



ania today



My slice of the island

Alex Jerrim

ell to my knees and kissed the tarmac. As a returning Churchill Fellow, I'd just spent three months overseas studying motorcycle rider education. I'd ridden ce motorcycles, often in high-speed chase situations, in and around London, nburg, Tokyo, Los Angeles and New York. I'd participated in civilian rider training grams across these countries. It was good to be back.



In Tasmania today

Travel can teach you many things. In my case, it was deep appreciation for this jewel of an island we call home. I yearned to take care of a 'slice of this island'.

Within months, serendipity landed me in a sleepy valley 45 minutes south of Hobart – a place that was to become home.

To get there you snake your way westward, away from the D'Entrecasteaux Channel. You steadily ascend through a hilly patchwork of pasture and forest. Silvery grey wooden stags pepper the distant slopes.

As you plateau, you feel the strain of the ascent ease and the foot lightens on the accelerator. The scenery transitions to a highland moor sprinkled with country bungalows, brick veneers, barns and huts. Then a tight bend to the left invites you into another world. You're about to enter the valley.

Now you descend through a storybook laneway cocooned by native forest. Like a quickly changing slide-show the images flip – rainforest, cliff edge, fern-filled gullies. Within a couple of kilometres you're welcomed into an ever-expanding space cut from the earth by a glacier, millennia before.

Look up and southward and you might see a pair of wedge-tailed eagles. Drop a pin from their lofty position and you've arrived at my slice of the Island. But for the moment, let's not stop here. There's still the ten-minute drive to the valley's end, where its walls graciously relax into Port Cygnet Bay.

The road wends its way along the eastern bank of a rivulet. Its namesake, William Nichol, arrived in 1834. Few physical reminders exist of life before white settlement. A deconsecrated church, now an indigenous museum, is home to some of these. In the 1940s my late father, an Anglican minister, led services there attended by the daughter of Fanny Cochrane-Smith, who is considered to be the last fluent speaker of a Tasmanian indigenous language.

The steep hills that border the rivulet are draped in curtains of forest, their jagged hems defining arable land. This ground was once crammed with berry farms and apple orchards. Now the grey hand-rived weatherboards of the pickers' huts rest mostly horizontal on weary, dry-stone foundations. A few still stand, swathed in blackberry. I picture in my mind the many people who sheltered in these tiny structures.

These days people come not so much to eke out a living from the environment but to experience it. I'm fortunate enough to do both. Our 100-acre property is mostly native forest, parts of it untouched since the days of the bullock cart. Seventy-metre eucalyptus trees stand proud just beyond our back door. Tall manforns survive the summer heat and in cooler months fungi and fluorescent green mosses carpet the earth.

From the surrounding bush I've fashioned and furnished a wooden home. Hand-milled beams, each three days in the making,

Opposite page: Moist shavings collect beneath the pole lathe. This page, clockwise from top left: Constructing the bed for a pole lathe using maul and axe; from tree to Windsor chair in seven days; students learn traditional felling methods; drawhorse and drawknife used to prepare a piece for turning; some picker's huts still stand – memories linger; 'My Slice' 45 minutes south of Hobart; foot power, simple chisel – shapely leg. Photos: Alex Jerrim collection

stretch the length of the house, their weight supported by four to eight-metre blue gum poles. Wattle trees, once growing on the house site, now line the interior. When you build this way, life becomes a journey of continuing education. When working wood by hand, particularly when using green wood and tools that predate the industrial revolution, you have an opportunity to understand a tree's story and, in turn, better understand your own.

Green woodworking is now my passion. The buzz and dust of power tools are replaced by the soft sounds of moist fibres rolling from the tops of hand-guided blades. The pole lathe pulses to the cadence of a slowly-beating heart and reveals a chair leg that, only hours before, was living within a tree. Only a busy mind prevents you from being fully present in the natural world.

It's now 26 years since that memorable touchdown and the journey that brought me to Nicholls Rivulet – my slice of the island.

You can experience the forest and learn traditional green woodworking skills with Alex at Nicholls Rivulet. His courses range from one to seven days. Learn more at www.wisdomthroughwood.com

