills such as lacemaking, saddlery and bootmaking.

These traditional skills and knowledge are as important for our culture as heritage-listed buildings, antique artworks and classic literature. Losing these skills means we are losing part of our living heritage and culture. Many trades require specialist knowledge and an artistic touch, and training and apprenticeship options are becoming more limited.

When planning the renovation of your period home, consider using traditional craftspeople where possible. Whether you're installing a hand-forged front gate built by a blacksmith, using a traditional woodworker to create a perfect piece of handmade furniture or employing a heritage stonemason to hand carve stone details, there is no substitute for true craftspeople.



**KIM FITZPATRICK,
STAINED GLASS ARTIST**

From a very young age, I had a passion to draw and colour in. It wasn't until my grandfather offered me the chance to do an apprenticeship that I really looked at stained glass in a serious light. I left Vancouver, Canada, in 1987 and set off to undertake a 5-year apprenticeship in Perth under the tutelage of my grandfather Carl Mynesbergen. I was 17. After 12 years I took over the business as the third generation family member.

My typical day involves contributing to creative new designs and managing large commissions, including new work and historical restorations for private and commercial clients. I am truly blessed to be able to make my living from what I love to do. I still look forward to coming in to work and seeing what last night's kiln firing has produced. Just like that child who loved to draw and colour in, I now do all of the above in a similar fashion, just on a more sophisticated and technical level.

We work on a large variety of projects including large commercial projects throughout Australia, such as the Parliament House of WA and the Burswood Crown Casino. We also work on large restoration projects like churches and government buildings as well as colleges and universities.

In our workshop facility our tools of the trade are still the same as my forbears, including our original millings machine for European-style flat lead. We also use traditional hand tools like horseshoe knives, glass cutters and pliers. We do use computers for some design work but I still hand-draw most of my detailed working drawings.

To become a stained glass artist, you must be good with your hands, have a creative flair for design and demonstrate good organisational skills. You need to accept that you will be working hard and that this job is not for the faint hearted. It is a labour intensive job and this is usually the main stumbling block for young people.

I believe there has been a shift towards old school craftsmanship as clients are sick of the throwaway society we have become with cheap, imported products. These traditional trades represent fine quality artisans that strive for excellence in creativity and craftsmanship; it's about taking pride in your work and creating something that will last the test of time.

traditionstainedglass.com.au

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Stained glass detail on doors and windows created by Traditional Stained Glass.





After

Before



FROM TOP: Dining table and wooden detail shown before and after French polishing.



RICK PULLEN, FRENCH POLISHER AND FURNITURE RESTORER

My dad was always tinkering with antique furniture in the shed when I was a kid. He inspired me to enjoy antiques both as a hobby and a business and in 1974 I was employed by a firm in Yorkshire as a City and Guilds of London apprentice French polisher. I trained under master craftsmen who shared their wealth of knowledge in traditional methods of furniture restoration and finishing techniques. I learnt skills including wood machining, cabinet making, upholstery, woodcarving, leatherwork, repair work, traditional finishing techniques and the science and theory behind all of this. You watched and listened on the job or you received a boot up the backside.

I work mainly on antique furniture (over 100 years old), including everything from grandfather clocks to chests of drawers, pianos,

rocking horses and staircases. Just recently I restored a writing bureau that used to be owned by Judge Jeffreys, who was nicknamed 'the hanging judge' of the London inquests back in 1685. The piece was highly carved with a macabre scene of someone being tortured by the Spanish Inquisition.

French polishing does not mean spraying or brushing on modern lacquer or varnish; a furniture finisher would do that. French polishing involves applying shellac to furniture by hand. Shellac is a natural substance secreted by the lac beetle on tree branches, which is processed into flakes and button shapes before being dissolved in alcohol or methylated spirits. The technique can be very tricky as each layer of shellac melts into the one, making it easy to destroy the entire finish if you make a mistake! I still use hand tools that have been used for over 100 years and, to a lesser

degree, some more modern power tools in my workshop.

I love my job. I once restored a table for a guy who was so happy he hugged me. It's a pleasure to see the expression on a customer's face when they see their heirloom lovingly cared for and restored to its former beauty. There is a story behind every piece, from its construction down to the distress marks that give it its character. When I restore furniture I can sometimes read that story.

