



Shop tour

CAMBRIDGE CAMPERVANS

An established, family-run business specialising in converting T5 and T6 Transporters. Let's see what they're all about shall we?

Words & Pics: Mike Trippitt



"Our neighbours were lovely," says Lizzie Reeve, recalling the days when husband Paul first set up Cambridge Campervans. "They used to say we could use their driveway when they were away. We were in a cul-de-sac, and at one point one summer holiday every driveway had one of our Vans on it."

Lizzie has vivid memories of those formative years, when Paul ran the VW Campervan conversion business from home: "I'd be cooking Sunday lunch and we would have customers sitting around the table. The kids would be haring around with toys. It was all a bit chaotic."

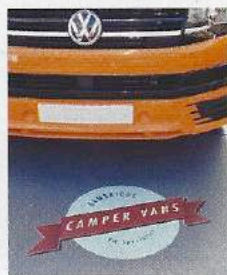
In less than a decade Cambridge Campervans has grown into a company employing six staff at





▲ Just your typical Cambridge Campervans interior

▶ Only one of these Buses is for sale, but both would brighten up any driveway



bed, wardrobe, table and electric hook up. There are two berths in the pop-top, which still has the original fabric. The 1600cc original engine has been overhauled and the gear selector replaced. Paul also had new steering bushes fitted. There was lots of play in the steering giving rise to the common observation that it "drove like a boat."

Now Paul and Lizzie use their Camper for weekends away with their two sons, as well as to go to festivals. They've been to Busfest a number of times. But it has been used for special occasions as well, especially weddings.

Lizzie says: "We tie helium balloons on the handles on the passenger doors and shut the balloons in. The driver gets out, opens those doors and all the balloons come out. Then the girls get out in their dresses. It looks good."

The Bay, re-sprayed in its original VW factory colours, gleams under Cambridge Campervans' showroom lights. It is pristine, and inevitably a big draw. Customers often ask whether it is for sale.

"It's not going anywhere," says Paul. "I just love it. It is one of those things that once you have got one you don't sell them. It is part of the family."

Alongside the Bay a Cambridge Campervans conversion awaits a new owner. Its metallic paint, large tailgate, alloy wheels, chrome sidebars and modern look contrast with its distant relative. Paul says it is typical of their vehicles.

"We do a lot of the 102 bhp Highlines, and we do a lot of 150 bhp DSGs. We like to use RIB beds, a pop-top roof from Austops, Smev

its showroom in central Cambridgeshire and at its newly acquired workshop close by. Paul says it developed from his work selling commercial vehicles.

"We've always liked VWs having bought and sold them. We did this part-time to make a little bit of money and it has grown massively." He says they now sell 150 Campervans a year.

Paul admits that they "were not really campers." Lizzie worked for an airline, so holidays abroad were the norm for the Reeve family. But five years ago they began their own Campervanning journey when they bought a 1976 Bay Window.

"It was very rough," says Paul. "There's a bit of a story to it." He says it had been owned by Mark Watts of Madmatz, the VW specialists in Northamptonshire to whom Paul subcontracts work, before it was sold to someone else.

"It sat rotting in a garden before we bought it. We've had it all done up. Mark did quite a lot of the work for us, but Lizzie chose it all."

The interior has been re-fitted to a modern high standard. There's a fridge, hob, rock 'n' roll

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▲ Paul and Lizzie's Bay has all the mod cons

► Room for three and beverages

◀ Another conversion gets under way

hob, grill and sink, and usually a Waeco fridge." He says that heating is an optional extra, though air-conditioning is standard. Whilst a typical stock vehicle will have metallic paint, Paul says they also do retro two-tone versions in original VW colours. Most now are T6s, but some older T5s are still converted.

Outside the showroom in a purpose-built preparation bay, forecourt manager Carl Golding sits putting the finishing touches to a T5 that's already sold. "Carl's been with us 20 years," says Paul. "He prepares vehicles for customers, including putting new wheels and side bars on and swivel seats in."

All staff, including Carl, are trained in sales, so there's always someone on site to help customers with their enquiries. With six staff, two of which work full-time in the workshop, Cambridge Campervans offer buyers a number of options. Some conversions, from the installation of elevating roofs, fitting of windows and building of internal cabinets, are carried out in their own workshops by skilled converters Matt and Greg.

But Paul says they also contract some of that work to both Campervanz in Worksop and Madmatz in Kettering. All are completed on site at the company's showroom. Consequently, says Paul: "The customer has a full choice of wood colours, different beds and slightly different lay-outs."

Paul says that about fifty percent of their conversions are to brand new vehicles although they offer a range of ages back to a 2010 plate. In the



summer months, vehicles are built to order, but by November they are able to build vehicles for stock. He says that ordering a new vehicle from VW takes 16 weeks, but he adds: "If it's a vehicle we can pull in from somewhere we can usually turn them round in six weeks."

Cambridge Campervans are not the only VW converter in Cambridgeshire: there are two others close by, and although they are in direct competition Paul and Lizzie say it works "massively" for them. Lizzie says: "We are well situated because we are on a lot of main routes," and she adds that people visit the area knowing there is more than one converter to come and see.

Lizzie is also behind Cambridge Campervans hire vehicle operation: "The reason we did it in the first place was because I had always worked. Up to four years ago I was cabin crew, but we got busier so I came to work with Paul. When I came to work as part of the company I wanted something that was mine. So I started the hire business; it was my little baby. I look after it, and it works for us."

It works for customers too. Half of those who hire go on to buy a Cambridge Campervan, and when they do, fifty percent of the hire cost is refunded. Paul says that as well as camping in the Bay, they take their own hire vehicles on family holidays to Cornwall:



"Because we use them we know what works."

The couple also believe they know their customers and the Campervan market. They say they often see people buying a Camper from a pension lump sum to use in retirement. Many customers use inherited money to treat themselves. Lizzie says it is pleasing to see "people putting money into something nice out of something sad."

But they have no doubt that the growth in the Campervan industry is customer driven. The events of 9/11 and other terrorist incidents have, says Lizzie, "started to sow a seed in people's minds about where they want to spend their holiday time."

"The way the economy has gone, and with Brexit, people would much rather invest their money in something they deem to be safe or a good idea, and can make a decision about where to take it at the last minute. It's all about clean living, the outdoor life and memory-making," she says with a smile.

▲ Most customers upgrade to 20-inch alloys

▶ Carl adding some finishing touches to a customers T6

◀ New meets old

