

By George!

When it came to swapping boat life for vanlife, only a VW would do for Mike and Clare...

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On 27 April 1947 when Dutch motor importer, Ben Pon, sketched a simple design and scribbled succinctly in his notebook, he could not have imagined the seismic revolution that would follow as it is over 70 years since VW began production of its T2 van based on Pon's original design. The sixties embraced the Veedub and, ever since, it has symbolised the open road, free spirit and a hint of rebellion. It's still synonymous with the campervan, too. In fact, so strong is the link between VW and the campervan in my and wife, Clare's eyes that, when we purchased our 'van, we considered no other make. But were we right?

A frank appraisal of how we would use a campervan led us to a T6 and, specifically, to Needingworth Campers in Cambridgeshire, being close to where we live, although I still gaze wistfully at the classic Splittys and Bays at shows and festivals!

When we collected our Camper King Retro Trek, we immediately broke with a 20-year tradition. Clare and I love sailing and have sailed on many boats over the years. But each one was a lady, the entire world refers to ships as 'she'. Strange, then, that we thought the world of campervans was different. We decided that our camper would be a boy, and we named him George.

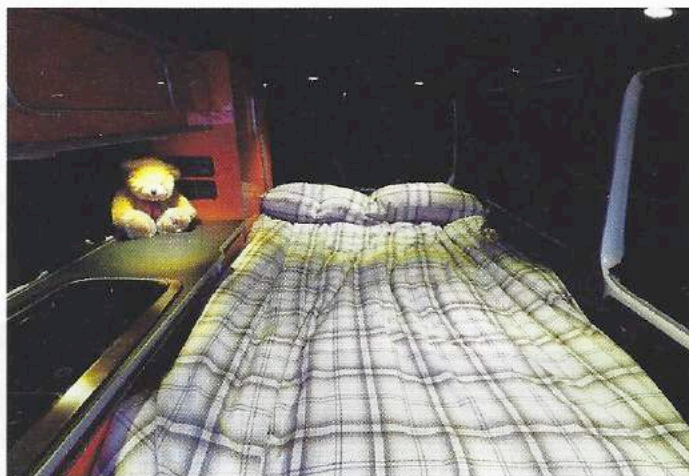
Before Camper King began the

conversion, we looked over and drove the white ex-rental panel van from which our camper would be made. It had been something of a leap of faith deciding to buy a 'van that would be newly converted from a used vehicle. A brand-new VW was over our budget, but this van was in surprisingly good order. It had just 10,000 on the clock, and its cab was free of marks and scratches.

Three years on, that George's chassis and shell were not new when he was converted is immaterial, but his pristine looks, lack of cosmetic and mechanical imperfections when we bought him and the conversion were important. That gave us great confidence, and led to an instant bond.



Clare & Mike



Base vehicle 2016 VW T6 Transporter Highline

Conversion type Camper King Retro Trek supplied by Needingworth Campers

needingworthcampers.com

Owned since April 2017

Engine 2-litre TDI Euro 6 diesel

Power 102 bhp

Economy 38mpg

Gearbox 5-speed manual

Travel seats 4

Berths 4

Leisure battery 2 x 100Ah

Length x width x height 4.90m x 1.95m x 2.05m

Equipment Base vehicle: air-conditioning, Bluetooth, DAB radio, parking sensors. Conversion equipment: Dometic fridge, combined sink and hob, grill, RIB bed, electric hook-up/230V, inboard water tank, battery charger, two solar panels

Insurance £451 (with Safeguard)

COSTS SO FAR

The campervan.....	£40,000
Awning	£500
Solar panels.....	£1,000
Total costs to date	£41,500

George's two-tone orange and white make him stand out in a crowd. We often hear a complimentary "Great van!" as people walk by. We chose orange units inside for a retro look. George typifies the link between the past and the present.

After a year, we headed to Dorset for our second holiday in him. Glorious weather and the spectacular Jurassic coastline combined to give us a memorable break. That week was a significant step on our campervan journey, too.

First, we'd just had solar panels installed retrospectively. For four consecutive nights, we had no electric hook-up, but the panels kept the batteries charged admirably.

The fridge performed well, and our tablets and mobiles were never far from fully charged. Were we to buy a new campervan in the future, we would specify solar panels from the outset. They're proving to be a great addition to George's inventory.

That holiday was also important because we visited the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu. I was disappointed that only one campervan was on display and, to my surprise, it was not a Veedub. The museum's 1964 Commer three-quarter tonne 'van converted by Auto-Sleepers looked handsome in white and blue. Its woodwork and soft furnishings defied its age. Most importantly, it was a stark reminder, at least

for me and Clare, that there is, and always has been, more to campervans than VWs.

Since then, when we go to campervan shows, not only do we compare George to other VW conversions, we judge him against other makes of vehicle. I'm sure that if the need to replace George arose, Clare and I would approach the task differently to how we bought him. We would look at VWs and other makes with an open mind. But, for now, we remain in the happy position of not having seen a short-wheelbase conversion that we would swap George for.

Having said that, our understanding of the campervan market has increased enormously since we bought him.

Back then, in our minds, there were two kinds of leisure vehicle: motorhomes and campervans. Motorhomes were for retired people seeking to spend their summers touring Europe, whilst campervans were for younger, more active couples wanting to express their free spirits. In truth, there are no such stereotypes, nor is the divide between motorhomes and campervans so black and white. We knew that motorhomes come in various lengths and some are wider than others but hadn't realised that the same is true of campervans.

Now, when we compare George to Fiat Ducato-sized conversions, for example, it is difficult to say which vehicle comes out on top. The shorter wheelbase scores highly when parking, as does the pop-top's lower profile. However, there's no denying the greater storage in the bigger vehicles, and the rear lounges look positively cavernous compared to George's compact interior!

It is only when we look at how we use George, where we take him and where we keep him, that the choice would be easy were we to replace him. Our home has just two modest parking spaces, so a larger vehicle would need to be stored elsewhere. We've always had two cars but, when we bought George, we decided to keep just one and use the camper as our second vehicle. As we use him for work, to nip to the shops and to get around, he needs to be at home.

Once we began camping, George's fitness for purpose was confirmed. We were never going to embark on extended tours, or head for distant, overseas locations.

The coasts, lanes and countryside of Norfolk and Suffolk are where we thought George would spend most of his time. And we were right.

Whether we head east or elsewhere in



A fabulous week on the Jurassic Coast, Dorset, in the heatwave of 2018!



the UK for weekends and holidays, we make a point of keeping away from motorways and major roads, preferring instead to follow lanes meandering through the countryside where we can.

Clare keeps a road atlas especially for George, and marks the routes we have travelled with a highlighter pen. It means we can find great driving roads again if we want to return to them. It also helps keep our memories alive, as does George's travel journal in which we record every journey.

After 20,000 miles, George has lived up to our expectations, and being brutally honest, so have we. We don't wild camp,

nor do we head off on a Friday not knowing where we will pitch up. We always pre-book sites, having learned from our boating days that there is nothing more stressful at the end of a day than being unable to find somewhere to moor.

But, with electric hook-up, a simple fan heater, and very cosy screen covers, George is a comfortable, warm and well-appointed space for weekends and holidays, whatever the weather, and whenever or wherever we go. We use him all year round, and have met some great people. We've also seen some great places. Long may it continue!



The tailgate open, fully loaded with luggage



Me, chilling inside with a book