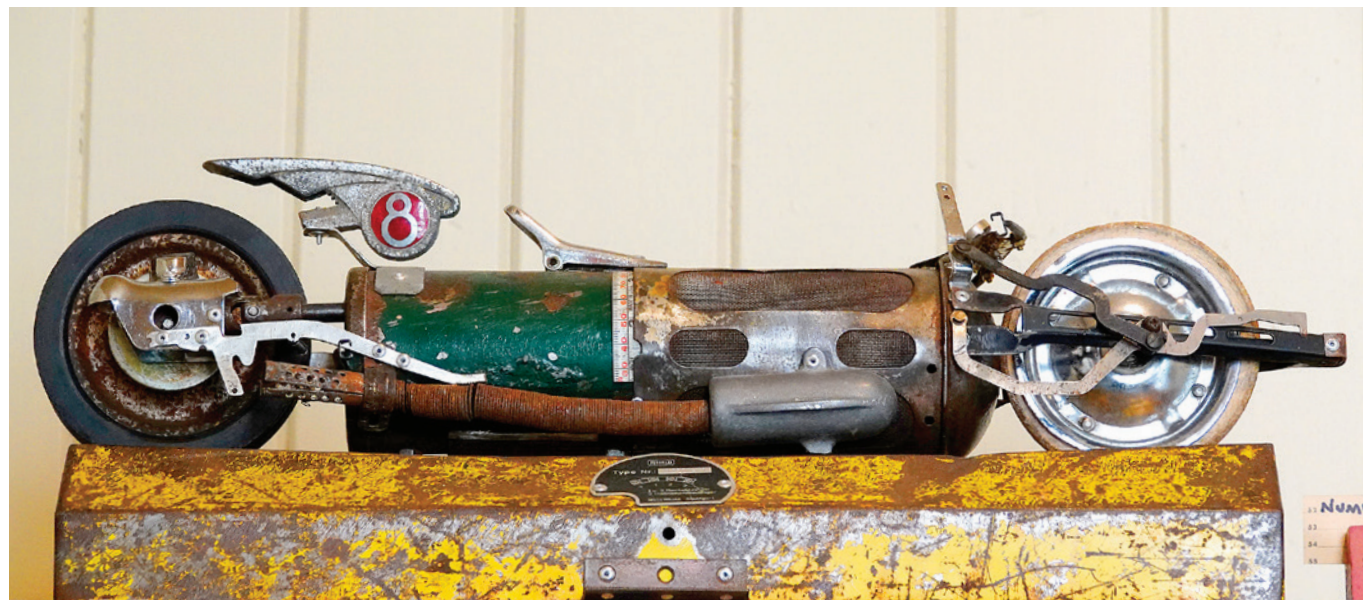


JUNKYARD GENIUS

“Creativity is seeing what others see and thinking what no one else ever thought” – Albert Einstein

By Chris Hegan

Photographs: Brian High and Martin Horspool



It is generally regarded as wisdom to ‘leave well enough alone’, but Martin Horspool is not having a bar of that.

Here is a man who considers nothing worth having, using, or wearing until he has either found a novel use for it or transformed it utterly. Nothing is spared – not his Honda 50 step-through, not the lamp over his desk, not the desk itself, not even his own hair, a white mane that stands straight up like bristles on a yard broom.

Everything around Martin bears his original and always stylish stamp. For the past 16 years, this odd bent has provided the former printer with a nice supplementary income, but,

as of August last year, this is his new career: the Buggyrobot guy of Oamaru – Steampunk Town.

Steampunk city

In his converted granary studio in the heart of the town’s Victorian precinct, Martin carefully designs and fashions ingenious model robots, using a painstakingly accumulated and meticulously categorised hoard of engineering junk, most of it harking back to the days when having ‘Made in England’ stamped on something marked it out as being the best you could get.

