

A labour of love

Louis Harrison

SOME people spend a lifetime looking for the thing that sets their heart alight, something they're truly passionate about and others are lucky enough to find that earlier on.

Mark Smith has spent a lot of his life restoring and being around the Pioneer Settlement's Queen of the Murray paddlesteamer, the PS Gem.

While the 13 stage restoration plan on the heritage listed Gem to restore it to its former glory began in the 1990s, Mr Smith and the Gem's story starts long before.

As a child, Mr Smith recalled holidaying in the area and having an affinity for the paddle steamer.

"I used to holiday here with my family and I always remember, you always knew you were in Swan Hill when you got up to the corner, and you looked down here, and you saw the Gem," he said.

The Gem's 150 year lifetime has seen it carry freight and passengers up and down the Murray River, have a restaurant on board and be an integral part of the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement's site.

Much of the Gem's history is coloured by hurdles that it has crossed, and the restorative process has been much the same.

The Gem is overseen by a dedicated team responsible for decisions about conservation works, and it operates under an independently developed conservation management plan.

The restorative process has involved more hands than just Mr Smith, and some of those people had a formative influence on his skills and his growing passion for boats and boat-



Mark Smith has spent years working on the Gem to get her to where it is today.

building.

"The first shipwright I worked with was Andrew Cook, and he was very good at explaining things," he said.

"Probably the one thing that really galvanised it for me was where we turned a plank of wood that is three inches thick, 10 inches wide, 16 feet long, and we did a 90 degree twist in it."

Mr Smith said one of the most challenging and rewarding parts of the restoration process was finding a suitable piece of timber to twist for the front of the paddle steamer.

"We spent a lot of time rolling planks over, looking for the right one to do what it had to do," he said.

No two days look the same working on the Gem according to Mr Smith.

"It's no different to anything that we do in

The Pioneer Settlement, there is always work to be done," he said.

Beyond the restoration work, The Gem has also held personal significance in his life, serving as the setting for his proposal to his wife.

"(My wife) had taken me to the jewellers, shown me the ring that she wanted and even cut it out of the catalogue and put it in my wallet.

"So I thought, right, if that's what you want, that's the one I'll buy, and we walked past the jeweller's one day, and it wasn't in the window anymore, and she was devastated, but at that stage, I'd already put it in the safe on the Gem.

"I hadn't decided even, probably until halfway through the meal that night, I thought, nah, I'm gonna do it tonight, and, of course, I forgot my keys, so I had to go get a spare set

of keys.

"We went for a walk up to the wheelhouse and I proposed to her," he said.

Mr Smith speaks fondly about his time with the Gem and paddle steamers after all these years.

"Once you get the river in your blood as such, you might move along the river, but you won't go away from the river, if that makes sense," he said.

"I'm lucky enough to be in a position that, I get to enjoy what I do."

"It's me and the boat."

Correction: In last week's front-page caption, Mark Smith was incorrectly identified as Brendan Harvey. The Guardian apologises for the error.



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