

# Marc & Tony Stevenson

Born c.1955. Rocking horse makers.

Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)



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# 1. Introduction

*This life story was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Stevenson Brothers website at [www.stevensonbros.com](http://www.stevensonbros.com).*



“The inspiration behind our business was our uncle James Bosworthick and our father, who were Naval Shipwrights in the Chatham Dockyard. Uncle James made toys and rocking horses and we always thought one day we would be given one to share”.

After moving back to England in the late 1960’s, the wooden rocking horse we had always hoped for, unfortunately, never appeared but an apprenticeship was offered instead. Both of us had an art background and Tony had time in a Sawmill locally, which supplied the wood for the early horses.

Our first workshop was on our sister’s farm in Kingsnorth in 1982 and within a year we’d moved to Bethersden where we are today.

We decided we would revive the art of rocking horse making and aimed to be the best makers in the world. Having made over 9000 rocking horses for discerning customers all over the world we are very proud of our heritage and have a wonderful clientele who appreciate the best of British craftsmanship.

Stevenson Brothers understand that your horse is a valuable and well-loved member of the family. We also recognise that from time to time, your horse might need a little TLC, which is why we set up the Rocking Horse Hospital for expert rocking horse restoration and conservation.

We specialise in restoring and repairing rocking horses, both new and old. Whether it be to get them in a condition to ride again, replacing the mane and tail or exposing and retouching the original paintwork. Each horse has its own unique character and our dedicated team works hard to ensure yours will retain its individuality as well as its antique value.

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## 2. Before Stevenson Brothers

“A most unusual career and business choice” is what my twin brother Tony and I are used to hearing since setting up Stevenson Brothers Rocking Horses in 1982.

Twins in business together is rare but making rocking horses, even rarer. Our inspiration came from our uncle James Bosworthick, and our father, who were Naval Shipwrights in the Chatham Dockyard.

Tony and I were born in Malta and moved to Kenya in the 1950's. Our Uncle James made toys and rocking horses all his life and we always thought one day we would be given one to share. When we moved back to England in the late 1960's, the wooden rocking horse we had hoped for never appeared. After a Grammar school education we went on our separate paths for a while. Tony into modelling, then tree milling and finally working in a draught office for a large American Oil Company in Hammersmith.

I took myself off to Art College and did a degree in graphic design, spending most of my time in the 3D construction department, designing and making educational aids for children with disabilities.

It was 1982 at a party on a friend's Thames Barge at Hammersmith when we had a conversation about going into business together. We went to see Uncle James, who was still a one man band in Suffolk and was about to retire. He said that we definitely couldn't stick at making horses and besides no-one wanted them any more as the first Gameboy computer games were appearing.

We decided to go ahead with a business in rocking horse making and so returned to see our Uncle a couple of months later. He asked for a £1000 to train one of us as an apprentice...a very wise move on his part. We had to borrow the money and then convince our sister to lend us a shed on her farm and two bedrooms as well. Fortunately, she did and we moved into Finn Farm in Kingsnorth, Kent.

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### 3. The First Workshop

Finn Farm in Kingsnorth, Kent used to be owned by Freddie Laker. He had made a success of his business and we were determined we were going to do the same! Our first workshop was a tiny, tin roofed, ex-RAF Fighter Pilot Scramble Hut from a disused local WWII runway.

We fitted a wood burning stove and wired up our first ancient cast iron band saw, we made a timber rack and fitted a stereo into our tiny office. Next we wrote our goals on the end wall, they were:

To re-introduce the rocking horse as a must have item

To be the best rocking horse makers in the world

To have other people discover their own creativity by working with us

Tony had served his apprenticeship so we built the first horse bodies according to Uncle James Bosworthick's plans in Lime bought from the Lumber yard where Tony had previously worked. In fact the owners of that yard, who supplied pit props to Kent's mining industry, bought the very first two horses we ever produced.

We glued, carved, sanded and sanded some more. Painted, stitched and polished, fitted manes and tails. Tony shared his training with me and we worked in the workshop together for 18 hours a day, often being joined by friends who stayed and enjoyed the fun and creative atmosphere of our first little workshop.

We were so excited at receiving our first cheque, we rushed into see our Bank Manager and deposit the £350. He had little faith we would succeed and did not give us an overdraft facility for many years, so it was our parents who stumped up the initial cash to start us off in our first year.