Half the pleasure of viewing one of the many robots surrounding their tireless creator is in trying to work out what ►

Nothing is spared – not his Honda 50 step-through, not the lamp over his desk



Happy in his work: Mr Buggyrobot

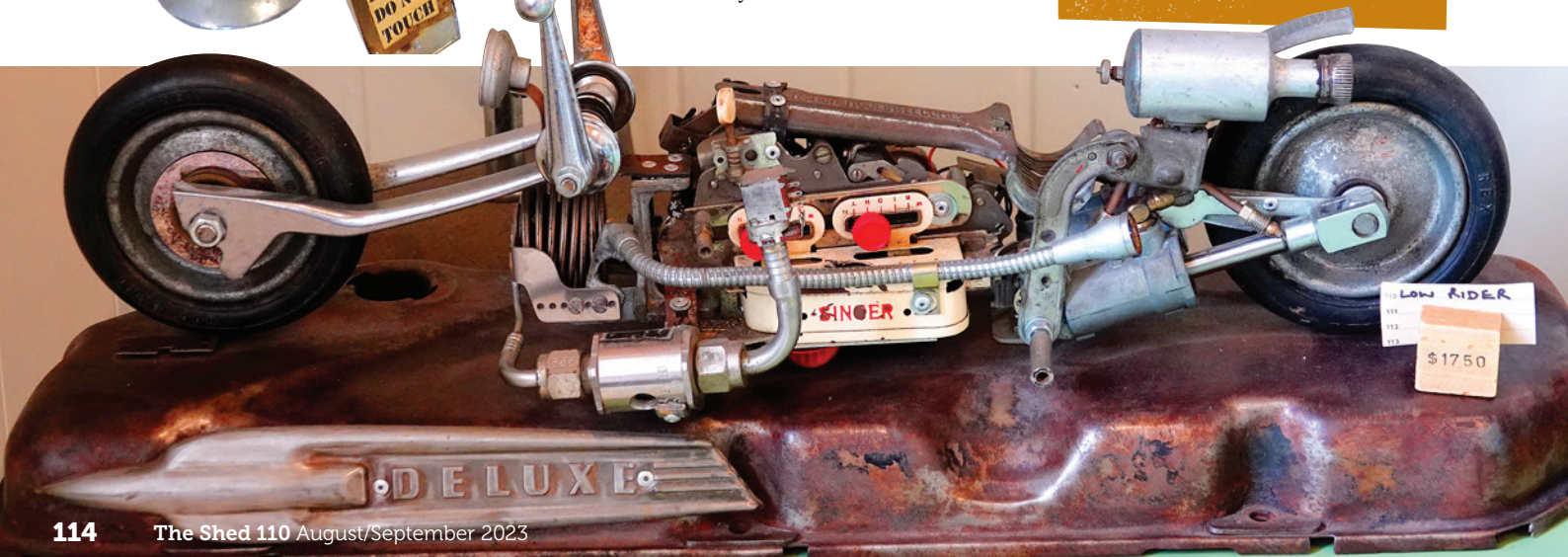
The showroom of a man of many talents



they are made from. Take Mrs Splorebot, for example. Her helmet, an upturned red ceramic and steel pot, is surmounted by the bonnet mascot from a '50s-era Morris car. Her eight long hairs were once brake cables. Her nose is a Bakelite engineering switch emblazoned for some obscure reason with the warning 'KEEP BACK'. Her eyes may or may not be the business end of two torches. The lower part of the head – anybody's guess! The torso is definitely the top of an old conical Tellus vacuum cleaner. The breasts are two small colanders with nipples that might actually be nipples, albeit ones designed to take a grease gun. The rest – well, work it out for yourself.

Martin's subjects were always mechanical. Hot rods were a favourite; anything machinery related

Mrs Splorebot



It all began in the valleys

It all started with drawing, back when Martin was a schoolboy in Llangollen in the Welsh valleys. That is how it is spelled, but when Martin says it, we hear no 'Ls'; rather, we hear noises that have no equivalent in the English alphabet – the Arabic, possibly. He has been gone from Wales for 25 years but the lilt still shows through.

Martin's subjects were always mechanical. Hot rods were a favourite; anything machinery related. He still draws, but even his cartoon figures are constructed like engineering designs. He makes no secret of his influences.

