

MEN'S SHEDS

A place to do and to talk

By Rachel Sloane

Men's Sheds are an Australian idea that came here around 2011. Non-profit-making, they are usually run by the men who attend, and the idea is that most men are happy to chat when working side by side on a project. Usually retired (although not always) and missing male colleagues, an informal meeting place such as a large shed is ideal both for those who live alone and those who just want to get out of the house. Found across Suffolk and Norfolk, some members go to Men's Shed to work on their own projects using the space, tools and expertise there, but also work together on community and paid-for projects.

At the Halesworth Men's Shed, which started in 2014, John Lange explained he was a member of Ditchingham Men's Shed first.

"At Ditchingham, we spent three years looking for somewhere to settle down and install machinery. Eventually the Wetland Trust at Earsham, which used to be the Otter Trust, said they could provide a plot for a peppercorn rent. We saved up, got some grant money, enough to buy a shed, and it's still being equipped out."

Finding the right premises is the biggest challenge for most Men's Sheds. The Shed at Halesworth is a large building that they have rented since 2015.

"It was a former printworks," explained Ray Roy, a Trustee. "When we took over, it was stuffed full of things from house clearances that had been donated to a charity, which we had to clear."

Members, or 'Shedders', pay to belong, and Shed committees also apply for grants from organisations such as Suffolk and Norfolk Community Foundations, The East of England Co-op, local councils, and independent trusts.

"The facilities here at Halesworth are so good. Keen people might have tools in their sheds at home, but not such large professional equipment," went on Ray, "and here there is usually someone around who can help with advice."

Why do the men join?

"I come from Yorkshire and lived abroad.



Malcom Crowther



Edward Creasy, High Sheriff of Suffolk with Ray Roy



Making a dog kennel



Working on a doll's house



Edward Ceasy, High Sheriff of Suffolk, looking round the Halesworth Men's Shed with John Lange

When I came back five years ago to live in Halesworth I straight away got involved with the Men's Shed. I am also involved with the Halesworth and District Model Engineering Society," said Vic Scott, displaying his latest project, an impressive hand-built 1911 London General B Type model omnibus. "I saw an advert about a talk Doug Mizon (a founder member of the Shed and East Suffolk ambassador for UK Men's Shed Association) was giving about the Men's Shed in the local library. I went up the stairs - and there were 26 ladies and Doug! We got talking and I thought wow, what a great idea... and started coming."

Ray explained he joined when his wife had dementia, and said he really appreciated the tremendous support he had when she eventually died.

At Halesworth, the Shed offers all sorts of woodwork, including joinery, marquetry, whittling, etc, metal working, model engineering, restoration, repair work, handicrafts, gardening, and more. Jewellery making tools were added for one new member - a woman - as this is a Men's Shed that is open to all.

As well as individual projects, the Halesworth Sheddiers also undertake community projects such as making benches and planters for the town, and wooden hearts for the Halesworth Compassionate Communities project.

"We are planning to expand into electronics and possibly blacksmithing, but it depends on demand and if we have the experts. It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation. If someone asks if we have the equipment for their interests, do we buy it first and then see if they join?" John Lange, asked ruefully.

In Felixstowe the Men's Shed was formed in January 2018 and is open for two hours, on a Tuesday and Thursday morning. Initially they met in a cabin in the grounds of Sanctuary Housing, then at Felixstowe Museum.

"Like most Sheds, we spent a lot of time finding suitable premises," explained Chairman, Tony Allen. "Eventually I wrote to the Master at Trinity College Cambridge, (who owns a lot of land around Felixstowe), sending four pages of photographs showing what we do. They spoke to their agents, Bidwells, who

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found this barn for us.”

The well-maintained large barn was perfect, although they are using a generator until the electricity is connected.

“We are building a room inside the barn which will be our bolt-hole and meeting room. It’s going to get cold here in the winter, but that will be able to be heated more easily,” continued Tony. “Some of our twenty members, most who are retired, have a background in engineering or building trades, but many have no professional skills and come to Men’s Shed for the fellowship. It’s recognised the men don’t cope as well as women when they are on their own, and we really fill a particular niche, supporting men.”

There is the image of a man on his own in the shed at the bottom of the garden...

“...yes, and its lonely! Here there is laughter and conversation whilst, of course, we are always careful of safety.”

Felixstowe Shedders are busy kitting out their new Shed but have also worked on community projects, including a memory room at a dementia care home and life-size figures for nativity scenes for outside Trimley St Martin Church.

Ivan Rose is one of the founder members.

“I’m retired after working in the building trade all my life, I’d done all the things at home that I needed to do, and I wanted something else! Men will talk over a workbench and that’s the idea here. You cover all subjects... as well as getting on with the job in hand!”

Peter Norman has also been involved from the start.

“It was the diversity of things you could do, that you don’t have space for at home, that appealed. The idea is to think big and do things you enjoy. Now we have a home of our own it is getting even better, thanks to the generosity of Trinity College. When we first came to look at the barn, we saw these huge great doors but had no idea what it was like inside... and it was quite amazing. It was both clean and dry. They really take care of their buildings!”

“This is a great crowd of blokes who work well together,” added Jerry Crosson. “I retired from the



Moray McPhail (Visitor), Jerry Crosson (Health & Safety), Peter Norman (Membership Secretary) and Tony Allen (chairman) at Felixstowe Men’s Shed



port in 2008, and my wife is retired as well. Coming here gets me out of the house and breaks the week upand I know what day it is!”

Mory MacPhail visited the Felixstowe Men’s Shed, on a fact-finding mission, from the monthly Martlesham Repair Café.

“The idea of a Repair Café is that you bring in your broken appliance and someone is there who can repair it. You sit alongside them and we hope some of the knowledge will rub off as you chat, so you’ll be able to do it yourself in future.”

The idea of a Men’s Shed and a Repair Café obviously has some synergy. Mory has a workshop in Martlesham for his bronze work business and thinks it would be ideal for a Men’s Shed. The next step will be to have a public meeting to see the level of interest.

Men’s Sheds are obviously spreading. If there isn’t one near you, there could be very soon.

■ For more information:
www.menssheds.org.uk
www.halesworthshed.org.uk
www.felixstowemensshed.org.uk

- A) Ray Roy at Halesworth Men’s Shed
- B) Wooden Hearts for ‘Hearts and Mind Halesworth’
- C) Ivan Rose

