

Men's sheds are more than buildings – they can be lifesavers¹

Mike Jenn

Community 'men's sheds' are bringing people together to share skills, tools and banter. For many it has saved them from life-shortening isolation

Wed 6 Nov 2013 11.15 GMT



Laurel and Hardy show how men's sheds can be about enjoyment and company as well as sharing skills and tools. Photograph: Ronald Grant Archive

A shed at the bottom of the garden is a fine thing to have, especially if you're a man. A place to mend and make, invent and create, to follow your interests in splendid autonomy, at your own level of untidiness, with whatever tools and materials you have to hand. A fine thing, but not everything.

What if you don't have a shed or what if you could have all this and more? After all, in your own shed you are on your own with limited resources and equipment. In a big shed you could find new mates with whom you could share skills and experience, more and probably better tools, and tasks that require more hands. Such places are being established, called "men's sheds". Three years ago there were just five in the UK, now there are 55, and today I am launching the UK Men's Sheds Association to promote a growing global movement.

I first heard about them from my son who lives in Australia, where there are nearly 1,000 shed groups. Six months before I was due to retire in April 2011 he asked me what will I do, and sowed the seed by telling me about the groups. I liked the idea of setting up a men's shed locally in north London because I could do with more mates and don't have a big enough garden for my own shed. My hunch was that I could also do something useful by creating a local group and helping to start a movement here. I visited sheds in Hertfordshire, Cheshire and in Ireland to learn how they worked. For many no-longer employed people, who need something to do, it is, in part, a work substitution. It may also compensate for the loss of your workmates and the kind of banter that took place on the workshop floor. 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.

A shed's activities usually involve making or mending in wood, such as carpentry, joinery, carving, whittling and furniture renovation, but can also include bike and vehicle repairs, tool renovation, upholstery, model engineering, milling and gardening. .

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/06/mens-sheds-building-lifesaver-community>

Guys have come drifting into my group, including to my relief someone who really knows his woodwork. Some have come with projects in mind and others with no idea or experience. We have built a number of items for the community, from a castle for disabled children to fire arrows at to a gate for the community garden, and we also make items we can sell to pay the rent and insurance.

We have had both men and women in our shed, though most are men-only (it's their choice). I'm more skilled than I was before and I am proud of the sculptures and bedside cabinet I've made. Ian, a retired carpenter whose previous life was all smoke and drink, says it is the best thing that has ever happened to him. Frank, who had his own workshop, says that we challenge him to do better work. One man said he had been suicidal when he first came.

The national association will promote shed groups and support their development as a way to improve health primarily in older men. It will help us learn from each other and reach out to those who have yet to hear of the idea. Whatever activities are pursued, the essence of a shed is not a building, but the network of relationships between the members. Perhaps one day soon there will be one near you.