"Wallace and Gromit, obviously; '60s horror movies – *Dracula*, *The Wolfman*; David Bowie; anything industrial, particularly British industrial design from the '50s and '60s — I love that stuff. I don't know – I'm all over the shop in my head," he says.

Martin enrolled in art school but, perhaps characteristically, chose the wrong courses.

"I should have done industrial

design. [The course] did involve a bit of printing, and I was young, wanted money in my pocket, so I signed on as an apprentice at the town's main industry, a big printing plant," he says.

He soon had enough money to buy his first machine: a '67 BSA 250cc bike.

The land of the long white cloud

Martin settled down to life as a printer in his hometown, and met his partner Wendy, but, as the century drew to a close, he decided that he wanted a different life story.

"Llangollen is a beautiful place – almost nobody leaves – but I had always been attracted to New Zealand," he says. "I was a mad paraglider. I even kept on after a close encounter with some power lines very nearly killed me; a couple more inches and I wouldn't be here. New Zealand always featured in the paragliding magazines. ►

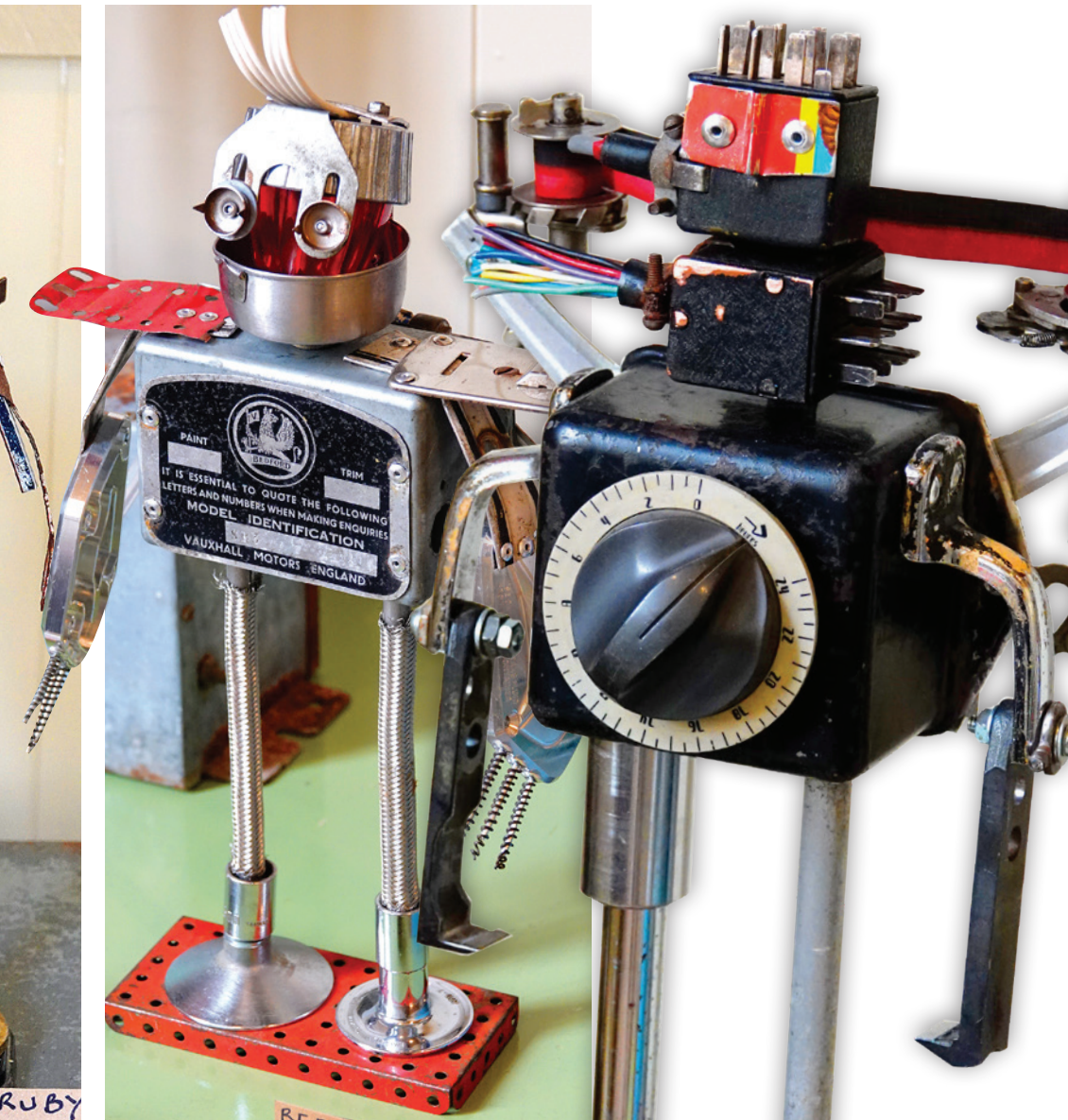


A dog ... flies out the door

Edward Spannerhands



Ruby – all sweetness and lightshade



badges, but now, with the studio open seven days a week, the colours for his mechanical palette are becoming a concern.

“They’re hard to locate,” he says. “There are lots of old guys with sheds full of stuff, but typically they won’t part with that $\frac{3}{16}$ Whitworth bolt until the day they die.”

Even that, though, has turned into a profitable and fulfilling branch of Martin’s robot industry.

OK, let’s do it

Through the years of having successful exhibitions and even getting commissions from overseas, working all weekend on his art, Martin kept the day job as a printer until finally, in August last year, he decided that he had had enough. ►

“There are lots of old guys with sheds full of stuff, but typically they won’t part with that $\frac{3}{16}$ Whitworth bolt until the day they die”

Beautiful mountains. Volcanos. It was easy to move. An agency lined me up with a job before we left.”

The couple settled in Auckland, ending up in Titirangi. Martin moved jobs a couple of times but mostly stayed where he was, just being a printer who liked to draw. However, the artistic urge kept niggling away, and 16 years ago he started experimenting with turning his imagination to making real objects, starting by using stuff he had lying around.

“I was showing a couple of photos in an art gallery [and] mentioned to the owner that I was working in metal,” he recalls. “She looked at my work – I had made robots but I was mostly making insects at that time. The exhibition went well, but from the start it was obvious that people weren’t keen on having an insect on the mantelpiece – offer them a dog and it flies out the door.”

We are the robots

The next year, he came back for another exhibition. The robots were an instant hit.