In the early 1970s people were saying that French polishing was a dying trade, and they are still saying it, but the demand has not changed – I'm still busy! These skills are being preserved because of the resurgence of interest to not only conserve, but to enjoy something that was well made. ▶

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5 minutes with Christian Bloomfield

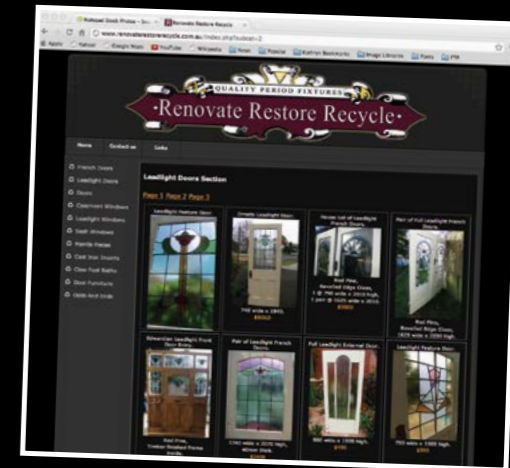
Life is perhaps never so busy as when you are knee-deep in renovation. Taking your search online can save time and money, says renovation and restoration expert Christian Bloomfield

"Renovate Restore Recycle started out as a business name only with a website attached while we hunted for the perfect trading location," says owner Christian Bloomfield. "Three years on we are still hunting for that 'perfect' location, but in the meantime our business has thrived online." The website is accessible 24 hours a day, giving customers the freedom to view items at their convenience with no pressure to purchase anything. "Having a website allows our stock to be viewed anywhere, thus generating sales Australia wide," says Christian.

Items are listed with photos taken from numerous angles, with measurements and price included alongside each product. With all this information at your fingertips there is no need for any guesswork.

Q: What are the advantages of shopping online?
With websites operating 24/7, customers can shop when it is convenient for them without the hassle of driving to the countryside to search aimlessly for that hard to find fixture. More often than not a manual search ends in disappointment and there is nothing worse than a pushy sales person trying to convince you to buy something that's not right!

Q: Have you experienced resistance to shopping online from clients who are used to more hands-on shopping?
Renovate Restore Recycle has an incredibly diverse product range, and while our sales are generated through the website we offer our customers the opportunity to view stock at our storage facility with no pressure to purchase.



Q: Do you have any advice for clients who are intimidated by online shopping?
We stock only quality items. For us to sell something without the customer seeing the product in person, we have to be totally confident that what we have sold is top notch and free from defects. renovaterestorerecycle.com.au



