

# PRESERVING OUR PAST

RED GUM & IRON FOUNDER ASHLEY REED TELLS CAM WARD WHY HE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT SAVING THE REMNANTS OF AUSTRALIA'S PIONEERING PAST AND ALLOWING THEM TO BE ENJOYED BY GENERATIONS TO COME



Billie Hammond, left, and Ash Reed from Red Gum & Iron have created a unique landscape at Freshwater Creek with their sculptures and furniture made from recycled timber and metal. Photo: Ginger + Mint

IF Freshwater Creek isn't quite a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town, it's not far from it. It's probably best known for its general store and, more specifically, the cakes and biscuits for which it's renowned.

But on the other side of Anglesea Rd are structures no less impressive than the general store's cream-laden passionfruit sponges. You may not know the name Red Gum & Iron, but if you've driven through Freshwater Creek you might have seen a paddock and outdoor gallery littered with its giant metal spheres.

On closer inspection, these spheres and other rustic outdoor statement pieces like fire pits have been made from innocuous items like old horseshoes and railway sleeper spikes. There is even a crocodile made from railway sleeper plates and coil springs and a bench seat fashioned entirely out of old hand tools.

And it is not just the man-made from which Red Gum & Iron crafts its wares. Lumber created from teak, blue gum, red stringybark, messmate, cypress and spotted gum logs that would otherwise have been destined for the woodchipper has been preserved to live on as indoor and outdoor benches and tables.

This reclamation of such tangible links to Australia's past is the passion of Red Gum & Iron founder and chief executive Ashley Reed and a crusade that he has been on for two decades.

"Recycling timber and recycling metal - that's what we're about and that's what we've been pushing for 20 years and no-one's listened. Now people are realising that the recycling part of it is what they want in their house or business," Ashley says.

"We were before our time. We were doing this 20 years ago and no one really realised what we were doing. Now they're starting to take notice

because we're on the Anglesea Rd and 22,000 cars a week go past.

"What [Australia is] doing, which people don't understand, is that we're scrapping all our Australian 'stuff'; that's our stuff that's been in Australia for hundreds of years and we're scrapping it to China just to make steel. I can't stress it enough: we can recycle this into a product that people can use, but people think I'm mad."

A love of wood took hold of Ashley growing up in Freshwater Creek with a builder father. It was fostered by the 20 years he spent working

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in London, where he learnt the sawmilling trade and started a joinery shop, which ultimately included doing pieces for the likes of the Queen and the Duchess of York.

In between and in the years since his London stint, Ashley has lived a rollercoaster life. As an apprentice joiner in 1989 he was named Australia's best at the WorkSkills national final. Later that year at the International Youth Skill Olympics in Birmingham he placed 10th in the world.

Ashley and his Australian teammates finished sixth out of 21 nations taking part at Birmingham.

His Australian blazer still hangs proudly in the shipping container that serves as his office in Freshwater Creek, along with clippings of his exploits as an apprentice.

When he arrived back home, business was so good he eventually had almost 20 people working for him when the company was based in North Geelong. But he had bipolar and simply couldn't manage the business. Ashley says he's "come a long way further" this time around and manages things differently.

But one constant that has remained during the past two decades is the relationship with Nelson Park School that has seen students come to Red Gum & Iron to do work experience and build their personalities and confidence.

Ashley says it has been very rewarding to have "helped so many kids".

He retired from the joinery business two years ago and now manages his small team, led by self-taught welder and jack-of-all-trades Billie Hammond who "just can't put the tools down".

If you want a handmade 2.4m sphere weighing two tonnes, Billie is your man.

Billie claims he tried to put the tools down for a couple of years, "but that's as long as it lasted before I got back on it and I haven't stopped since".

"That's just the way I am. I've always been around my father who was repairing or fixing or building things. It's just naturally come to me," he says.

"It's definitely rewarding in the sense that you can repurpose something that would otherwise just be pulped up and put on the garden. This way it'll be used and live on for another 20-odd years, if not more, so someone will actually get enjoyment out of it, rather than it being thrown away and mulched up or melted down and



Billie Hammond is a self-taught welder creating eye-catching sculptures and furniture from discarded everyday items like hand tools and horseshoes. Photos: Ginger + Mint

repurposed into something that no one cares for."

Billie laughs as he asks whether he is the most experienced person in the world at making his trademark spheres since he has been doing it for the past 15 years he has been working on and off with Ashley.

Demand for Billie's skills is definitely there - Ashley says the lead up to Christmas is the company's busiest time of the year with \$40,000 worth of orders a month and currently he has three welders working "24 hours a day" - even though the spheres can take up to three weeks each to make.

But they're also the biggest sellers, with the 900mm diameter ones the most popular. The biggest and most complex orders are the 2.4m "brain balls" made from high-tensile steel pieces.

"The welds like to snap because the multiple welds are fighting against each other and they find a way to break and snap away from the steel," Billie says of these big challenges.

That requires huge welds on both the inside and outside of the structure. Even then the spheres can break under their own weight.

Billie's personal preference is making fire pits. But he says he also finds enjoyment in working the slabs of timber, especially cypress because

it's soft and easy to work with. He likes being able to take what appears to be weathered timber and bring it back to life, planing, sanding and waxing it to make the grain pop and show off the timber in all its natural glory.

Most of the Red Gum & Iron orders are local but Ashley says the "sky's the limit".

"We have shipped balls to Sydney before. It's just hard to shift such a large item on a truck but we work it out," he exclaims with pride.

Red Gum & Iron is located at 675 Anglesea Rd, Freshwater Creek. Follow @redgumandironrecycled on Instagram.





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