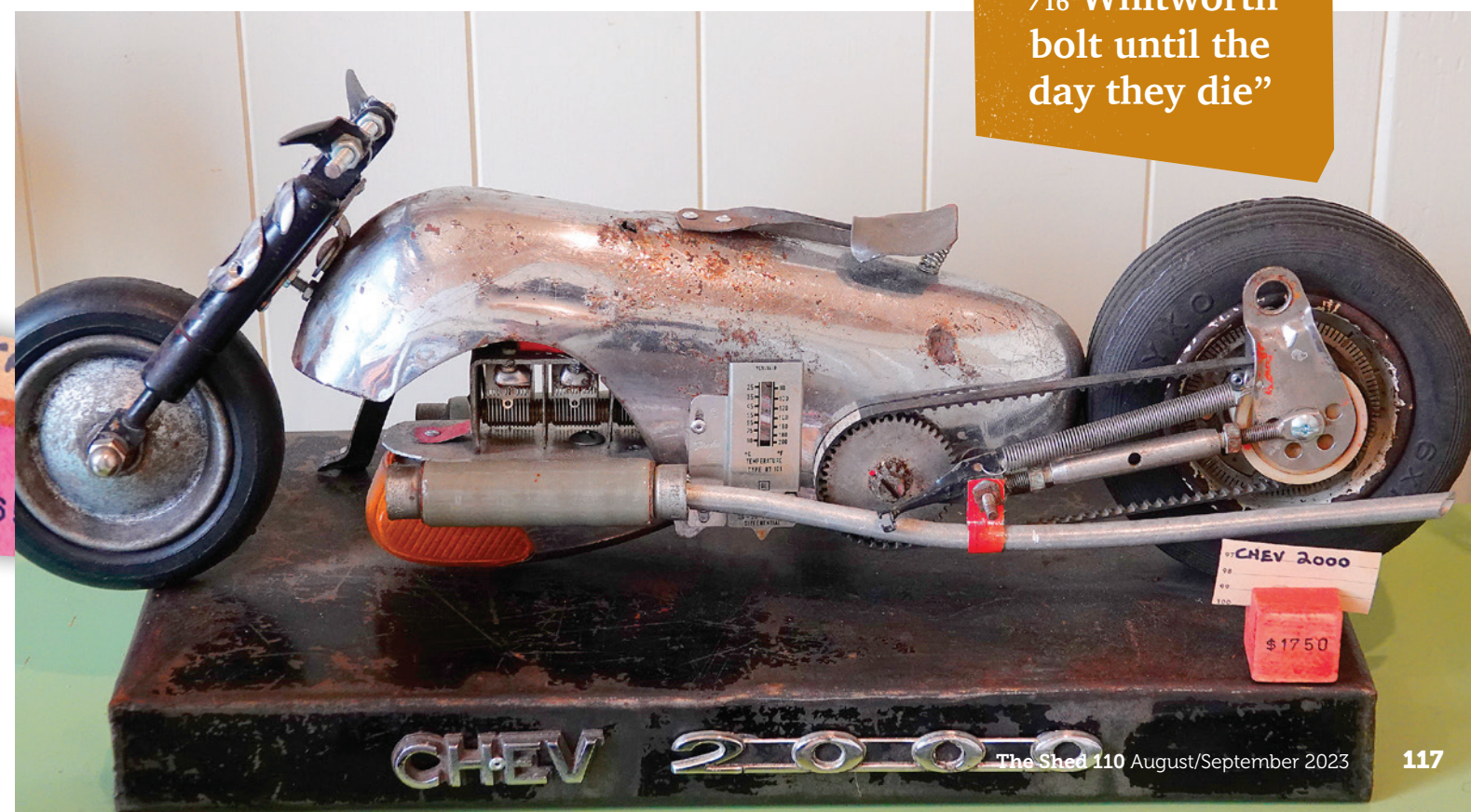
He laughs. “That was when Wendy went from, ‘Oh, Martin’s playing with his toys again,’ to ‘Well, this is all right!’”

Along the way, Martin broke his leg and gave up paragliding for good, much to his mother’s relief – not hard to understand, considering he has former paragliding companions who will spend the rest of their lives in wheelchairs. It did not stop him doing a bungy jump and a tandem skydive, which he seems to rate as safe alternatives. Opinions may differ.

In any case, Martin no longer had time for the winds. His increasing output demanded raw materials and they weren’t making them any more. Now, he was haunting hot rod shows



and classic and vintage car shows where there was always a brisk sale of spare parts; junk shops, estate sales, anywhere that there was likely to be old machinery either whole or in parts. He has a large suitcase filled with car





“I was tired of seeing the same group of colleagues year in year out, people always talking about their golf swing, that sort of thing”

“I was tired of seeing the same group of colleagues year in year out, people always talking about their golf swing, that sort of thing. The robots always sold well so we took the plunge,” he says.

The timing was right for both of them. Wendy was a retail regional manager, running 14 stores, when the business was sold to an Australian concern. They merged two jobs into one, and Wendy was happy to take the redundancy.



No animals suffered in the bagging of this trophy

The Mainland calls

They plumped for Oamaru: “It’s a lovely town and the robots are a good fit with the steampunk thing. They’re not actually steampunk but it’s kind of in the same vein. The Victorian precinct is a tourist attraction, so there are always people coming through.”

