

OUTBACK FRONT 'N CENTRE

CURATOR KARINA EASTWAY
MAKER AKUBRA
INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN KEIR, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF AKUBRA
PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY AKUBRA
COUNTRY AUSTRALIA

THE ANCIENT ART OF FELT MAKING HAS A MODERN HOME IN AUSTRALIA THANKS TO FIVE GENERATIONS OF THE KEIR FAMILY.

CAN YOU TELL US YOUR NAME AND POSITION WITH AKUBRA?

My name is Stephen Keir and I am the Managing Director of Akubra Hats. I am also part of the fifth generation owners of Akubra along with my sisters Nikki McLeod and Stacey McIntyre.

IS IT CORRECT THAT THE NAME AKUBRA COMES FROM AN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE FOR HEAD COVERING? IS THERE A STORY AROUND HOW THAT CAME ABOUT?

For many years it was believed that the name Akubra had its origins as

an Aboriginal word meaning head covering. The Akubra trademark was registered in 1912 and it was always believed that this was the case. It was not until the Keir family finally decided to write a book on the history of Akubra that it was discovered that our original belief was incorrect.

The name was created and registered by Arthur P. Stewart, who at the time owned a menswear store and sold the newly-named Akubra hats, as well as acting as a distributor to other hat retailers around the city of Sydney.

RIGHT Stephen Keir, Managing Director and one of the fifth generation of Akubra owners.



CAN YOU BRIEFLY DESCRIBE THE 800-YEAR OLD PROCESS OF MAKING THE RAW MATERIAL, FELT (BEFORE THE FORMING PROCESS STARTS)? WHAT MAKES RABBIT FUR PERFECT FOR THE FELT-MAKING PROCESS?

As we understand it, legend suggests during the Middle Ages Saint Clement was a wandering monk who happened upon the process of making felt by accident. It was said that he stuffed his sandals with linen fibres in order to make them more comfortable. St Clement discovered that the combination of moisture and perspiration and ground dampness, coupled with pressure from his feet, matted these fibres together to produce a cloth. St Clement became the patron saint for hat makers, and the theory outlined above is consistent with our manufacturing process today. Rabbit fur is ideal for the felt-making process because rabbit fur (under a microscope) has tiny barbs that actually assist in knitting together when we start our hat forming process.

WHO ARE THE FELT MAKERS AND HOW DID THEY LEARN THE ART OF FELT MAKING? ARE THEY DESIGNERS OR MILLINERS?

The felt makers represent the 100 staff working on our manufacturing floor. Employees are required to complete a four-year apprenticeship to become a felt hatter. Usually each felt hatter can complete with expertise four specialised tasks or processes. The apprenticeship process is internal to the business, with experienced tradesmen and women training new apprentices. As such the craft is handed down from generation to generation. The design of hats usually represents a team effort between the Managing Director and Operations Manager, along with input from the sales team.

MAKING AN AKUBRA HAT IS A VERY TIME-INTENSIVE, HANDMADE PROCESS. HOW IMPORTANT IS THE HANDMADE ASPECT TO THE BRAND?

It is critical – we see our manufacturing process as more like a craft. Each process and set of hands is crucial to producing a





quality product. There are 162 steps in the process, each hat is handled 200 times in manufacture and passes through 60 pairs of hands with each pair of hands acting as a quality check. Quality is paramount for us.

IS THERE A STORY OR INSPIRATION BEHIND THE ORIGINAL DESIGN/SHAPE?

I am not sure that there is an original design. We make more than 100 different styles to suit all people and all markets. Certainly styling has changed over the 140 years we have been in business as consumer tastes change. Fortunately, we have the capability to move with the times.

THERE'S BEEN FIVE GENERATIONS OF THE KEIR FAMILY BEHIND AKUBRA ... WHAT DOES TRADITION MEAN TO THE FAMILY?

It is much the fabric of who we are. Through my father and grandfather, I learnt the important values of our business, as they learnt from their forefathers. Tradition and respect sit high in my personal values and I believe that business is much more than simply maximising profits.

WHAT STARTED IN 1876 IS NOW AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY. WHAT'S BEEN THE SECRET TO KEEPING THE BRAND AND PRODUCT ALIVE FOR OVER A CENTURY?

I couldn't tell you in a few sentences. There have been many highs and lows over the past 140 years. Through that time we have always endeavoured to stay true to our corporate values. The most important attributes for business success are honesty, fairness, quality and generosity. We always reflect back on these values. I think overall we have a great reputation with the various stakeholders in our business and again these values are about more than just profit. Having said that if you don't have a great product and great people you are unlikely to survive long.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN THE TRADITION OF STOMPING ON YOUR BRAND NEW AKUBRA?

In one respect this tradition perplexes me. Why would people do this to a brand new hat? I expect they want

to give it that worn-in look that you see from our core customer – the outback man and woman. Their beaten-up hats have their own personality and form part of their identity. Indeed, we are often asked to manufacture a worn looking hat, I guess a little like the jeans you see with holes in them today. Hats have had this trend for decades I would suggest.

WHAT COMMUNITY (OR CULTURAL) CONNECTION DOES AKUBRA HAVE WITH THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK (OR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES)?

I guess our hats have become part of the fabric of the Australian outback. I would struggle to put my finger on how this evolved over time but we now see the term 'iconic' used when referring to our brand. Of course, it is something we are very proud of

and work extremely hard to live up to and outback people are the most important supporters of our brand. Without them we could not remain 'Australian Made'.

WHAT COUNTRY (OR CULTURE) OUTSIDE OF AUSTRALIA WEAR THE AKUBRA MOST?

We have been exporting since the 1960s. The USA was our largest market and during the time we sponsored Greg Norman, who happened to be the world's #1 golfer, sales exploded so much so that we had to place all customers on quotas. We simply could not keep up with demand. Today we export all around the world with our largest markets being China and Tibet – seems there is a thirst for internationally made products in these countries.



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