

GET PRACTICAL...

with Deputy Editor Rachel Stothert



I've never owned a toolbox, but maybe I'm going to have set up a basic kit for when I'm using test motorhomes. In one recent test 'van, the cassette blind came away from the wall whilst I was

trying to close it one night. Whether or not I'm a bit ham-fisted is not up for debate (although that's one thing I have inherited from my father: the ability to break things). Fortunately, Dave Hurrell was on hand with his BIG box of tools to get me out of that particular scrape...

All of which made me wonder what the minimum toolkit to take away would be? And that's where you come in. Do you rely on gaffer tape and a Swiss Army Knife to get you through everything? What is the one essential tool you never leave home without?

As I cannot carry a road test editor with a full box of tools with me wherever I go, I'd like your help to create the ultimate motorhome repair kit and be prepared for most eventualities. Even though I am a girl, I'm willing to have a go at anything and have a very logical approach to fixing things.

And now for what your Practical MMM has in store for you this month: one reader fitted extra three-point seatbelts to accommodate an ever-increasing family. Dave Robinson had a proper frame support made up to take the belts, to allow his daughter, her husband and their three young children to use the 'van for holidays.

Where size matters in the opposite direction, Barrington Weekes manages to squeeze a comfortable two-berth motorhome into a micro-camper shell.

Knowing what you go through when designing your own motorhomes, I thought it would be eye opening to see how a manufacturer does things. Thus, I headed for Auto-Sleepers, who will be launching a new model this month, to find out exactly what goes into the design process.

Also look out this month for the Clubs list in our Services and Supplies directory. Clubs play an invaluable part in the support network for motorhome owners, as the wealth of experience and know-how that club members have is often unparalleled. Why not tap into it and have some fun along the way as well?

Rachel Stothert

FROM PAPER TO METAL: PART ONE

What does a manufacturer do with a new idea? What is involved in moving a new motorhome from concept to production?

I visited Auto-Sleepers in a search for some answers. This month: the design process.

The light bulb moment happened just after the NEC show in February this year. Auto-Sleepers used the show as an opportunity to talk to customers and dealers about the current 'vans and any gaps in the range.

Feedback indicated that customers were on the hunt for smaller, more manoeuvrable motorhomes, which got the company thinking. The subject was discussed at one of the weekly design review meetings for developing any ideas and new models.

These project development meetings involve discussion of all models currently under review and any new models, ranging from a simple decision to change the curtains or tweak a layout to the development of a whole new model. There are about 20 motorhomes under review at any one time.

For each model there is a job list with staff names against the individual tasks.

One of the key minds belongs to sales manager Dave Clarkson. At only 43, Dave has been with the company for 25 years, starting on the factory floor and moving into parts, then through the company to his current position. So what he doesn't know about Auto-Sleepers you could probably fit on a stamp.

Dave has quarterly dealer meetings, from which ideas can also come. With a small network and close relationships, there is regular contact with dealers, who are essentially part of the Auto-Sleepers family. Working closely with the loyal Auto-Sleepers Owners Club (ASOC), Auto-Sleepers can also call upon the experience of long-time owners to help develop and test their products.

Brian Cross is the Product Development Manager, working with the research and development and design teams to produce CAD drawings. But that is just the beginning of the development process. Designs are sent to the prototype shop where a small team of experienced motorhome builders creates the shell according to the CAD diagrams.

Once the provisional furniture has been installed, the design is then re-examined to see if it is practical. With the project I was allowed to observe, the key was to find out if the kitchen protruded too much into the sliding doorway and if the washroom was practical, and...

After the mocked-up furniture has gone in and the decisions have been made, the mouldings and furniture are fabricated properly, with the 'van still in the prototype shop. The equipment and all the fittings are installed



properly and all the furniture is made on site. There was actually a washroom moulding being shaped while I was at the factory.

