

# WOMBAT HOLLOW



IRON BED & LAMP CO.

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Former State Liberal Party Minister Michael Yabsley (pictured) has gained a worldwide reputation for an antiques business he runs from his Southern Highlands home



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A photograph of Michael Yabsley, a man with glasses wearing a light-colored shirt and overalls, standing in his workshop. The workshop is filled with various pieces of industrial equipment and lamps. In the foreground, there is a large, square lamp with a white shade and a metal frame. To the right, there is a large, cylindrical lamp with a white shade and a wooden tripod base. In the background, there are various pieces of industrial equipment, including a large metal mesh structure and a wooden workbench. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and the lamps.

Michael Yabsley has turned a lifelong passion of collecting agricultural and industrial antiques into a successful lamp design business, titled Wombat Hollow Iron Bed and Lamp Co.

# Mover & shaper

Former NSW government minister Michael Yabsley has seen the light, transforming old industrial equipment into "objets d'art", writes LOUISE TURK.





A 1930s car jack makes a strong design and form statement in this one-off Wombat Hollow lamp, (above left), created by Michael Yabsley (above right) outside the shed in which his lamps are constructed, with his English Springer Spaniel, Harley.

**MICHAEL YABSLEY EMERGES FROM HIS** country shed, with its corrugated-iron panels, extending his hand in a friendly welcome.

He's wearing tradie-style khaki overalls and a pair of well-worn workboots.

At home, without the sharp corporate suit, Yabsley could almost pass as your average farmer Joe. He even drives an old Chev ute.

But there is one dress item that completely gives him away: a gentleman's scarf, casually yet expertly, knotted around his neck.

The sartorial flourish reveals the 53-year-old is a man of style, who has a flair for aesthetics and for whom attention to detail is paramount.

Yabsley, already well-known in NSW as a Liberal Party high-flyer and former NSW government minister, has tapped into his creative side to make a new name for himself as a designer of exquisite lamps. And like everything about Yabsley, his range of lamps is anything but ordinary.

He selects industrial and agricultural artifacts, long past their use-by date, and transforms them into designer lighting.

Some of the more unusual vintage pieces which have been reborn as lamp bases include washing mangles, bench drills, engine parts, oil cans, garden sprinklers and blow torches.

Who would have thought that a pulley wheel from an early shearing machine, fitted with a brass pipe, and dressed with a porcupine quill cone-shaped shade could become a highly desirable objet d'art?

Yabsley certainly did when he started his business Wombat Hollow Iron Bed and Lamp Co in 2007 from his home at East Kanglaon, near Robertson, on the Southern Highlands.

"People are forever saying to me: 'How do you come up with these ideas?'," he says from his shed (Yabsley is big on sheds) at his Wombat Hollow property. "Somehow my mind always jumps forward to what an object could be, rather than what it is."

Yabsley, a natural conversationalist who had a stint on radio station 2GB in the 1990s, picks up a deep fry basket which has had its handle removed: "That becomes a fantastic shade," he muses.

Indeed, Yabsley's one-off creations, which are priced anywhere from \$95 to \$17,000, have found their own discerning niche market. His lamps have been featured in Australia's glossy chic magazines and are snapped up by flush clients.

Emirates Airlines recently bought one of the artifacts for a private dining room at its resort in the Blue Mountains. The owner of



**Whenever I hear the expression: 'restored to its former glory' I cringe, and think 'oh no'.**

Hungry Jack's burger empire also has one on his yacht in the south of France.

Yabsley, who designs the bases and shades, employs a small team of artisans who work on-site at Wombat Hollow to manufacture the lamps. Wife Susie Yabsley is involved in the marketing and sales side of the business.

"It's not, it's never going to be, and nor do I want it to be, a mass production," he says. "This is a very boutique-scale operation. We will do probably 200 lamps this year."

The lamp design business and life on the graceful country property, filled with an impressive and meticulously organised collection of agricultural and industrial antiques, is another world to Yabsley's former parliamentary career at Macquarie St in the Greiner and Fahey governments.

Yabsley departed politics in 1994 but he has subsequently carved out an influential role as one of Sydney's best-connected lobbyists.

