

## Manufacturer Spotlight



Interview with Willie Erken,  
owner and operator of window  
cleaning supply manufacturing  
company Wagtail.

When I was asked to interview Willie Wagtail, owner of Wagtail Pivotal Tools, it was like asking a soccer fan if he'd like to interview Pele or a baseball fan if he'd like to meet Babe Ruth! I've owned every one of Willie's squeegee's since they've arrived on the scene and I'm besotted with them! It's now my squeegee of choice – I always carry an 14" and 18" Wagtail on every job when I'm not using a water-fed pole. The time saving that window cleaners gain are tremendous and without the loss of quality to boot. The French/Colonial windows I used to hate cleaning have now become enjoyable to clean using just one of his tools, the 6 inch "Flipper" and I'm finding a whole range more of possibilities when I normally reach for the water-fed pole. They are that rapid! Being relatively easy to master, they are the must-have tool for any window cleaner worth his salt. The range of Wagtails are usually mastered within an hour even for the slowest window cleaner.

When Willie mentioned on one of the forums that he had signed up a booth for the ISSA show in Amsterdam earlier in 2010, it was my excuse to go over and meet him. You couldn't meet a nicer guy, his excitement for the products and people he meets shows through. It was a hard task to get to talk to him because his booth at the trade show usually had around twenty people queuing up waiting to try out his Wagtails. He had some pretty impressive prototypes on display

as well – some of which you can read about below. Many window cleaners don't know that his tools are also famous for cleaning floors as well as cleaning windows. If you haven't tried one yet, you can find Wagtail tools just waiting to be bought in the WCR shop. Don't delay, these tools will UP your speed and give you increased earning power over the competition and embarrassingly so, as well.

Karl: When did you start window cleaning and when did you leave to become an inventor of squeegees?

Willie: I started window cleaning in 1979 after I returned from a two year working holiday in Europe.

Karl: Do you still keep your hand in and go out window cleaning in Sydney with your brother Peter now and again?

Willie: Once a year I go out window cleaning with my brother's crew and once a year with my friend Eugene from "No Streaks Window Cleaning." The sole purpose is to keep up with techniques and try out new inventions.

Karl: So the Wagtail squeegee was named after a famous Australian bird? Does it have a deeper meaning?

Willie: It definitely has a deeper meaning; the Wagtail bird constantly wags its tail similar to the action of my squeegees. Secondly, my nick-name since birth was Willie and the bird is properly named the Willy Wagtail.

Karl: What was your thought process behind designing the Wagtail squeegee?

Willie: Since I was primarily a shop window cleaner, the use of poles was essential. To get a perfect result, continual horizontal strokes were needed i.e. the S - stroke on a pole and also by hand. From this, the Wagtail Pivot was invented!

Karl: The switch to make Wagtails to a lighter plastic more than traditionally used metals was a touch of genius. Was that a Eureka moment?

Willie: I started window cleaning in my 20's and by the time I was 30 I started getting arm and wrist strain due to the heavy tools, so I started buying really cheap lightweight squeegees and converting



them to be strong and durable. My Eureka moment came when I was using one of these squeegees and my new invention “the multi-lockable pivot” broke and resulted in this loose constant pivot.

Karl: How did you come up with the idea for a pivot handle?

Willie: I saw the advantages of a swivel handle but I was unimpressed with these as a hand held. They were either too loose or too tight, so I obsessed with the idea of a controllable pivot.

Karl: Was ergonomics a major process in your thinking when you designed the squeegee or was it solely for speed?

Willie: I had five guys working for me and we were all about 40 when we all developed different forms of arm strain. My carpal tunnel was so bad that I sold my business to these guys and opened up a retail store with Indonesian furniture and artifacts. This store was unsuccessful so I needed to return to window cleaning. I was 40 years old, broke, injured and aging so I needed an edge to regain my window cleaning business.

Within a week I developed the Wagtail Pivot; I gathered my brother Peter and a team of professionals and entered a business plan competition at a local university. We won the five thousand dollar first prize and my invention was selected to be exhibited at the new technology museum in Sydney (Powerhouse Museum).