Traditional trades

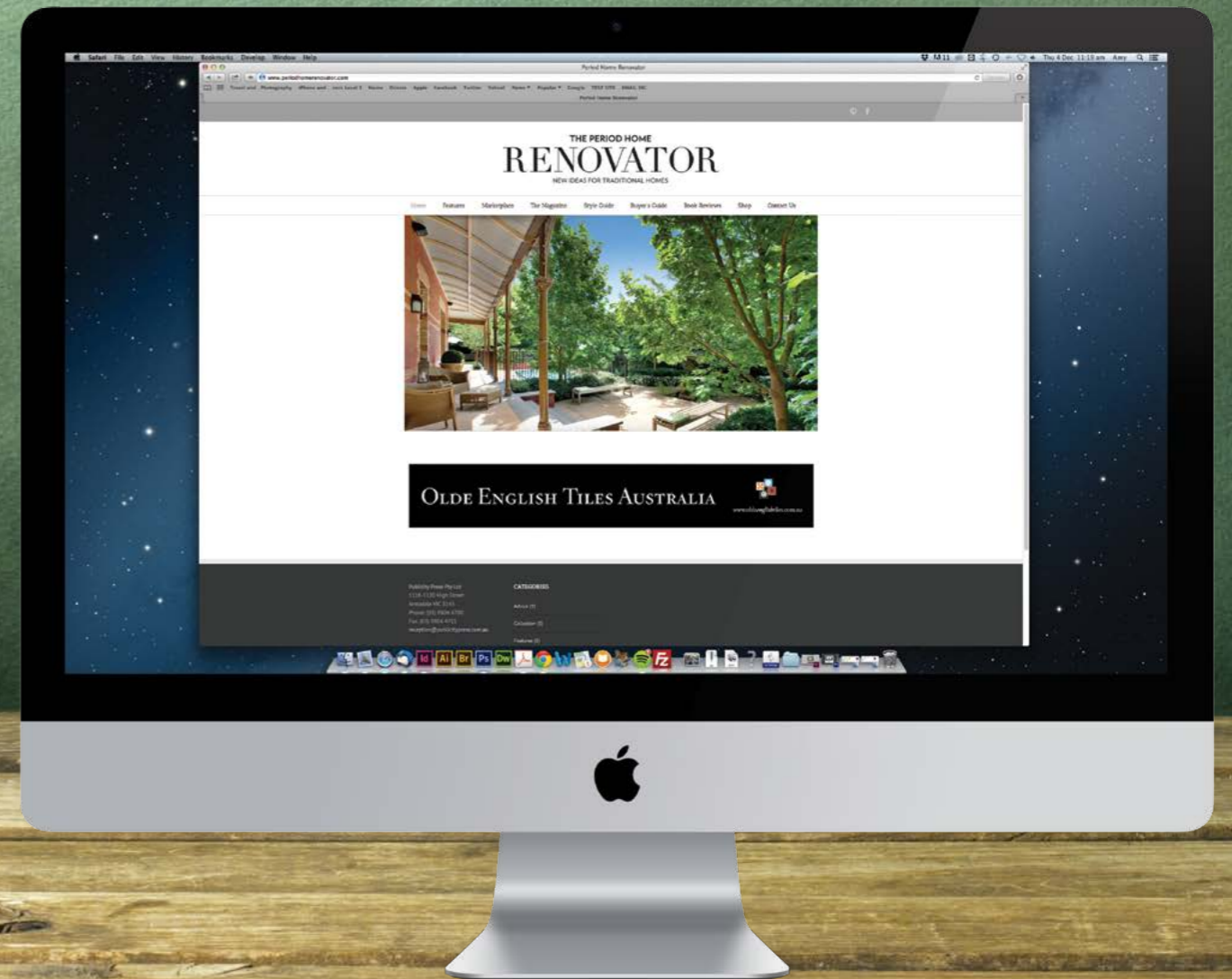


THIS PAGE: Rick Pullen in his workshop.

THE PERIOD HOME RENOVATOR

NEW IDEAS FOR TRADITIONAL HOMES

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THIS PAGE: Mark Kent in action.



FROM TOP: A gate created by Mark Kent; tools of the trade.



MARK KENT, BLACKSMITH

I was brought up working with hand tools from an early age. My father was a master stonemason, so I understood what handcrafted quality work was. I started blacksmithing around 30 years ago and spent every spare moment working and studying the processes. I soon became a TAFE instructor and taught traditional blacksmithing and knife making before I began working as a fulltime professional blacksmith about 10 years ago.

Blacksmithing is a very labour intensive craft. I usually start work early – sometimes at 3am – especially in summer before the heat of the day kicks in. I use traditional blacksmithing tools such as an anvil, swage block, power hammers and hand tools on a daily basis. I mainly use coke to heat the metal in a side draft forge, but sometimes use LP gas for production work. I do incorporate modern welding processes into some of my work mainly to keep the cost affordable, but I prefer to work traditionally.

The hardest part of my job is pricing the work. Most clients don't understand how time consuming hand forged iron work is, so I need to work with them to find out what they are really after in the end product, and how much they want to spend.

I am on a personal journey trying to create my own style that will take me a lifetime to perfect. My commission work is varied – from home owners wanting a handmade door handle, to working with architects, designers and builders, as well as restoring and renovating heritage houses and working with heritage architects.

For someone interested in blacksmithing, I would say it can be the most rewarding thing you will ever do, but you will have to get used to hard, hot work, many hours of learning and a big box in the corner of the workshop for ideas that just didn't make the grade. There is no substitute for working with or watching a working blacksmith. PHR

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