

Stepping into She Shedding in Whitby

Sleights Area Men's Shed (SAMS) is a very active men's shed in the Whitby area, now two years old. It's a Men's Shed, although women have been frequent visitors, many on the Coast to Coast walk which passes SAMS' door.



After 5 months of operation, SAMS arranged a trial women's workshop using the lathe. Three women attended but SAMS was not in danger because one lived in France, another in the Midlands and the third, a local, was in full time employment. More relevant was that they thoroughly enjoyed the experience of wood turning.

Within a month, SAMS welcomed Maggie from Germany to the Shed. It was no short term visit but for 5 months. She was staying locally to improve her English – maybe with a Yorkshire twist! With little time to recover, SAMS received an enquiry from Paula in Redcar, up the coast from Whitby.

For 34 years, after being denied woodwork at school, Paula had wanted to use a lathe. She had seen news of SAMS in the local press and decided it was her moment of opportunity! Paula still attends when work permits. Both women also enjoyed the atmosphere and banter at SAMS – they had little choice, of course – and were very appreciative of their inclusion as Shedders.

It was what we eventually learnt about Maggie and Paula that convinced the Shedders that SAMS could be suitable for women too. No details, but for different reasons the two women were both undergoing significant changes in personal circumstances and work-life balance. We, and indeed they, were not aware of the need to reconnect socially and to their real selves. It was no different to some of the men at the Shed or ourselves. We all often wear masks, and sometimes without realising it.

The “women in our Shed” experiences led us to review SAMS' evolution and consider what was so exclusively male about Sheds. We looked again at the original aims and how they had worked out in practice.

Promotional postcards had been produced prior to SAMS' launch. They were essentially the Shed manifesto. They stressed three main principles:

- 1) The Shed was to help men at some kind of a loss. Men who had holes in their lives for different reasons from what life had or could have been
- 2) The worth and success of the Shed would not be gauged by work done and things made, but by outcomes in the lives of Shedders
- 3) The Shed would be guided from within, dynamic in outlook, and not shaped by external expectations of supporting bodies. It would be a shared adventure.



These were the guiding principles for SAMS but there were additional significant, unexpected, external outcomes not planned for. The local rural community took an interest in SAMS, helping with workshop space in parts of a Methodist Chapel and a local business and simple encouragement. Shedders began to join in other events in their “adopted” community and even became ambassadors to visitors not only for the Shed but the locality too.

SAMS quickly won the support of various wellbeing services who had clients they believed might benefit from a safe, inclusive, active environment which gave time to people.

Therefore, it was not a big step for SAMS to explore establishing a Women’s Shed. The views of the wellbeing services were positive to the idea. The view of a female community worker at Coast and Vale Community Action, a voluntary sector umbrella organisation, was equally positive. She was experienced in women’s work and confirmed the value of Sheds for some women.

The “some women” is the same as “some men” for SAMS; people who feel disconnected and isolated from the self they once were and would like to be again. Men enjoyed the challenge of doing the unfamiliar. It very simply took their minds off everyday concerns for a while.

Hence the subtitle to Whitby Women’s Shed website is “Creative Distraction”. Creativity requires effort, and effort distracts.

Whitby Women’s Shed, nicknamed the “She Shed”, was planned and organised over a 6 month period and has been operational now (Dec. 2017) for 3 months. The Shed has already had an impact on the outlook of individual She Shedders in a way very similar to that of SAMS with men. Reduced isolation, raised confidence, motivation and hope.

Whitby Women’s Shed has been under the wing of SAMS, funded through Asda/RVS Shed Programme and Two Ridings Community Foundation. The plan is to transition to Shed Coordinators to oversee the She Shed day to day before a separate constitution and trustee body is set up. Expansion to two shed days a week is on the cards.

Now, SAMS and the She Shed are looking at a Women’s (and a Man’s) Shed for Staithes up the coast. Why? Because they work.