Martin thinks it is important that potential customers are able to see him at work, and even have a chat: “I’ve always got to be here doing what I’m doing. I like talking to people, especially people from overseas. They like seeing something that hasn’t been mass-produced in China. I have to manage a balance because I can’t multitask. When I open my mouth, my hands stop working.”

Customers

Buggyrobot has two rooms in the building, across the corridor from each other. One is the showroom, the other is Martin’s studio. Wendy comes in three days a week, giving Martin time to catch up with the work.

“When they come through the door, 90 per cent turn left and go into the gallery but 10 per cent walk into the studio,” Martin says.

Reactions vary.

“Old guys will come in and start rummaging through the drawers, asking if I have a window handle for a Morris Minor. Sometimes they’re a bit reluctant to hear that the stuff is not for sale. I have told the odd one to bugger off. I draw the line at groups of kids. That’s when the velvet rope and the ‘No Entry’ sign go up,” he says.

It is easy to see why Martin would resist having a dozen or more little hands let loose in his studio. Although it looks like a junk store, Horspool’s studio is immaculate and meticulously

Buggyrobot memorials

Four or five times now, people have come to Martin and asked, “Can you make something that represents Grandad?”

The grandfathers in question have invariably been beloved family members who spent all their spare time in their sheds.

“One of them was a guy who had died ages ago,” Martin says. “He had a big house in Herne Bay in Auckland. When his wife died, the shed had stood untouched for 25 years.”

His family came and asked Martin to make not one but three ‘Toms’, for his daughter and her two kids.

“So I asked, ‘What was he like?’”

“We don’t really know. We never saw much of him because he spent all his time in that shed, messing around and working on his Holden.”

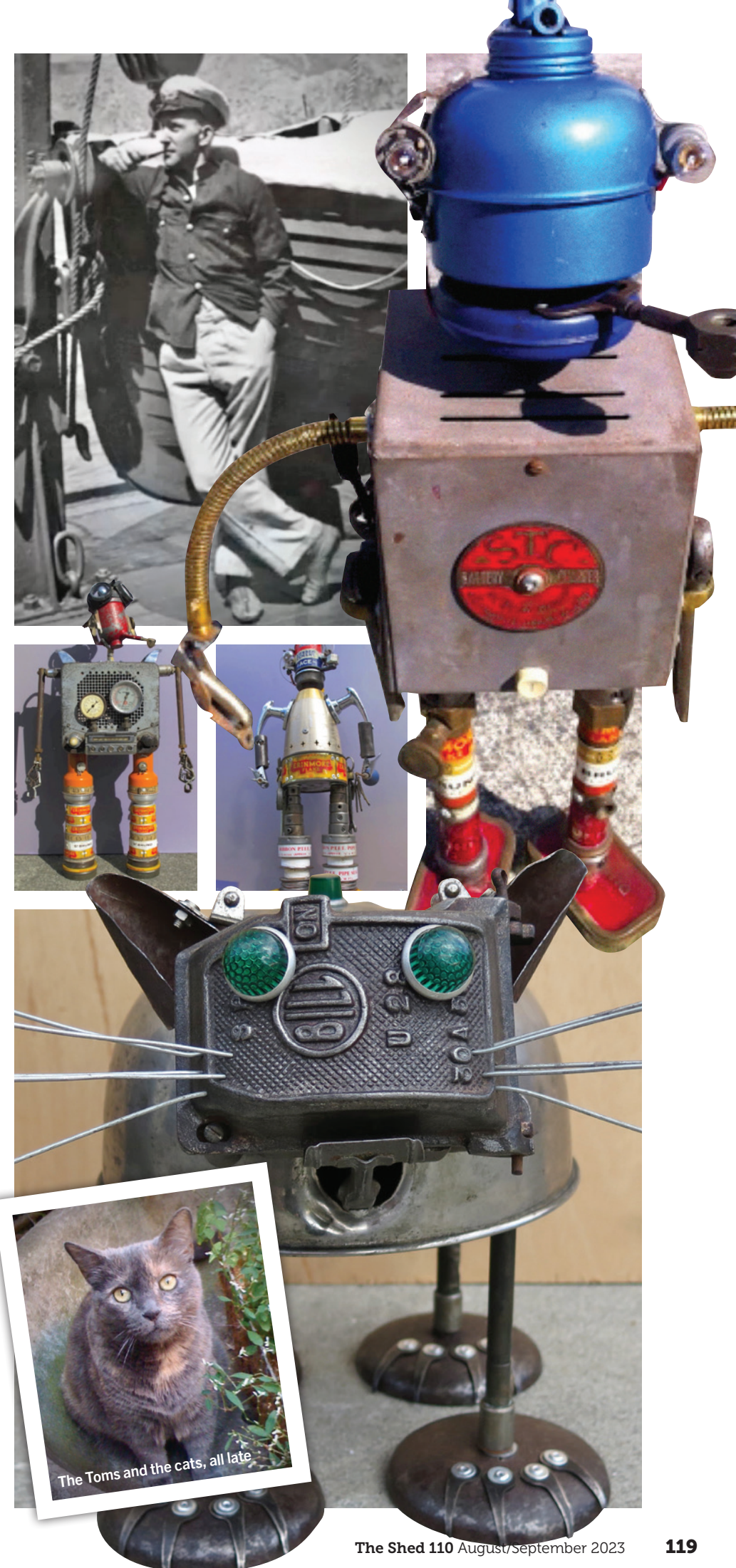
“It took ages,” says Martin. “I didn’t want to get it wrong, end up with a runty look. One good clue was the stacks of Erinmore pipe tobacco tins. They were useful, and every ‘Tom’ had a pipe.”

