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Hand-painted signs showcase artistic talent

23 August 2011 | By Wendy Short

FAMILY man Harry McDougall pursued his artistic talent later on in life, setting up a new business along the way. Wendy Short talks to the man whose animal signs reflect the pride of the livestock industry.

Many workers look forward to their retirement, but this does not apply to 68-year-old Harry McDougall. Having worked as a dairy herdsman for many years, he now spends his days painting signs for farm driveways and banners for pedigree livestock showmen.

Harry was not born into a farming family; his father was a bus mechanic. However his passion for livestock developed when he was a small child. He has had a long and varied working career, which in the early days saw him move back and forth across the English/Scottish borders.

Growing up in the market town of Galashiels, he was often found 'helping out' on a mixed farm close to his home. At some stage, he says, the family he worked for must have found him useful, as they offered him full-time employment on leaving school.

Some 12 months later, he felt restless and went to work with a herd of pedigree Dairy Shorthorns in Cumbria. Several jobs as a herdsman followed, before he finally settled for 25 years, looking after James Kilpatrick's noted Hawkrigg British Friesians, and only leaving when his employer died and the herd was dispersed.

Nowadays, anyone losing a job and tied accommodation at the same time would find it difficult to source new work and get on the property ladder. But Harry quickly found employment in a factory making cellophane paper, where he worked varied shifts, including night shifts, for the next 18 years. He also bought a house in the pretty village of Newby West near Carlisle, where he still lives.

"We took out a mortgage and bought our house soon after I started at the factory," says Harry. "When you are looking for work in your 40s, you cannot afford to be choosy. By that time, we had a grown up family and didn't want to move again."

The artist

Harry concedes it was possibly the boredom of factory work which encouraged him to take painting more seriously.

Having first experimented with watercolour paintings of cattle while he was a herdsman, his hobby flourished during his time off from the factory. But it was not until he was in his mid-fifties that he became a self-employed artist, producing aluminium farm signs and promotional items used by livestock showmen.

Although he attended a short course on sign-making, Harry has never had any formal training. At the beginning, he had a stand at the local Borderway Mart in Carlisle, and took out a couple of advertisements in the *Farmers Guardian*. However the livestock showing world is a small one, and for many years word of mouth has been enough to keep the orders flowing in to 'Animal Signs'. At present, he has enough work to last him for at least three months.

One popular request is for aluminium show boards and PVC banners depicting pedigree livestock, to put up around the holding pens at shows. The banners are in great demand for pens of show sheep, as they create a barrier to reduce the chance of cross infection.

"A lot of the current banners are based on computer graphics, with vinyl imagery and lettering which can peel off over time," says Harry. "I have an associate who can print my designs directly on to PVC, although most of my work is done by hand using waterproof ink. The portraits are hand-painted, with the lettering traced out, to achieve the right spacing."

Another addition to the production range is varnished wooden show boxes, which are handmade by another local associate.

“It gives a professional look to a pedigree livestock pen if the box containing all the equipment is painted to match the show board or banner. Having information like the prefix and the location of the animals helps with promotion, but that is not the only reason why people ask for them. Most are proud of their livestock and want to display them to their best advantage when they are on show to other breeders and to the public.”

While computers hold little attraction for Harry, he acknowledges emails are a useful form of communication with customers, who often send him electronic versions of reference photographs of their livestock or farmhouse.

Highly durable

The images are painted in special ‘One Shot’ enamel, which is imported from the USA by a London-based supplier. The signs are highly durable, as the artwork is protected using yacht varnish in the final stages. Ideally they should receive a fresh application every third or fourth year.

Harry is often asked how long it takes to finish a painting, but he says this is hard to define. A lot depends on the size of the finished article.

“I can paint a good cow more quickly than the time it takes to breed a good one,” he says.

“A hand-painted item is unique, and can be a lot more flexible. For example, I can take a photo of a cow which won at the Highland show and set it in front of a picture of the farm. I can use a bit of artistic licence and alter its stance slightly, to make it look more correct. This is where the experience I gained in taking the Hawkrigg cattle to local shows comes in useful.

“Requests for signage are not limited to farm livestock,” says Harry. “I have been asked to paint signs featuring gundogs, a cat, and even an alpaca. My work is never boring, because no two signs are ever the same.”

Having past the official retirement age by three years, Harry admits he tries to take things easier. When he was just starting out, it was common to find him up at all hours, especially when clients placed orders just weeks, or even days, before a show.

Today, if he can't meet a deadline, he offers the alternative of a voucher. It can also make a nice gift for a friend or relative who is difficult to buy for.

“I try to avoid working weekends, where possible, because my wife and I like to spend time with our three grandchildren.

“I will carry on as long as I keep enjoying my work; the state pension doesn't amount to much and it's nice to have a little extra money. I seem to have drifted into employment without having any definite strategy, but I certainly have no complaints about the way my life has turned out.”

Readers' comments (1)

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Anonymous | 24 August 2011 12:58 pm

As a Christmas surprise to my husband, our daughter gave us one of Harry's Nameplates for our farm gate. Although this was a few years ago, the sign is as bright and colourful as when it was received , and has had many appreciative comments from both friends and the usual farming 'reps' . A Very Talented Man Indeed!

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