

A Cool Splitty called Ethel

Chris Jiggins achieves his childhood dream of owning a classic VW before a near-death experience means starting over. From window-fitter to local artist in a campervan...

WORDS & PHOTOS Mike Trippitt

Chris Jiggins sits down at a table in a farmyard watched closely by a horse. It neighs gently – they've known each other a long time. The 42-year-old artist, Essex born and bred, comes here often, for it is where he stores his paintings and his VW Split screen called 'Ethel'.

"I've loved them ever since I was a child," he says of the VW Splitties. "I have always thought they are the most beautiful thing on the road."

Although Chris was 37 years old when he bought Ethel, his first campervan, it wasn't his first experience of camping: "My brother had a Bay-window when we were 18. That started the camping-out thing; getting out with the boys and having a good time! I like travelling and love the idea of being able to move around freely."

The right bus

When the time came, he had a clear idea of what he wanted to buy: "I was looking for a 15-window one. I had to have a 15-window because I only had a certain amount to spend and knew I would never be able to get the 23-window version! I love the curved windows on the back of this model."

But with German-built 1960s 15-window

Kombis fetching prices beyond Chris' reach, he knew what he could afford would be rare. He found one in the UK and bought it for £11,000. He admits that its history is a little hazy: "It's come from Uruguay. It was registered with the Split Screen Van Club as a 1965 for some reason, but we know it to be a 1970s Fleetline."

Chris' van had been imported by the seller to use as a wedding vehicle. It had a cream exterior with red leather front seats and a rock 'n' roll bed when Chris agreed to buy it, but that wasn't all...

"There was a cabinet against the back of the front seats and a display cabinet that had hydraulics in, which popped a bottle of champagne and glasses out!" says Chris. Not what he wanted.

Making the changes

Ask Chris what work he's had done to Ethel and he'll say: "I pimped it! That's what I did." He laughs and adds: "I made her beautiful!"

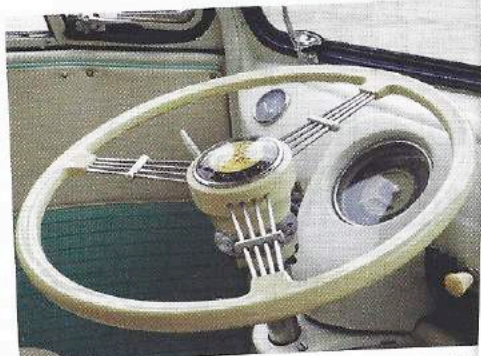
The seller (a vehicle restorer) resprayed the vehicle to Chris' requirements. When he'd first driven the vehicle he had been so disappointed by the steering – "it drove like a boat" – that he questioned whether he actually did want one after all. But he had



the Red 9 Design front suspension system installed, and the steering completely changed. "Now it drives stunningly; like driving a real car. Brilliant."

But the real changes came when Chris upgraded the interior. He knew a local joiner who had done work at the farmhouse, so asked whether he would make a good-quality interior at a reasonable cost. The joiner agreed.

Chris has always loved the original Devon conversions, so, with some research, came up with a design close to the original Devon layout. "I wasn't religious about it," says Chris. The design, which took four months to build and install, was changed "in some ways for the better"



Who wouldn't enjoy driving with this steering wheel?



The iconic and beautiful VW front headlamps



Chris Jiggins

Base vehicle 1975 (approx.!) VW T2 Fleetline, named Ethel

Owned since April 2013

Drive Rear-wheel drive

Engine VW 1600cc petrol engine

Power 50bhp

Economy 25mpg

Top speed 60 mph

Gearbox 4-speed manual

Travel seats 3

Berths 3

Equipment Red 9 Design front suspension system, start button ignition, two leisure batteries, modern USB ports, gas bottle and BBQ. That's it – sometimes less is more!

Insurance £250

COSTS SO FAR

The van	£11,000
Amount spent to date	£15,000
Total costs to date	£26,000

CHECK OUT CHRIS' ARTWORK AT

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from the original. "I wasn't worried about that," he says. And he was right not to worry. Ethel's quality oak interior is a real feature with storage in abundance. New panel linings and oatmeal upholstery complement the wood, giving a light, airy feel. Chris chose not to fit a galley kitchen, preferring instead to cook and wash up outdoors.

After five years, Chris is realistic about Ethel's mechanical reliability, describing it as typical of a bus of her age. He says that when you buy an old bus "the bills start off in their thousands. Then they dwindle down to five hundred and you end up at a couple of hundred. This year she's been MoT'd and had a new starter motor. To be fair, the last two or three years haven't been that bad."