He finally came up with three ‘Toms’ that he was satisfied with.

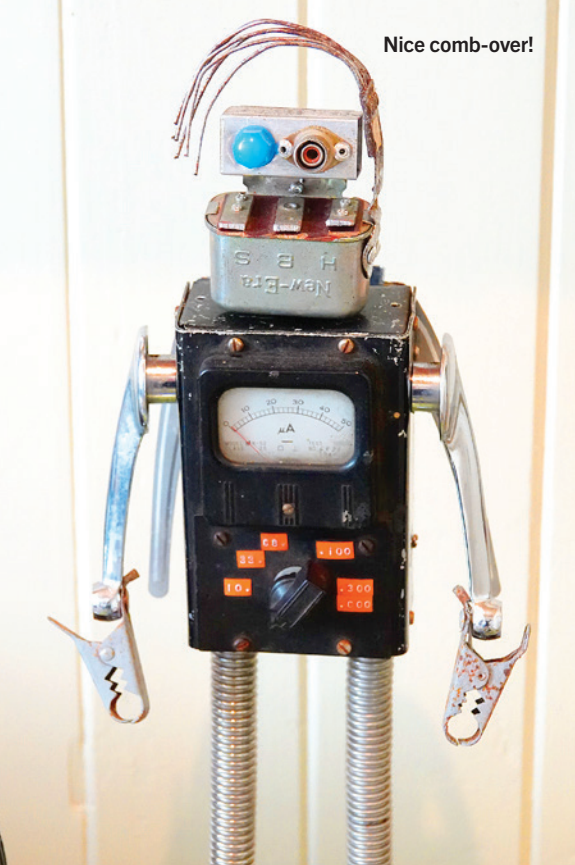
“The family came around one Sunday afternoon for the handover,” says Martin. “It got very emotional, actually. We were all sitting around the kitchen table crying. I must have got something right.”

“I also made a repro of a friend’s late cat. Angus is an ex-pat Kiwi who lives in New York, a successful guy who likes to torture me with difficult stuff. He had the cat cremated and wanted something for the ashes. First, he liked the head but not the body. When I got the body right, he didn’t like the head any more. I used a ‘60s electric kettle for the body. I think he liked it in the end.”