He's federal treasurer of the Liberal Party, a director of a national corporate advisory firm, and he runs his own Sydney-based company that specialises in fundraising and corporate hospitality.

He's known for his political nous and powerful network of contacts (the guest list at his 50th birthday party included Andrew Peacock, Lady Sonia McMahon, and John Howard's brother Stan).

Yet, away from politics and the fast-paced corporate arena, collecting relics has always been a source of pleasure and contentment.

"When I was a child my father used to say, when we'd go to the rubbish dump: 'Michael will end up bringing home more than he has taken,'" he laughs.

In the 1970s, as a teenager in Lismore, Yabsley started collecting cast iron beds, some of which dated back to the 1840s.

During his political career, he continued amassing the antique beds and carefully restoring them by hand buffing the metal.

"The creative side of my personality has

always been there," he says. "I have always done creative things, although not to this extent because I was previously preoccupied with my own career."

Yabsley's imagination went into overdrive after he saw some lamps which had been made from old tripods and wooden shoe lasts.

Towards the end of 2007, he made his first few lamps and was encouraged to go further, and become bolder, by the initial positive response to his designs.

Suddenly there was potential in many objects that would have otherwise been melted down to scrap or gone to landfill. It took Yabsley's eye to see the beauty in something as utilitarian as a car jack.

"There is not much future for an old car jack and yet when you look at them, and at their working parts, the actual mechanism and the design that's gone into it is extraordinary," he says.

"That's why when I see something like that, complete with its worn blue paint, I think it's fantastic."

Yabsley cleans and repairs the artifacts but believes the metal and wood should have blemishes that tell the story of time.

"Whenever I hear the expression: 'restored to its former glory' I cringe, and think 'oh no'," he says.

"Take this magnificent old water pump ... that is the original old paint that goes back many decades. At one end of the scale, I could sandblast it, I could prime it, I could do it with three coats of gloss enamel and end up with something that looks like its straight out of Harvey Norman."

"Instead we've just taken the superficial peeling paint and we've waxed it. We go to great lengths not to overcook anything."

Yabsley says his lamps have a strong focus on emphasising the design integrity of what he calls the "orphan artifacts". He pays special attention to the proportion between the base and the shade and the contrast between the industrial object and the fine fabric shades.

"This is more about design, decoration and sculpture," he explains.

"I've been flattered by a number of comments that have said the unusual thing about Wombat Hollow lamps is that they do combine sculpture and design with lighting. I think it's probably in that order."

"And then there's the fact that it is a use for these wonderful old artifacts that would have otherwise been thrown out."

Yabsley's lamps command attention because they are quirky and original, and they embrace adaptive re-use practices. They may be the stars of the show at Wombat Hollow, but mention must also be

made of Yabsley's sheds.

He has a workshop shed in which the artisans carry out the metal and woodworking on the lamps.

He has a storage shed, which is home to most of the completed lamps, the shade materials, and an eclectic collection of carpenter's planes, funnels, lanterns, bench drills, and "just about anything."

He also has an original 1930s timber shed, recently relocated to his property, which houses a beautiful collection of domestic period pieces that were used in Baz Luhrmann's epic *Australia*.

And he has an architect-designed shed which is a social and entertainment hub for the family, which includes their children Edward, 21, and Alexandra, 15.

It's a large open space that includes a



Friends in high places ... former NSW MP Michael Yabsley, left, has the ear of former Prime Minister John Howard at a Millennium Forum luncheon in Sydney in 2001.

recycled commercial kitchen and gas-powered heaters that hang from the ceiling. Rabbit traps, enamel signs, and rusting farm equipment are displayed alongside a sleek entertainment area with modular lounges and giant TV screen.

Yabsley informs that the shed, which can accommodate gatherings for hundreds, has been the venue for many family parties (including his 50th).

The Yabsleys, known for throwing a good shindig, are hosting a masterclass and brunch at their home next May as part of the highly-anticipated Australian Chamber Orchestra's performance in the Highlands.

By the way, when it is cleaned out the shed has perfect acoustics for an orchestra recital. ■