

# Shepherd's delight

While Victorian shepherds tended their sheep, little did they know that the simple tin or wooden wheeled huts they used as shelter would become the latest garden must-have in generations to come...

Words by Lucy Evans





Above: 'Finding an original old hut laying in a hedgerow is becoming almost a thing of the past now, but you may get lucky,' says David Morris. 'Buying a new build or making a good replica yourself is the most likely route to hut ownership these days.'



*'Originally used as mobile accommodation so the shepherd could follow and tend his flock in remote countryside, these huts are also the perfect project for the keen upcycler'*

From David Cameron to Kate Humble, it seems numerous celebrities have literally jumped on the bandwagon and ordered themselves a shepherd's hut as an extra working space or garden retreat. To be honest, who can blame them. The appeal of these huts is obvious and instant – as they have wheels they usually require no planning permission, they look utterly charming, and they have a myriad of uses. Hanker after an artist's studio? Want a spare room for guests? Need a play area for the kids? A shepherd's hut will surely fit the bill.

Originally used as mobile accommodation so the shepherd could follow and tend his flock in remote countryside, these huts are also the perfect project for the keen upcycler. Although they are becoming increasingly rare to find, it is possible to rescue an original one and restore it to its former glory. David Morris, historian and author

of *Shepherds' Huts and Living Vans*, is an expert, and while researching his book found images in illuminated manuscripts, showing shepherds in wheeled huts dating from the late 1400s and earlier. More recently, he has watched their popularity grow and grow. 'During the 1970s and 80s there were still quite a few huts languishing in fields and hedgerows, or being used as small farm store sheds,' explains David. 'The majority were left to moulder and collapse. By early 2000 when we saved ours, there was still very little interest, but from the early 2000s onwards their popularity has gone from strength to strength.'

If you've found a hut to restore, where do you begin? Before you start, David encourages examining the hut carefully to find out as much as you can about its history. 'So often there are really fascinating details lost in the enthusiasm and overzealous rush to clean, repair, paint and hang the curtains. Learning how to "read" your

hut is an interesting and valuable part of the restoration and research process. Inside on the timber work you will very often find shepherds' names, sheep tallies (the number of sheep or lambs), names of fields, poems, weather references – all often written in pencil and now very faint. Spotting and recording these (and preserving them) is part of the fun and the thrill of investigating an old hut, but I think there is also a sense of responsibility and respect to the old shepherds who used them, to retain these old jottings, to enjoy them, learn from them and be proud to preserve them.

'Many original wood and metal details are often also lost or replaced, because people think they are not savable. Main parts of the hut too are often discarded, when a bit of thought, care and creative thinking could save the original part, keep the hut more original and also save money too!' 🐾





Photograph: Shepherd's Rest Ltd

## Top tips for restoring a shepherd's hut

DAVID MORRIS'S WORDS OF ADVICE FOR ANYONE READY TO TAKE THE PLUNGE

### 1 ASK FOR HELP

Think about your own capabilities and be honest with yourself. There is nothing wrong with seeking the help of engineers and carpenters for advice where you don't have the knowledge yourself. There is nothing worse than having an accident and spoiling a hut because you didn't ask.

delicate condition. Be very careful, jacking, moving, transporting and working on, in or underneath one. Take time to think through the stages of work and to prop and support with proper trestles, stands and jacks that are suitable for the job – again, ask if you are unsure.

### 2 THINK AHEAD OF YOUR HANDS

This is the mantra we use in the workshop. This applies to examining the hut in the hedgerow, transporting it, examining it before work begins and all the time you are working on it. Look, think, examine details, think about solutions, think about safety.

### 4 SECURE THE STRUCTURE

Save good details, but don't compromise the structural strength or safety of the hut. It needs to be strong enough to safely stand on its own four wheels (and be moved) and safe enough for people to get inside. Be sensible and practical.