Martin’s most challenging Angus commission was the Evil Head: “He [Angus] is as bald as an egg and wanted a robot with his bald head as a kind of Dr Evil. He had his head scanned and 3D printed and sent it to me in New Zealand, hand delivered by his niece, then he told me to make a robot with it. I managed to put it inside one of those old glass-domed parking meters, which I thought was pretty good. But not good enough – he wanted it lit up in red LEDs. I’m not really an electrical guy but I got it done somehow. He picked it up when he came to visit his mum. He seemed pretty happy.”



The Toms and the cats, all late



Nice comb-over!



organised, the embodiment of an artist with an intense focus on detail and organisation.

He attributes this partly to the discipline of the printer – “There are tidy printers and very tidy printers” – but also suspects he has a touch of OCD. “I can’t just take any two eggs from a carton. The rest have to look good when they’re gone. Like, if it’s a full dozen, I’ll always take the end two. I like symmetry, which helps with the work.”

Online marketing

Martin does not rely on walk-ins to the gallery. Buggyrobot.com, his web shop, is impressive – stylish and efficient, showing off his range as a multimedia artist. There are the robots, the ironic game-hunters’ trophies, the racing bikes – the closest that he gets to proper steampunk – his photos, three designs of T-shirts, and videos.

He had a successful exhibition in New York seven years ago and still

gets commissions off that show. His most challenging, and perhaps most artistically impressive, commission was to put together Viktor the Lonely Robot for Kiwi band Dukes’ music video for its hit, Secrets.

The inspired twist on the ‘going to pieces after a break-up’ theme has, well – see it for yourself, just look for ‘Dukes Secrets’ on YouTube.

It is world class, something Aardman would be proud to have made. Viktor goes through his trauma using stop-motion animation, which involves moving a part, taking a single shot, moving it slightly again, another shot, and assembling that into a movie.

“I was there but I gave up after two days. It was unbelievably boring work,” Martin says.

He tried China but it didn’t work out. “We booked a cubic metre in a container for China but they wouldn’t let it in. They have banned all foreign recycling, and all they could see was a bunch of junk to be recycled. The agent and I had a mutual friend in Hong Kong who eventually smuggled them across the border in two big suitcases. I went there for the show and had a great time. They love haggling, always looking for a bargain. Theoretically, I still have an agent in Guangzhou, but it’s just not a workable business model.” ▶



“Though this be madness, yet there is method in ‘t”

The method

As with everything else Martin does, he has a system for starting a new model.

“First I put together a collection of bits that I think might look good together,” he explains. “I lay them out flat on the bench and try them out, sometimes replacing bits until they all work. Then I start from the feet up, attaching the feet to the legs, sticking them together as I go.”

His favourite tool is a 3.2mm double-ended drill bit, to drill the holes for the pop rivets: “It’s a special bit – it won’t snap. Ordinary drill bits snap if you lean on them too hard at the wrong angle. Working the way I do, that usually means the stub end goes into my thumb. So I’m pretty keen on that drill bit.”

He is also fond of a small ball-peen hammer, saying, “If a bit of metal is too

shiny, it might need tenderising – add a bit of a patina. The hammer’s good for that.”

We notice that the robots always stand on a pedestal.

“Well, they have to,” Martin says. “They’re almost always top heavy. The pedestal keeps them upright. That’s important.”

On average, a full-size robot takes about 12 hours’ work, and that is just the construction. Add the time to locate and select the parts, then factor in the overheads, and it’s obvious that Martin Horspool will never be known as the ‘Buggyrobot millionaire’. However, he is finally making a living doing what he loves, and that is priceless.



“Made in England” – nothing but the best



He has just
acquired a 1969
Triumph Herald

Got any old engineering stuff?

The Buggyrobot business model is a work in progress right now. The commitment to be there seven days a week means that Martin doesn't have time to keep replenishing his stock, which is still healthy but not bottomless. He has just acquired a 1969 Triumph Herald, which will inevitably acquire the Horspool trademark. So, to any reader with a shed full of old engineering stuff, the Buggyrobot guy of Steampunk Town would be very happy to hear from you. Let's be honest: you're probably never going to need that $\frac{3}{16}$ Whitworth bolt. 🛠️



And now for the Herald ...