After three months we had made four horses and decided to have a Press launch and a party to celebrate. We chose our birthday 20th October 1982. To our delight, people flocked to our tiny workshop. TV and local newspapers took up the story: we were in business.

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## 4. The Early Years

We sold 15 horses in our first year. Within a year we had outgrown the farm and bought our first workshop in Bethersden, employing two friends as carvers. Initially we only manufactured Dapple Grey rocking horses as instructed by our Uncle James, but soon changed construction methods and introduced new hardwoods to increase the range and choice.



We decided very early on to number and date each horse on a brass plaque as many of the Victorian makers did not label their rocking horses and identifying them was difficult. This would also give our horses a more collectible appeal in the years to come.



The British Overseas Trade Board were contacted early on as we realised we had to get out into the global marketplace and could not wait for the market to find us. Our first world tour was in 1985 where we attended Trade Fairs in London, New York, Boston Dallas, Los Angeles then Sydney and Melbourne in just six weeks. We came home with £20,000 of orders and took on two new members of staff.



*Hassanal Bolkiah, the Sultan of Brunei.*

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1988 was a very big year indeed. Having finally got our horses into Harrods, we were then commissioned to make a Merry-Go-Round for the Sultan of Brunei, who happened to be the richest man in the world at the time.

We made a 12-horse hand cranked Dobby set with two carriages all carried on twisted brass poles. The delivery trip was a highlight. It was to be erected at his second wife's palace, perched high on a cliff top overlooking the sea. It was huge, all in marble.

The profit from that helped us to rebuild our workshop and double its size to 5000sqft including a new showroom. We persuaded the local Council to sell us some gardens from the neighbouring houses and added a car park too. We could now be visited properly and encouraged our clients to take a day out from London to the country.

To this day, we have a friendly local farmer with an airstrip and we provide the co-ordinates to anyone that wishes to fly in. We also offer a collection service from the three local railway stations and can recommend B&B's locally too.

## 5. Rocking Horses

The following are examples from the Stevenson Brothers current range of rocking horses:

### **Bright Bay**



The Bright Bay from £3,870, £4,640 incl. VAT.

The new Bright Bay rocking horse in oak features a London Tan leather saddle with a raised and stitched brow and nose band. An exceptional piece that would make a wonderful addition to any home.

### **The Unicorn**



The Unicorn from £2,800, £3,360 incl. VAT



The once mythical steed is now a reality for wonderfully creative play and would make a magical addition to any home. Our beautiful new rocking unicorn for 2016 is finished in white pearlescent paint with silver details and mounted on a white painted oak base. The unicorn features a detachable horn, distressed silver leather saddle and light grey tack with mysterious dark eyes and a grey-blue blanket. Personalise your rocking unicorn with a secret locking compartment full of your own treasures and add a plaque to the base.

The first rocking unicorn produced by Stevenson Brothers Rocking Horses was designed with Dame Judi Dench for a charity auction in 2013. Since then, the rocking unicorn has become a popular choice with many clients choosing neutral shades and colours and metallic details similar to this first unicorn. The rocking unicorn can be completely customised to your wishes. Pictured above is the original rocking unicorn designed with Dame Judi Dench, which features gold and silver painted flecks on a white base with silver-grey tack plus silver and nickel metal work, as well as the new design for 2016 with more distinctive silver details and a blue-grey blanket.

### **The Dapple Grey**



The Dapple Grey from £2,100, £2,520 incl. VAT

The Dapple Grey rocking horse is mounted on an oak stand and can have a special engraved plaque for your personal message. Further embroidery, accessories, and a secret locking compartment can also be fitted upon request. Remember, all our rocking horses are custom-made to order so you can choose exactly what you like.

## 6. Our Team



*The team.*



*Painting a Dapple Grey.*

Most of our dedicated team have been with us for over twenty years. Our first secretary, Sue Russell, was made a partner early on and her commitment to the business is huge. She has been on board for 29 years now.

We have a pair of brothers whose combined years with us add up to over 45. Our Workshop Manager joined us from school and served his time as an apprentice going through Furniture College on a day release scheme. Nearly all of our team are now married and support families of their own and enjoy being part of this unique small family business.

