

Scott Wilson - Farrier

Scott completed a Certificate III in Farriery apprenticeship.

What made you consider becoming a farrier and how did you go about it?

I kind of fell into it. I was doing fencing with one of my dad's mates but it got quiet in summer. A local farrier approached my uncle and asked whether I was interested in taking it on. I gave it a shot, fell in love with it and stuck with it.

I'd never been around horses before I started but had grown up with animals. I discovered I enjoyed working with the horses. For me it was a matter of adapting how I cared for animals in the past and learning how to look after a bigger animal. Working with the animals is what got me interested in the first place.

What are the benefits of doing an apprenticeship?

I spent three years learning the trade: all on the job. You learn as you're going, your education is paid for by your employer and you get paid while doing it. You can take the skills you learn and work anywhere in the country as well as overseas. Farriery is not a job you can learn by reading about it or by watching it. You actually have to do it. That way the information and knowing what to do and how to do it stays with you. Doing an apprenticeship is great because you learn under supervision. You get instant feedback which stops you developing bad habits and helps you learn from your mistakes. You continue building on your knowledge and learning every day.

I've been really lucky. We work in a group and have a good dynamic. There is a lot of healthy banter and there is always someone there to help you. Lots of support and guidance: like a second family. I get to see people doing things in different ways and have it explained why one person does something

one way and someone else another. I go to work every day and have a good continuity of work because of the bigger team. When there is spare time, I get to work at the workshop, learning how to fabricate, using different machines and welding techniques, broadening my skills.

What personal attributes and general skills are ideally suited for the job?

You don't need to have grown up around horses. You mainly need to be calm and confident and enjoy working with animals. There is a lot of guidance in an apprenticeship so people can start at different points and learn how to fit in and how to do the work. You just need to have an interest and want to do it. Being able to concentrate is also important but as you get more experienced you get better at staying focused. Although traditionally a male trade, girls can do it too. It's about technique and strength development.

You learn incrementally. When I first started, I mainly held the horses to get me used to them. It was more around learning about horses and understanding their behaviour, how to control them and hold them as they are such big animals. You actually have to be pretty strong willed more than anything. I found it interesting, knowing how to handle them and where to be around a horse, how to be around them so not to startle them, quiet and easy, patting them, making sure they know where you are at all times. When they're jumpy, they're easily startled.

I got to learn how to read them, like reading a person: reading their bodies to anticipate their reaction and gauging their mood. Knowing when it's safe to do the work. You can feel if they're tight and uneasy about you and if they're ready to jump or have a little kick. Their body has different ways to react that you can read and tell you to be more careful.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Every horse is different so there is always something you need to be thinking about. It's not just the same thing over and over again. The horses themselves have different needs, different problems, so there is always something different to do. The majority of our work is off site, routinely going to different stables which have anywhere from 10 to 40 horses. Our truck is the mobile workshop. We interact with different people: trainers, stablehands, owners, vets, providing holistic advice on what the horse needs based on the issues we see. We share our knowledge on what needs to be done with a foot but also what they need to do with the horse once the shoe is on.

I find the work we do at the Murdoch Vet Hospital really interesting because we see more severe faults, horses which have special needs that we may not see every day. We collaborate with the vets, exchange opinions, see the x-rays and learn from each other. Farriers analyse the history of the foot capsule. We look up the leg and understand why it is the way it is. It is a pretty basic thing that we do but it takes knowledge and time to be good at it. You're always learning. We can explain some things to the vet before they actually take an x-ray. It's fascinating.

Has farriery changed since you first started your apprenticeship?

Farriery is an old trade: one of the oldest. The work is all about good shoeing. It's about getting the foot in the right balance and keeping it in balance. You have to be able to picture the horse's foot and shape a bit of steel to it. For me, not much has changed about that but the trade is moving forward. We are spoilt today with the quality of the shoes available on the market. The composites are strong and light and today less of our work is making shoes from bar stock. We still learn metal works as it is important to retain the necessary skills, knowing how to make a machine made shoe, how to alter them, but we no longer need to make tools. We just maintain them. Although it's been around a while, we use liquid equithane for orthotic support in the arch of the foot, now understanding how best to use it, when to use it and when not to use it to ensure the horses are sound.

What are some challenges you face working in the industry?

Your typical working day starts at 6 am and you're normally finished by 1:30 pm. The early morning starts are hard to get used to at first but the benefit is you get to finish early. It is a pretty physical job, particularly on your legs and back. At the start you get the jelly legs. Like any job, you need to build up your muscle strength and learn good technique which takes time.

Although we get lots of exposure to it, learning to talk about your work and dealing with different clients are skills which take time to learn. Knowing how to handle clients and keeping everyone happy can be challenging, particularly when you're still a teenager learning the trade. You learn a lot about different ways to interact and handle yourself throughout the apprenticeship.

What are the opportunities for people who finish their apprenticeship and attain a trade? What does the future hold?

One day I'll run my own business and be my own boss. Even though I finished my apprenticeship a while back, for now I'm happy continuing to work for my employer, continuing to learn. Once I knock off, I do some work for myself which helps me build up a clientele. I'll keep working here and build the business up slowly. Once you have your own business, you can make pretty good money, equal to any profession and you can control your life a little bit by calling the hours you work. But that's in the future.

What advice do you have for anyone considering a career in farriery?

You just need to find a farrier willing to take you on. Once you've got that you can commence your apprenticeship and enter into an employment contract. The trickiest part is finding a farrier to employ you.