

MEN IN SHEDS

The fast-growing 'Men in Sheds' movement is helping combat loneliness and isolation among blokes of a certain age. **Graham Sherwood** goes inside a busy 'shed'

IT USUALLY starts off as a bit of a joke. "Where's your dad?" "In his shed, of course."

The much-pummelled stereotype of the henpecked husband taking refuge in his shed – often fitted out with an easy chair, transistor radio and flask of tea – is as old as the hills.

A man shed, to the untrained but critical eye, often appears to be a chaotic cornucopia of myriad tools, old machinery, broken appliances, offcuts of wood and metal, and innumerable packets of nuts, screws, bolts and nails that will all become essential some day.

Set among this is the workbench, where the magic really happens. However, there

is a serious side to the man in a shed. Whether he's temporarily escaping from the wrath of a curmudgeonly wife or merely whiling away the long days of retirement, possibly even as a widower, it is in the main a lonely existence.

After all, there are only so many go-karts, soap boxes, dolls' houses and rocking horses that need making and, as the once-needy young grandchildren blossom into spotty technology-driven teenagers who don't seem to visit so much anymore, enthusiasm can often seep away.

As with the inspection, discovery and action required to sort out the many health problems that beset the older generation, women are usually more adept than men at dealing with the concepts of loneliness and living as a singleton.

So all hail the 'Men in Sheds' – an embryonic scheme that is beginning to catch fire around the country, where in conjunction with local authorities, older-generation charity organisations and health services, premises are being funded to provide a more gregarious

"Whatever activities are pursued, the essence of a shed is not the building itself, but the network of relationships between the members inside it"

Mike Jenn, founder of the Camden shed



Above: Just a few of the MK Shedders who were in attendance. Virtually everyone present had a small hand in renovating the wonderful model railway layout shown here

Left: Mike Jenn, 67, has enjoyed a career in the charities sector, which included 15 years as the managing director of Quaker Social Action. He is the chairman of the UK Men in Sheds Association, and a founder member of the Camden shed, which he started in February 2011

alternative to spending time home alone in your shed.

Although in the UK it is a relatively new phenomenon (the Shed concept was first started in England by Age Concern Cheshire in 2009) in Australia – where the idea has been going for more than seven years – it is thoroughly embedded, and now boasts more than 1000 sheds. Just three years ago there were a mere handful of British sheds; now there are now more than 60 groups in regular operation throughout the country.

So what goes on in a shed? The answer is virtually anything, with activities like the woodworking skills of carpentry, joinery, lathe-working, carving, furniture renovation, stick-making – even whittling – together with metalworking, bicycle and vehicle repair work, model

Either serenading his fellow shedders, whether they like it or not, or just putting his past career skills as an electrician to use helping others, Dick Evans enjoys the camaraderie of the MK Shed



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construction, engineering, milling and musical instruments repair.

Some sheds have branched out into photography, electronics, computing and even weaving, but the common theme remains: it is one of shared enterprise with ‘shedders’ sharing skills, physical assistance, expertise and of course encouragement, albeit often tinged with a healthy dollop of banter.

For many, it is often the first time they have collaborated outside the workplace, quickly making friends and workshop buddies who allow for larger, more challenging projects to be taken on. Sometimes, two or even three pairs of hands may be needed, and more challenging cross-discipline projects involving wood, metal and electronics can be successfully embarked upon.

I visited the Milton Keynes shed which has been in operation for nearly three years to find a jovial, if not outright comical, bunch of blokes, easy in one another’s presence, all giving as good as they get, both in banter and more importantly shared assistance and encouragement.

In one area, there was a chap mending model steam engines, in another ukulele music spilled across the room. On another bench two somewhat studious men were carefully applying a new skin to the wings of a model aeroplane, while around the corner the searing sound of a circular saw whined through its task in the woodwork and carpentry area.

Taking pride of place in a nearby bay was a reconstructed Reliant Kitten, which had been skilfully converted to run on battery-powered electricity. In an adjacent office suite sat a bank of computers – some old, some older – all being eagerly used by other shedders.

Encouragingly, during my short visit two potential new recruits were being shown around. As I listened to their shedder chaperones, the conversation was relaxed, no sign of an oversell, merely

showing them the possibilities of the broad facilities on offer. A mug of tea later and it appeared the newbies were already hooked.

Statistically, however, while the Men in Sheds phenomenon does seem to be catching on, the current roll-call represents a mere drop in the ocean of potential membership. In Milton Keynes, for example, the demographics suggest a pool of around 2000 men of a certain age could avail themselves of the shedders’ facilities should they feel so inclined. With membership both regular and

Electrical and Design Engineering skills put to good use here by Brian, left, and Dennis, right, re-skinning one of a collection of model aeroplanes



Ken aged 71, had a career as a civil engineer and worked at Bletchley Park. Having retired, and suffering with a small disability, he misses the interaction with the visitors so the MK Shed has been a lifeline

occasional peaking at a headcount of around 80, there is still much to achieve.

Marketing – or, as the shedders would more likely say, ‘letting people know we’re here’ – is an important aspect for the future of the Men in Sheds idea.

Tackled locally, in the guise of good working relationships with other charities and/or a variety of school projects for example, the shedders’ existence can be quickly propelled into a town’s psyche, the feelgood factor wonderfully contagious.

To attempt this on a national scale is an enormous undertaking, a challenge taken on by Mike Jenn, who started his own shed in Camden, north London, a couple of years ago.

Says Mike: “Men are social beings, and if your children have flown and maybe your wife, too, it could save your life to join a shed, or at least

relieve the life-shortening stress of relative isolation.”

The Men in Sheds National Association will promote shed groups and support their development as a way to improve health primarily in older men. It will help sheds learn from each other and reach out to those who have yet to hear of the idea. Mike adds: “Whatever activities are pursued, the essence of a shed is not the building itself, but the network of relationships between the members inside it.”

This was certainly in evidence during my visit to the Milton Keynes shed and I left, after a happy couple of hours, with the thought that literally anything could be rebuilt inside it... whether that be a model aeroplane, an electric car, or – perhaps more importantly still – a man’s self-esteem.

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For more information go to the website: www.menssheds.org.uk.