Karl: I see the Wagtail is banned from speed window cleaning events; are you annoyed?

Willie: The Wagtail squeegee is undoubtedly faster than any other squeegee so yes, we are extremely upset. I was even prevented from entering a T.V. Show; “Guinness World Records” after the producer was informed by the Guinness Book that only fixed squeegees can be used. In one way it is proof that we are the unfair advantage by providing a pivot.

Karl: Thousands of window cleaners now have relief from wrist, shoulder and arm pain – is this something you would like to be remembered for?

Willie: My father was a doctor and so to develop a tool that prevented injuries was the pinnacle for me being “the black sheep of the family.” Unfortunately he died just before we won the business plan and International awards.



Karl: Where do you keep all your international trophies and awards for the Wagtail? Above the fireplace?

Willie: I keep my gold medal in an Antiquarian Leather Book Case but all the other awards are in a box ready for when we own a factory with a beautiful foyer.

Karl: Would you say a Wagtail is all a traditional window cleaner needs in his arsenal to clean windows?

Willie: Absolutely, they are lighter, faster and more versatile. Sometimes when there is pole work on narrow windows above thirty feet you need to tighten the pivot for the straight pull. For this reason we developed the adjustable tension in the pivot mechanism.

Karl: High-rise window cleaners cottoned on to the Wagtail long before the rest of us. Why?

Willie: My brother Peter owns a large high-rise window cleaning company and he became very successful due to the fact that all his employees outperformed competition due to using the Wagtail. Peter will state that reach is all important when you are abseiling and the Wagtail has more reach than any other squeegee.

Karl: The Burj Khalifa in Dubai (tallest building in the world) started using your squeegees – that was a coup! Did you send them Wagtails?

Willie: In Australia most high rise window cleaners use Wagtails and it was an Australian company that was commissioned to clean this building first. Luckily, they used their Wagtails for the television reporting of the cleaning of the building's windows.

Karl: How many variations of the Wagtail squeegee do you have now?



# WAGTAIL

## Pivotal Cleaning Tools

Willie: Orbital, Blue Ribbon, Flipper, One Pass, Whirlwind, and Swoop makes six.

Karl: I thought the "Blue Ribbon" squeegee was a major improvement over the previous. Why the change in design?

Willie: Although the first Wagtail was lighter than other squeegees, it was still a little heavy for older window cleaners like myself. Also the channel was wider and did not fit into the BOAB so I set out to design a strong, ultra-light squeegee that was capable of using other brands of channels.

Karl: The Wagtail "Whirlwind" came with a change of pad. Was that a design change to provide more scrubbing power?

Willie: The jury is out for this one, the Whirlwind is really good at scrubbing and water retention however it is slightly heavier than the Flipper. I think the Whirlwind is the ideal tool for the really dirty windows encountered on high-rise and residential windows.

Karl: You have a new "one pass" squeegee (the Swoop) about to be released, how does this differ from previous Wagtails?

Willie: Apart from weight I think that glide is very important to prevent what I call cigars (little water lines at the end of a swirl). The new Swoop, provides more glide and hence more washing power in a single action. I believe this to be the Holy Grail of the squeegee. Additionally there is always a need to pre-wash the very top edges and corners of a window, and for this we provide the pad to flip in front of the squeegee blade, similar to the Flipper. This new tool will wash and wipe simultaneously, due to the one inch wide base extension.

Karl: How long has the "one pass" Swoop Wagtail been tested for? How much quicker is it than the previous Wagtail design? Is this a "game changer" for window cleaners?

Willie: Years of research have gone into this tool but we have only field tested this since the release of a very successful launch at ISSA Amsterdam of just the prototype!!

It is faster and more versatile than all previous models. I think it is the pinnacle of all the tools designed by Wagtail.

Karl: How long does a product you invent take to get from drawing board to release normally?

