

Selected notes from the United Kingdom Shedfest – Brian Sawyer

Robert Goluch and I were sponsored to attend the UK Association's 10-year anniversary celebration of Shedding – 300 attendees from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales enjoyed displays, presentations, the AGM, the networking over meals and the requisite post-Shedfest pub analyses. Past President **John Latchford** graciously spent a couple of days driving us straight from the airport to visit four Sheds, the UK Association Board meeting and the Shedfest celebration in Gloucester. We met with UK sponsors, association staff (including Chief Officer **Charlie Bethel**, shown here, who affably hosted us for the event), the Board of Trustees, long time volunteers and many Shedders. I came away impressed with their association's level of professionalism and inspired by their success (1,100 active Sheds in 10 years) to apply some of their learnings to our Canadian Shed 'movement'. Most of the learnings about organizational development are too dry to list here, but I had some interesting personal interactions and observations I can share, in no particular order:



UK Shedders share the same values as Canadian Shedders. I visited five Sheds and found the men to be welcoming, enthusiastic about gathering regularly for their shared interests, proud of their accomplishments and happy to be part of a thriving and purposeful Shed community. Every Shed was unique, and many were successfully 'sponsored' by local charities.

The value of a national website. **Mike Jenn**, founder of UKMSA 10 years ago, emphasized the importance of the website even in the beginning – an essential source for distributing information, providing common resources to help start Sheds, sharing knowledge acquired from the cumulative experiences of Shedders, and celebrating their successes and learnings. Mike continues to volunteer as one of the UK Ambassadors.

Their Ambassador Program is a key outreach tool for starting new Sheds. **Patrick Abrahams** (Ambassador) and **Rachel Meadows** (Volunteer Manager) shared their experiences with having experienced volunteer Ambassadors reach out to connect with community leaders about the value of having Sheds in their communities, to recruit and support new Shed leaders, to encourage 'shared leadership' of Sheds once underway, to stay in contact as a resource only for as long as needed. *Their key advice was that Sheds grow best by 'osmosis' and mentoring.*

The importance of ongoing and coordinated fund-raising. UKMSA is funded by 8 Trusts/Foundation and supported by 7 corporate sponsors. The funding is critical for salaries of a few key staff who support daily operations, financial management, communications, community engagement, partnerships and Shed membership. **Hannah Warner** (Fundraising Manager) gave a presentation on the challenges and benefits of quantifying the 'value case' for Sheds as community benefits/assets, to attract and maintain funding from public and private partners. **Frank Tiller** (Funding Officer) serves Sheds directly as an experienced resource for finding Shed grant opportunities and completing grant applications in their specific regions.

The value of having a Board comprised of experts in diverse fields. The UK Board of Trustees are 12 individuals from a range of professional backgrounds – only half are Shedders and three are female. Their diversity of expertise and depth of experience on the Board is considered an asset in responding strategically to a range of organizational opportunities and challenges. The Chair, **Rob Loyd**, is not a Shedder but is keen on raising the profile of Men's Shed values, goals and benefits for recognition in national public health discussions. The UK Trustees, overseeing a relatively mature organization with staff to manage operational responsibilities, are more of a 'governing' Board than the MSC Board, which is 'operational'.

UKMSA has an official 'Patron'. **Chirs Fisher** is the UK's first (and maybe only) accredited blind woodturner, amazingly. He gave an inspiring talk on the benefits of being part of a 'maker community', the value of Sheds to meet and be creative and his own personal struggle to overcome the challenges of oncoming blindness. He emphasized the importance of staying engaged and connected with his community through the website and through in person events like Shedfest.



Their AGM illustrated that we share some common values and challenges. They recognized their volunteers as a critical element of the movement (they had a big recognition event earlier this year). They shared the results of a 'Thousand Faces' survey of Shedders which validated the positive wellness impact of Sheds on their members. Treasurer **David Webber** shared that most funding comes with strict controls on how funds are allocated to specific programs, and that there are no year-to-year guarantees on funding levels. He also noted that a national insurance policy was investigated and found to be impractical – Sheds are so independent, and conditions are so variable that a policy to cover them all would be either too generic or too expensive. Instead, the UK association recommends known/trusted insurers to Sheds.

The Shedders we met were inspiring and I wish we could have talked longer. Way too many to list here, but the commonality was that they were turning their Shed spaces – whether a bay in a commercial strip mall, or storage containers bolted together, or an unused Scout Hall or a dilapidated 200-year-old church being restored – into welcoming spaces brimming with tools and wood shavings and



the required tea/coffee pot. If there wasn't room for big pieces of equipment, they put them on wheels for outdoor use. They were all good at dismantling old pallets with crowbars and planing the rough planks into useable boards, seeing as wood is scarce in England! At left is **Ian Lloyd-Oswell** from Evesham Shed, using his grandfather's carving tools to teach younger guys some new skills. On the right is **Bob Allison** (Cirencester Shed Chair, second from left) and fellow Shedders posing with their planer and a pallet about to be 'repurposed'.



Jason Burke, Secretary of Hounslow Shed points out some details the church they are refurbishing as a Shed – an amazing story of how a vintage car enthusiast group who had met for 25 years evolved into a Shed who are not only renovating a historical building (and turning the mortuary next door into restaurant) for their own purposes but are using their facility upgrade work and technical skills to inspire other community groups and nearby Sheds; they have garnered support and sponsorship from the nearby airport, a hospital, a car dealership, and the National Lottery Fund. Talk about community engagement!



All in all the Shedfest and Shed visits were inspiring and useful. We saw firsthand how a mature and successful national Shed Association conducts its business in supporting Sheds and has set an ambitious goal of influencing national health policy to garner more government support for Shedders. We met many Shedders who benefited from the associations support on the road to becoming self-supporting Sheds, who could then mentor other start-up Sheds. UKMSA has offered to continue their support for Men's Sheds Canada as needed. We have invited **Patrick Abrahams** to participate on our Research Committee and **Rachel Meadows** to share best practices from their Ambassador program. Hopefully we can benefit more from their experience as we grow into our Canadian version of the Shed movement.