



SHED HEAVEN: Main picture, Bob Hodge, Roger Gould and Malcolm Pickett enjoy a chat outside the chapel. Above, Bob Hodge at work on the sticks. Far left, Mick Jenkins, and, left, enjoying a game of dominoes.

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Way down in the delightful countryside off Blue Bank that leads to Sleights from the North York Moors is the charming hamlet of Littlebeck where a small Methodist chapel has not been sold off, as many country chapels' fate has deemed, continues to hold regular worship and has recently found a new lease of life - as a shed!

This is not the equivalent of a redundant country telephone box being turned into a mini library. It's also not a shed to simply store equipment.

It's a man's shed, or to be totally accurate a men's shed. It's called SAMS - Sleights Area Men's Shed - where men of a certain age who

either feel at somewhat of a loss or simply want to do something constructive with their time and re-engage with blokey banter can do so in beautiful surroundings.

Retired construction industry expert Graham Storer came up with the idea that in the past eighteen months has seen SAMS grow to a team of 25 meeting, working and enjoying the company of others every Tuesday and Thursday.

The chapel is situated on the route of the Coast to Coast walk that sees the 'shedders', as they now refer to themselves acting as brief informal hosts to visitors from all over the world.

"One of the problems men have is that we don't always relate to each other as well as women do," says Graham.

"When my wife and I came here from High Wycombe I felt fairly isolated and many who have been used to working with others in work places all their lives feel that way.

"I was at a bit of a loss and we often say this is for men like that. Sometimes this can be down to having lost their wife or in retirement finding a loss of their sense of purpose.

Men in the shed find new purpose

Project is restoring a sense of community

"Why this might have worked was brought home to me on visiting family in Australia. My grandson and I were in a place called Sale in Victoria.

"We saw these older guys working together in what looked like a large workshop. I found out it was a men's shed.

"This is a big thing over there for men's mental health and considered so important for well being that the Australian government, local authorities and health services have all got behind a project that now sees nearly 2000 across the country.

"Their building are far larger than our home in the back room of the chapel, but it's the people who make the shed work as an entity, not the building.

"There's a phrase that goes 'you don't get given a shed, you build it' and by that the meaning is in building the members, the atmosphere and the aura around the place.

"We have that bucket loads here in Littlebeck."

Wood turning, polishing, wood carving, stick making and IT are just some of the talents show in the chapel - along with neat line in

hospitality repartee with mugs of tea and the occasional sausage sizzle for the long distance travellers.

"This is an amazing place offering a new lease of life for men who perhaps thought their usefulness was gone.

It's already gone way beyond what I had imagined and we are working with more people every week. People are on the whole living longer these days.

"There is so much knowledge, experience, expertise and talent among men who have worked all their lives. SAMS gives the opportunity to express all of that and

somewhere to talk with others of like minds or similar ages."

Dewsbury-born Bob Hodge started his career in the wholesale fruit business in Leeds and worked in the supermarket business in South Africa for 20 years before retiring to Sleights in 2005.

He, Graham and the other main partner, retired teacher Roger Gould, were friends prior to SAMS and have worked together on other social projects. Bob wasn't immune from similar feelings.

"When you've been on the road nearly every day and looked after 50 stores suddenly the retirement comes and you feel cut off.

"When we moved here the only early pleasures I had were walking the dogs. I needed more in life and I knew I had much more to contribute."

Bob is now the SAMS stick maker. He shows fellow shedders how to make them and currently has three outlets where his sticks are sold.

"They're made the traditional way out of hazel and either stag horn, buffalo horn or wood handles. He also takes over when Graham isn't around.

HELPING HANDS

Sleights Area Men's Shed has received support from Coast & Vale Community Action and North Yorkshire County Council. It has had tools donated from local companies in the Whitty area.

There are currently 432 sheds operating in the UK with an average of six opening each month - the latest is a women's shed in Whitty.

"We've had women as shedders at Littlebeck," says Graham. "We have a lady called Paula from Redcar who is, as Keith says, 'a natural wood turner'."

"Teamwork is massively important," says Graham. "If I'm not here Bob will spend time not doing what he wants to do but making sure everyone is okay.

"It's vital because although we have able-bodied men of all ages, including everywhere from a 38-year-old to three boys in their 80s who

are all as fit as a fiddle, we also have two from a care home - a man and a woman.

"One is an old farmer from Egton called Dennis. We encourage him to participate and when one of our Coast to Coast walkers was a farmer from Australia and showed him his cattle on an iPad he became quite animated.

"It was nice to see Dennis having a conversation and that's as important as the crafts."

Retired agricultural engineer Keith Nelliss is another regular who provides his professionalism as a wood turner. It's a role that is bringing about some of the world's more elderly apprentices.

"Keith's so talented. While we approached him to come and he's naturally a very quiet man I know he really gets a lot out of being here. We're delighted he is too."

One of the many kind comments that Graham has received since SAMS started in early 2016 bears out what he felt initially.

"People say 'my dad would have loved this'. We hope many more get to hear of us and come along to our shed."