Willie: The "Pivotool" (a dual purpose domestic window/floor tool) took three years of constant design (in house university trained designer) and prototype work. Prototypes were more than ten thousand dollars and tooling were tens of thousands of dollars. This tool failed in the television infomercial world and all that money was lost. Now it is my job to make prototypes and we only go to a designer when we are absolutely sure of its potential. It takes now about a year to get into production since our "Pivotool" misadventure.

Karl: Who is your tester for Wagtail products? Does he work with your brother Peter in Sydney?

Willie: New inventions are tested comprehensively by a professional window cleaner in Sydney for domestic homes and storefronts and the "Window Cleaning Company" of Sydney for high-rise. However most of my friends are window cleaners with very interesting backgrounds. One was invited to and rejected Mensa, another quit university after receiving distinctions and my brother Peter studied Engineering in Switzerland. When I give these guys my latest inventions I get amazing feedback.

Karl: I'm a big fan of some of your other products, namely the "Angle Arm" and the "Bucket Clip." Why do window cleaners not hear about these so much?

Willie: The "Angle Arm" is a huge success for us, but we are not noted for our marketing and when a product is not received well by our distributors - like the "Bucket Clip," we are unable to get it into the hands of a window cleaner. The "Bucket Clip" is my most underestimated invention as it serves two huge problems; one keeping the bucket handles higher, thereby not having to bend down too far to pick up the bucket and the built in extractor holds the squeegee or applicator upright and extracts water when needed.



Karl: I've actually tried the Wagtail "Whirlwind" on floors myself – it became huge in Australia – why not the rest of the World?

Willie: Standards of floor cleaning around the world are appalling if you think about it compared to window cleaning. I believe hospital diseases such as MRSA are due to poor floor and bench cleaning hygiene. We have some really large organizations and hospitals interested but they take forever to change their habits, one day the world will clean floors with a squeegee.

Karl: The Wagtail "Pivoting Wet Scraper" is another time saver, what sizes are they supplied in?

Willie: The "Pivoting Wet Scraper" is being trialed and if successful we will introduce the final version and in different sizes.

Karl: When I saw your new "bucket-on-a-belt" prototype at the ISSA show in Amsterdam you were thinking of calling it the "close to me bag," because of its snug fitting. We laughed because it could get known as the Colostomy bag. Have you got a new name for it yet?

Willie: Funny, we did not have the courage to call it the "Close to Me bag" but all the guys using them call it this! The official name is "Hip Dipper" and it will be released later this year with new stronger plastic.

Karl: This will be the lightest "bucket-on-a-belt" ever seen – did you plan it this way?

Willie: Weight is always important but the squeezing of solution to the middle of the mop is the best quality of this invention. Comfort of a flexible bag also was important.

Karl: Who do you admire in the window cleaning world?

Willie: Other manufactures are not my idols, they just copy, but guys like Karl Robinson, the Lambrinides brothers and Mark Henderson are taking the profession of window cleaning to new levels.

Karl: What's the one window cleaning invention you wished you had thought of?

Willie: I really struggle with this one but I suppose the whole water fed pole industry is moving at great new levels each year. I wish we were more involved.

Karl: Are there any other tools that you are working on for the immediate future?

Willie: I would really like to divulge this one but there are too many creative window cleaners out there. Being obsessive I am working night and day on something really simple but to engineer it is a nightmare. I have made working prototypes but manufacturing this concept is the sticking point.

Karl: If you weren't a window cleaner/inventor what do you think you would have ended up doing?

Willie: Stockbroking or a real estate agent was my goals.

Karl: Where do you see window cleaning in ten years time?

Willie: The future of window cleaning is what I work on day and night so I can only see the Wagtail pivoting tools being the major window cleaning equipment for the professional.

Karl: What do you find time for outside window cleaning?

Willie: We live right on the Sydney harbor, so most of my spare time is either on our kayaks, walking the dogs or I take my daughter Hannah to Equestrian competitions. I also own and deal in antiquarian books specializing in leather bound English authors.

Karl: Do you clean your own windows? Or do your daughters get put to use?

Willie: Believe it or not I do clean our windows at least twice a week but not for the view, just to test new concepts.

Interview done by Karl Robinson of Robinson Solutions BlogSpot.