### 3 GET SUPPORT

Huts can easily weigh 1 ton or more and an old one can often be in shaky,

### 5 BEWARE FIRE HAZARDS

Working with gas flames, welders, grinding wheels, etc. near huts can be a very real fire hazard. Be really careful about this. Huts are often tinder dry, and can catch

fire very quickly. Have a fire extinguisher and buckets of water *at hand*. Please don't wait for your hut to be on fire before you start looking for them! Have someone watching as well, if you are working nearby or on the hut with heat – sometimes fires start in concealed areas (i.e. behind panelling or tin work sheeting).

### 6 HEATPROOF YOUR HUT

If your hut has a stove or if you want to fit one, it's essential you fit a steel plate beneath the stove big enough to shield the heat and catch spilled embers. Also, that the sides of the hut behind the stove and its chimney are heat-guarded too. The aperture through the wall or roof through which the chimney passes must have a proper heatproof chimney sleeve. Without these your hut will be at serious risk of catching fire.



Photograph: Dave Tidman



Above: Chris and Matt restore shepherd's huts for their clients at The Fourpenny Workshop.

### A HELPING HAND

As satisfying as restoring a hut from scratch can be, with the sheer amount of work involved it's good to know there's an alternative for anyone feeling a little daunted. Companies such as The Fourpenny Workshop are able to take on some of the more arduous tasks for you – leaving you to pick and choose which elements you'd like to tackle yourself.

Based in Curdridge, near Southampton in Hampshire, The Fourpenny Workshop is run by Matt Plummer and Chris Tidman. 'I've always had a fascination with shepherd's huts,' says Matt. 'Growing up we used to play in one on the local farm. When I saw a restored one more recently it brought it all back to me – the romance of a stove and a bed – and I thought it looked really cool. So I started buying them as a hobbyist. Chris walked past one day as I was doing up a hut, we got talking, and then worked on it as our first project together.'

Matt and Chris will source huts for customers, supply parts and custom-make them if needed. They can also help and advise when clients are struggling with their own restorations. 'We often help with getting the roofs right – measuring



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Photograph: The Fourpenny Workshop



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the curves – people often buy corrugated iron to do it themselves but it really needs to be worked out first using pen and paper.' It's up to clients how much they do themselves. 'We've often taken things to a certain level then given them back to clients to finish. At the moment we're putting a new set of axles onto a hut for a client, then bringing it back to her so she can get her carpenter to do some work on the inside.'

Sometimes compromises have to be made to strike a balance between authentic restoration and practical use. 'The original huts were very seldom insulated, which has helped them last so long because they didn't sweat,' Matt explains. 'But people do want to insulate them nowadays, which is fine, as long as there's a ventilation gap. You can use anything off the shelf, as long as it's fitted correctly.'

Matt and Chris are currently working on a horse-drawn shepherd's hut from 1840 made by the famous Victorian company Tasker. They are getting it ready to go to The Garden Show at Stansted Park in June. 'We're panicking at the moment but it will look great when it's done!' enthuses Matt. 'When we went to pick up the hut

the tin was holding it together, but when we lifted it to put on the trailer all the axles fell straight off. It has the hugest wheels at the back, over a metre tall, but really small ones at the front – it's got bags of character and is a real rarity!'

As the popularity of shepherd's huts continues to rise, Chris and Matt have even started making replica huts to order. However, their main passion still lies in bringing the classic character of an original hut back to life – and really getting into the nuts and bolts of the process. As Matt says, 'Our catchphrase is we like to do "rustoration" not restoration!'

### FIND OUT MORE

- *Shepherds' Huts and Living Vans* by David Morris is published by Amberley Publishing. You can also visit David's website at [www.pastexperience.co.uk](http://www.pastexperience.co.uk) for conservation and restoration advice.
- Visit [www.thefourpennyworkshop.co.uk](http://www.thefourpennyworkshop.co.uk) for more about Matt and Chris and the work they do, and find them on Facebook at Thefourpennyworkshop and Instagram at the\_fourpenny\_workshop.