

Treasures in an old green shed



Former Cobden blacksmith Bill Roberts has lost nothing in enthusiasm, as he demonstrates how to fix a wagon wheel. Pictures: DAMIAN WHITE

After 65 years, Bill is still in love with blacksmithing

By JOHN VAN TIGGELEN

THE facade of a faded green shed in Cobden's main street used to have 'W.J. Roberts, Blacksmith' emblazoned in bold, black letters across it.

The words have since disappeared and the shop is looking frail, but venture beyond the creaking door and there's nothing but treasure. And the most priceless of all is Bill Roberts himself.

Bill, now 81, began his apprenticeship as a blacksmith in 1927, in Cobden.

He made it through the Depression by taking on another apprenticeship, as a farrier, before building his own blacksmith shop across the road from his boss's in 1939.

As Bill recalls, the town had three general blacksmiths in those days and another four farriers.

While the modern day equivalent of the blacksmith, the car mechanic, goes about his daily routine next door, Bill is fondly reworking some of the relics from his past.

"Come and have a look at this," says Bill, as he loads a partly rimless wooden wagon wheel on to an ancient-looking contraption. It's a wheel horse. "One of only two left in the country."

Bill deftly manoeuvres the machine to fit a giant pencil sharpener over the end of a spoke. He turns a handle and neatly carves a peg on the end of the spoke, then another one, so he can fit them into a new section of wheel rim.

Bill shuffles around the shop, showing off pieces of metal remote in time but not in mind. Bullock yokes, Cobb and Co coach lockplates, jinker rims and rack upon rack of horse-shoes.

He fashioned them all himself, on his trusty anvil. Says Bill: "The electric welder killed blacksmithing."

But he bears no grudges against modern technology, only love of the old.

Past the old furnace and the enormous wind bellows hangs a curious looking saddle. It's a side saddle, so called because it is designed to allow women to keep their legs crossed on horseback.

"That's a good saddle," says Bill. "The queen still uses one of these."

Bill owns the shop, and obviously takes a lot of pleasure in looking after it. Occasionally he shows around a school group, and though he lives a mile out of town, he drives down daily to collect his mail from the letterbox nailed to the front.



Bill Roberts is still deft at the anvil but he laments: "The electric welder killed blacksmithing."