



World attraction: Tambo Teddies is now owned by Tammy Johnson and Alison Shaw (below left), and the teddies are often gifted to dignitaries, such as Harry and Meghan (below).

Steaming ahead with tradition

AT THE height of the Murray River's trading era there were about 270 paddle-steamers in Echuca, says Rohan Burgess.

"They would cart wool here to load it on the rail to Melbourne. That was around the 1880s to early 1900s, but of course today there are only about seven big paddle-steamers in Echuca-Moama left."

And Rohan owns three of them.

Since he was a boy, helping his father restore one of the grandest vessels, Rohan has "loved and had an addiction for" the ships of the Murray. These days, through his business Murray River Paddlesteamers, which he runs with twin brother Craig and skipper (and boyhood mate) Neil Hutchinson, Rohan is giving a modern polish to an old waterway tradition.

Pride of his fleet is the *PS Emmylou*, which starred in the TV series *All the Rivers Run* (where she was renamed the *PS Providence*). The ship has recently been given a \$500,000 refurbishment.

"*Emmylou* is powered by a beautifully restored 1906 Marshall and Sons steam engine, making her the only wood-fired paddle-steamer in the world offering regular scheduled accommodated river cruises," Rohan says. "But she's actually not an old boat. She was built in 1982 using steel with an old look, and will go on forever."

Rohan also owns the *PS Canberra*, which celebrated her centenary in 2013. She has been taking tourists on cruises along the Murray, Darling and Murrumbidgee rivers since 1944. In the early 2000s the *Canberra* was restored from a diesel back to a steamer.

The third boat in Rohan's fleet is the *Pride of the Murray*, which began life in 1924 as a barge and has since been converted to paddle power.

Rohan grew up in Melbourne but his love affair with Echuca and its steamers started as a young boy when his father — a senior member of tourism development in the Victorian Government in the early 1970s — helped the region become a paddle-steamer mecca.

"He helped the city of Echuca buy the *Pevensey* from Mildura and I remember being proud as punch as he came into port on her with the Premier."

For several years after, Rohan would join his father each weekend as they volunteered to restore the *Pevensey*, "painting, pulling winches, taking parts home and restoring them".

Rohan maintained his contact with Echuca, even when he rose through the ranks of the banking and finance industry. In 2012 he landed his perfect job, overseeing the shire's assets, which included the *Pevensey* and *PS Alexander Arbuthnot*. It was during this role he became friends with the then-owner of Murray River Paddlesteamers, buying the business in 2015.

"At the time I asked myself, do I want to do this or not. I immediately realised I didn't want to be another decade older and regret having not done it," he says. "This is not a job. I pinch myself every day."

Craig lives in Melbourne where he works with tourism bodies and manages the business. Neil is the skipper, overseeing six other skippers and nearly 40 staff.

The company has refreshed itineraries, incorporating trips to a brewery, winery and distillery in the region, as well as horse and carriage rides, and activities for the kids.

"I once did a relaxation class where the teacher asked us to go to our happy place. I immediately thought of the Murray and these boats."

"I hope the industry is still here for my grandchildren to see, so they can experience the magic of what this represents — an important part of Australia's history. The stories here should be kept alive forever."

— Sarah Hudson

Bearing good will

After 27 years the Tambo Teddies are still a symbol of hope, hard work and the rejuvenation of a small outback town, writes **SARAH HUDSON**

WILLIAM and Kate have one each for George and Charlotte. Harry and Meghan were presented with one for Archie.

Then there are the Premiers, VIPs and new generations of little Australians who also own a Tambo Teddy, the cuddly output of a toy business in the tiny central west outback Queensland town of Tambo.

The concept was born in 1993, after the wool price crashed and the district was gripped by drought.

"I don't think when teddies first started being made here — with the aim of helping the town's economy — that many people believed 27 years later we'd still be making bears in the outback," says co-owner Alison Shaw.

"We get orders for bears around Australia and the world each week and we're currently looking at export opportunities in Korea.

"One day I had a phone call from the Premier (Anastacia Palaszczuk) because she was wanting a bear for Harry and Meghan and she said there's nothing more Queensland than a Tambo Teddy."

Since 2014 Alison, a former wool classer, has been co-owner of the business with netball buddy Tammy Johnson, a teacher. Initially they also worked with friend Kiralee Sanderson, who recently pulled out of the trio.

The business, though, was first started by three Tambo women, who at the time were taking part in a government initiative to bolster drought-hit outback Queensland towns, including sheep farms hit by the wool crash.

"It was a brainstorming event and about 80 people turned up on the day, which was considerable given the town only now has a population of 400," Alison recalls.

"Quite a few ideas came out of the meeting, including the Tambo sawmill and the tourist association, as well as the teddies."

When those original three women retired, Alison and her buddies decided to take over the reins and have since transformed the business.

She says one of the big changes has been in the region's sheep industry, which was hit about a decade ago

by an increasing wild dog population.

"It had a big impact. As a wool classer I was working about 10 months of the year at the time. There were many more sheep farms then."

"In recent years we've had cluster fencing erected (to stop wild dogs) and there's a more positive attitude to the sheep industry coming back. Sheep farmers are reporting improved lambing rates, without them being maimed."

Alison says this, combined with a decline in Australian manufacturing and high costs, means Tambo Teddies sources its scoured, tanned and dyed Australian sheepskins from China.

With a staff of 10, Tambo Teddies process more than 3000 woolly sheepskins a year, each hand sewn.

While bears continue to be made in Tambo, a shortage of sewing personnel meant they now also manufacture in Toowoomba, making 250 bears a week.

It takes about an hour to sew a bear, each stuffed with recycled plastic.

There are two bear "families": Basil (more traditional) and Toby (chubbier and with mixed coloured sheepskin), with small bears (30cm) costing \$135 or large (45cm) costing \$165.

No two bears are the same, each is individually numbered (they are currently up to more than 50,000) and each is named after a farming property in the Tambo district, about 40 farms in total. So Archie was given a bear called Stirling Downs Sussex, while Princess Charlotte was given Shady Downs Charlotte.

Some bears have clothes, including the Little Aussie Ringer, and Mr and Mrs Stockman — complete with



Driza-Bone and Akubra — and they take special orders, including wedding bears, soccer stars and Disney princesses.

The company also makes bears for fundraisers, most recently one for a Royal Flying Doctor Service auction, and another firefighting bear.

Aside from the teddies, Alison works part-time as an arts and cultural officer at the Blackall-Tambo Regional Council. She says while online orders have skyrocketed in recent years, many people visit the town especially to pop by their shop, usually on their way to Longreach.

"Part of my motivation in doing this business is that I love sheep and wool and the grazing industry of the region."

"I also see Tambo Teddies as an iconic business in this area. It has put the town on the map. If you go anywhere and say you're from Tambo, everyone asks how the teddies are going."

"It's so important for the community and town."

"People here are proud of it."