Please view www.whitby-womens-shed.org.uk and see the journey there has been from day one. SAMS web site is www.sleights-are-mens-shed.org.uk

Graham Storer

SAMS Co-ordinator

December 2017

Elaine Marsh, Marie Keen, Betty Ward

Whitby Women’s Shed, Shed Coordinators

Moving Forward in the She Shed

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Whitby Women's Shed took 9 months to get off the ground from conception to opening mainly because of the difficulty of finding suitable, town centre premises for it. It being a place that would tolerate lathes, drills, cupboards as well as crafts and even a bit of food preparation. The Eskmouth Scout Hall "stage room", uncovered by a sequence of accidental conversations, eventually provided that.

We three women (now designated Shed Coordinators) were not part of these lengthy negotiations, preparations and funding applications. We and other women are the beneficiaries of that effort for which we thank men!

Two of us entered the picture on the occasion of an open meeting advertised in the Whitby Gazette. **Betty**, the other, lives near the Scout Hall and showed her friendly face when the She Shed landed. That was her downfall since she was persuaded to join and was then captivated by the novelty of using equipment like lathes, drills and screwdrivers.

Betty, a widow of relatively recent years, is very independent and active but she nevertheless had a bit of a hole in her life which the She Shed has helped to fill with creative distraction. Wood turning in particular attracted her and she now has a lathe of her own.

Elaine tracked the progress of Men's Sheds in the local newspaper. She felt isolated for reasons too complicated to explain here. She had been a long term paid carer but her charge died and that left her suddenly with time on her hands and feeling rather demotivated and down. Neighbours and dog walkers she would meet suggested she go to coffee mornings, WI, U3A but these were not "her".

Elaine attended the open meeting and liked what she heard. She joined up and began to get involved in the "building" of the Shed as a project as well as the use of equipment. Her background in caring allowed her to understand Life took on a much more positive feeling that reflected on Elaine's face as she walked the dog, still crossing paths with other dog walkers. They saw the difference in Elaine, as did Elaine's husband.

None wanted a leadership role as such but as the need became apparent for some management, albeit lightweight, they stepped forward to share increasing responsibility for the Shed. Recently they were happy to be formally recognised as joint Shed Coordinators.

Elaine also began working in another project to establish an allotment on a "mountainside" in Whitby. This too has given her an activity with others she enjoys. Her husband says he has a different wife!

Marie attended the first meeting and the Shed from day 1. She has mobility difficulties but brings great skills in the area of creative crafts. A Londoner by birth, she moved to Whitby from elsewhere



when serious illness stopped her plans to start a new business in their tracks. She came to Whitby as a place she had visited and liked, and as a place where she might curl up and in some ways retreat from pressures.

Marie is a learner. She enjoys attending the craft fairs in Harrogate and Durham where she gets ideas. At the She Shed she can offer those to the other She-Shedders.

We - Betty, Elaine and Marie – are three quite different women. We did not know one another and have different outlooks, but we enjoy working together and with the other She Shedders. They too are very different. One lives in a care home (though is not the normal care home resident), another lost a husband to cancer, followed by a partner a short while ago. She wants to learn skills with tools in the company of others. Another has mobility problems and is brought by her partner, her registered carer. She has to be sedentary, so “new” crafts are her interest- she has taken up rag rugging. Another is young, in sheltered shared housing, who was introduced by her case worker.

We are helping shape an important volunteer support culture that Sheds have. Sheds encourage people to care about each other, help each other and work in flexible small teams on projects of their choice.

We speak for ourselves, but also we believe for the others, when we say the She Shed is a life saver and an initiative that has raised every individuals’ self-esteem and confidence. We have people coming to view the strange concept of a Men’s Shed for women! That all adds interest too.



Whitby Women’s Shed is one of a handful of true Sheds in UK (and an associate member on the map of the UK Men’s Shed Association). We have recently offered our experience to a Men’s Shed in Frome, Somerset which is looking to establish a Women’s Shed. Our advice? To do it like a Men’s Shed in atmosphere and with many of the skills, because it encourages activity which distracts us from some of the day to day concerns we cannot avoid.

Sheds are health tonics for women and for men.

*Elaine Marsh, Marie Keen, Betty Ward, Shed Coordinators
Whitby Women’s Shed*

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