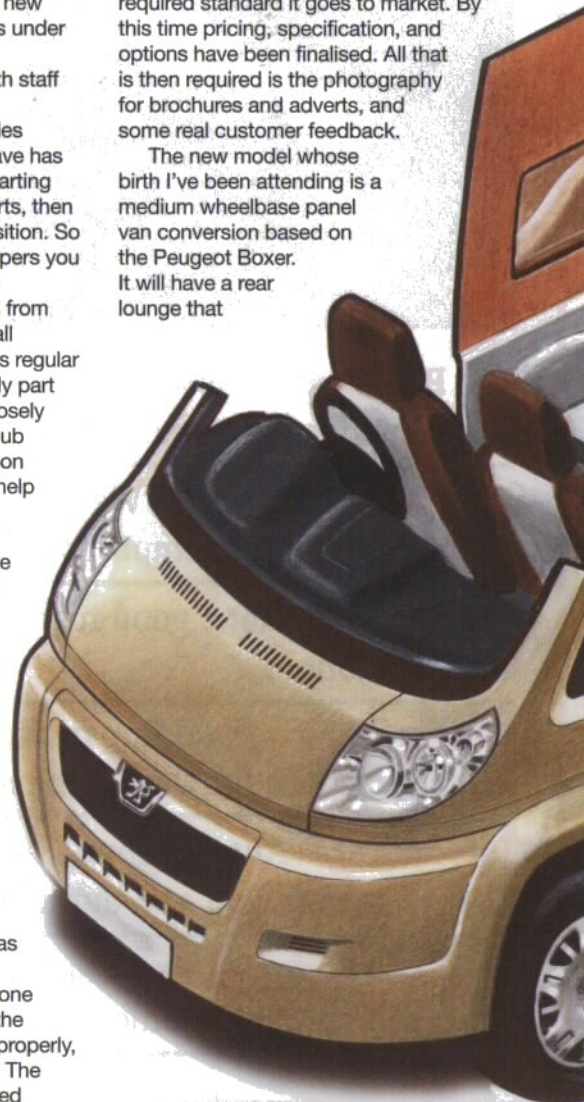
Once the prototype has been finished, the vehicle is tested and this is where ASOC comes in. Auto-Sleepers often supplies owners club members with a prototype to take away - to see what works, what creaks and what doesn't work.

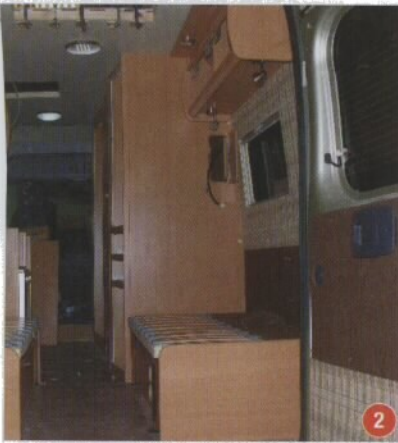
If the problems are insurmountable, Auto-Sleepers would prefer to restart the whole project. However, this doesn't happen often and normally small tweaks will do the trick.

Once a prototype has been finished to the required standard it goes to market. By this time pricing, specification, and options have been finalised. All that is then required is the photography for brochures and adverts, and some real customer feedback.

The new model whose birth I've been attending is a medium wheelbase panel van conversion based on the Peugeot Boxer.

It will have a rear lounge that





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makes into a double and an amidships kitchen opposite the washroom.

This model is due to be available as a standard Auto-Sleeper and initially as a Marquis County special edition, both based on the Peugeot.

Next month I'll be visiting Auto-Sleepers again to follow the production process.



HOWARD

- 1 The 'van stays in the prototype shop for as long as it needs to
- 2 This is the 'van with the furniture installed. All it needs now is a finished washroom
- 3 Constructing one of the mouldings to tailor-make GRP panels for the washroom

DEAL WITH DISCOVER

Many of you have contacted us with regards to the recent, and sudden, closure of certain Discover branches. We contacted the company, specifically to find out what happens to customers who have warranty agreements, deposits, and outstanding orders at the closed branches

Trevor Parker, Chief Executive of Discover Leisure PLC said:

'Whilst we are currently enjoying positive trade at the start of the high season, external economic pressures are such that at this time, like any business, we cannot continue trading from non-profit making branches. National Caravan Council statistics continue to report that the overall market is significantly reduced and as a result, simply cannot sustain the current level of retail outlets and difficult decisions must be made. By reducing store numbers in line with current market capacity, this should give optimism to the remaining sites that will have greater potential to thrive.'

'Though regrettable, the decision to close our smaller branches gives stability to the company and puts Discover in a better position to ride out the current recession and protect further jobs.'

'Site closures and redundancies are always regrettable and a difficult decision especially as we have a loyal and hard working team. A number of employees however are staying with the business for a short period to ensure all customers are contacted, services or repairs completed or alternative arrangements made from elsewhere in the group.'

'With regards outstanding orders, we are very much working with what each individual customers wants. We are offering their full deposit back, collection of the vehicle they have ordered from our Coppull or Darlington branch or, where they want the vehicle but do not wish to purchase it from us, we are working with our manufacturer partners to source alternative franchised dealers who can both fulfil the order and ongoing servicing on behalf of the customer.'

'Any new vehicle recently purchased will of course still be covered by your manufacturer warranty who will be able to advise of the nearest service providers. Any used vehicle recently purchased from us with our 6Star Guarantee obviously includes AA protection providing essential cover for used vehicles not covered by the manufacturer. This includes mechanical breakdown cover and roadside recovery as outlined in the policy booklet and all features will be honoured. The contact numbers for the AA are included in the booklet along with further guidance.'

'Discover will continue trading through our remaining outlets and via our online shop, though we do understand that geographical constraints on existing customers visiting our remaining stores may cause inconvenience or disappointment and we sincerely apologise to any customer who may be adversely affected.'

Customers with queries should visit www.discover.co.uk/info