Life changes

With the bus complete, Chris and partner, Natalie, used it for weekend camping trips in East Anglia, where they live. But their lives took an unexpected turn in February 2017 when Chris suffered a major stroke. It came out of the blue. "I remember coming home from work. I was shattered. I knew there was something wrong with me all day. I was tired. I got home and said to Nat that I was going to bed. How long I was there, I can't remember. I fell out of bed. Either I'd tried to get out of bed and had already stroked or stroked when I was on the floor."

Natalie called an ambulance. Chris remembers hearing a paramedic say that he thought he'd had a stroke and thinking that it

didn't sound good. The next he remembers was being in hospital.

"I don't remember becoming conscious. I remember becoming conscious of being conscious. I never took what happened on board. I've always thought 'I can beat it, I can deal with it.' I thought we'd sort it out. In terms of the severity of the stroke, my lead consultant in hospital said that I shouldn't be here. The stroke was that bad. It's an absolute miracle that I am alive."

Chris had lost the use of his right side and spent weeks in hospital, and had months of rehabilitation. With determination he fought his way back. Ethel the bus became a focus.

"Obviously you face things like 'Am I going to be able to drive?' 'Am I going to be

able to walk?' I started to make plans as I went along. My driving licence was a big part of that. I thought 'I need to be able to drive my bus.' I didn't care about my car and I couldn't care less about getting back in the work van I used to drive when I was a window fitter!"

Getting his driving licence back in May 2018 was one of a number of significant steps. He says: "I always likened them to stepping stones. The first stepping stone was coming to terms with someone being in the room when I was having a shower. I thought 'This isn't happening for long'. I asked my rehabilitation team if I could walk around the courtyard at the hospital. I just thought I needed to get out. So I walked round and round the courtyard and went from walking around the courtyard to walking around my local park, which is the size of half a football pitch. Round and round. I was pushing myself all the time."

Chris remembers thinking that if he was going to keep his year-old son, Parker, safe, he would need to be able to carry him upstairs. "So that was one of my first targets. I can do that now," he says.

"Because of the stroke, life has really, really slowed down. I talk slower than I used to, I move slower. I'm happy being not so rushed around. There is no pressure in life."

"Before, because we worked so hard, our lives were just rushing around, never stopping. You're not really taking much notice of what you want out of life."

So Chris looked at what he wanted to do with life. He turned to the subject that had occupied his childhood and his school and college years: art.

Art is cool

He says his grandfather taught him to draw during countless Sunday visits to his grandparents: "My grandad was my hero. He was such a funny man and so charismatic. He was so cool. I love the word cool, but I think it is overused. When someone is cool, it's inside them.



Best trip

I love going away with the family and my son Parker absolutely loves Ethel! The best trip this year was with my eldest son, Rhys. Big boys trips away are always a good laugh, and all my crew have Volkswagens!

My grandad was so cool." He says that art is cool, then smiles and says: "The van is cool!"

His grandad kept Chris interested and through showing him how to draw and paint, rather than telling him how, brought out Chris' own ability. Painting was, and still is, "an escape," says Chris: "I was one of those people at college who knew he'd got work to do for months, but would leave it until two or three days before I'd got to do it! I'd turn the lights off and sit there with one lamp on and 'leave myself'. The only thing was my hand and a piece of paper."

Such escapism remains important and, during his recovery in hospital, art gave Chris something to think about: "There was a couple of nurses who were Ed Sheeran fans, so I sketched Ed Sheeran and gave it to the team as a thank you. I got some good feedback from doctors who came up to me

and said it was brilliant, it really lifted me.

Since his return home and through his recovery, Chris has painted regularly, exhibiting and selling his work from his campervan at local fairs and exhibitions. He won his first competition back in February.

Since the summer, Chris has been on the road in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. Ethel certainly gets attention: "The 'van is a double-edged sword. People come up and say 'Like your 'van, mate'' even though they do not buy my work." But he says that he likes the fact that he drives a Volkswagen bus to work!

Still a family camper

Chris' van remains a family camper. "This year we've done really well. I work at my discretion, and my partner, who works for a charity, has a couple of days off in the week.

So we have Thursday to Sunday free, and we have it in our heads to take advantage of that.

Parker, who is now two-and-a-half years old, has made a difference: "Now I've got a little son, he makes it even more worth having. He loves it. Camping is an adventure for a little boy."

Chris plans to continue painting and exhibiting his work from his campervan in towns and local fairs: "I like the painting as much as I enjoy the driving, meeting people and selling my art. My main aim is just to keep my hand in. Natalie and I agree that some things just happen in life, so we'll see what comes up."



The curved rear windows that Chris fell in love with



The old-fashioned gear and brake levers... and modern stereo!



'Tractor in oily field' Copyright, Chris Jiggins