

# This is not a pub

As pubs across Britain continue to close at a frightening rate, Kyle MacNeill meets the landlords taking matters into their own gardens

PHOTOGRAPHY:  
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**T**hey're like pubs, but built in people's back gardens..." Driving through sedate Andover, I start telling Brad – our taxi driver – about our wet-your-whistle-stop tour of the UK's pub sheds. He cuts me off. "I know what they are," he says, wide-eyed. "I've got one."

Pubs are closing down at an alarming rate. Earlier this summer, a Campaign for Real Ale (Camra) study found that, around Britain, 18 are shutting their doors every week. "Right now we are at the end game of 'Proper British Pubs'. They're a dying breed," says J Mark Dodds, founder of the Fair Pint, Fair Deal For Your Local, and Protect Pubs campaigns.

Dodds believes there's a keg-sized number of reasons for these closures. For starters, young people simply don't drink as much as previous generations. Add that to nationwide trends such as urbanisation, regeneration and gentrification, and you end up with a landscape increasingly devoid of traditional community boozers. And of those that survive – for now – Dodds paints a tragic picture: "[Many] pubs are run-down, tired, lacklustre," he says. Though not through any fault of their own, necessarily, but often due to "tied leases, which force tenants to buy beer from the pub company at twice what they would pay if they were able to direct from the

brewery." This leads to rising prices for consumers, fewer customers and, well, you get the idea. It's a circle as unappealing as a table-etched ring of stale beer.

But it's not all doom and gloom for boozing in Britain, because while pubs are being demolished, pub sheds are being erected all over the country, assembled by mavericks ready to build their dream free house.

The concept is simple. Anyone can – without planning permission – build a shed that's up to four metres high, two metres away from all fences, and doesn't take up more than half of the land around their house. You can't get a licence to sell alcohol,

**"MY FRIEND AND I WERE IN MY SUMMERHOUSE. I GOT SOME PAINT AND BODGED IT TOGETHER"**



but you can give it out for free and ask for donations, if your mates aren't too stingy. That's all you need to adhere to, legally speaking. Then you're good to go.

These sheds are springing up in their thousands and bringing British men together, one brick, one plank of salvaged wood, one ale at a time.

## DRUNKEN DREAMS

We start our adventure in Chesterfield, visiting Tremayne Boulton and his queasily-named pub shed The Stick It Inn. Sporting a paisley shirt and freshly buffed brogues, he cuts the appearance of a 50-something bookshop owner – not the 19-year-old he actually is. "It was a pink summerhouse," Boulton tells me, while he stands plumb behind the bar. "My friend and I were sitting in it in 2016. I found a tin of paint and bodged it together," he explains. Standing inside The Stick It Inn – which has been lovingly fitted with brass features, vintage taps and a hand-built bar – "bodging it together" feels like a diabolical understatement.

Boulton's shed is built on family foundations. "I was 11 when my grandad passed away. A lot of the stuff, when he died, went into the shed. And a lot of it stayed in the pub shed. My auntie Debbie, when she first came inside, shed a tear. It reminded her of my grandad," he says.



## THE STICK IT INN

**Location:** Chesterfield, Derbyshire

**Landlord:** Tremayne Boulton, 19

**Most popular beer:** John Smith's

**Number of seats:** 13

"I found a tin of paint and bodged it together. I used to work in a pub when I was younger – just collecting glasses and stuff like that – and I liked that. I've always been an old-fashioned bloke, I don't know why. I'm like Benjamin Button. I hope that my friends will speak to their kids about [the shed] – like my mum does about pubs – and tell their kids they used to sit in this pub shed."

Boulton and his backyard haven of sentimentality is not a one-off. There are many other budding shed publicans, all turning their drunken dreams into a tangible reality. Mike Bacon should be credited with the rise of pub sheds. Bacon started the Pub Sheds UK Facebook group in 2013, to bring together budding DIY landlords. It has since built up a following of nearly 10,000 members, sharing everything from tips on how to install underfloor heating to flogging each other fridges for makeshift bars.



**THE ENGINE HOUSE**

**Location:** Andover, Hampshire  
**Landlord:** Kevin Fields, 46  
**Most popular beer:** Engine House Beer (homebrew)  
**Number of seats:** 20

“A friend of mine built a pub shed in his garden and I thought I could do it in mine too, and make it fire-service themed. It’s just within the limits of planning permission. It’s been a bit of an adventure and it keeps going. The ladder that goes upstairs is also an old fire-engine ladder which I collected from Somerset. When I picked it up I realised it’s actually an old Hampshire ladder, so I probably actually used it for real!”



aspects of a pub: community. “It’s a social part of people to go to pubs,” Burles tells me. “Where would you go to meet people without pubs or clubs?”

The Steampunk Saloon is an inviting, entertaining and surprising place to hang out and sink a few beers. As well as a pretty special bookshelf that boasts a signed first-edition of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell To Arms*, there’s also the art pieces, the state-of-the-art hi-fi, and of course Jason’s hospitality, which combine to create the full experience for his ‘punters’. It’s no surprise the place is always packed with Burles’s family and friends.

**HOME FROM HOME**

As soon as Brad the taxi driver drops us off at our final stop, the Engine House, owner Kevin Fields bounds outside to meet us. A towering presence, dressed in a custom-made Engine House shirt,

Fields makes us feel as if we’re stepping into our own home as soon as we enter his. Once we weave our way into the garden, it’s clear what his passion is: the fire service.

Obsessed with the trade in which he has worked for 28 years, Fields built his boozier in six months. Throughout our stay, a nostalgic Fields discusses how fire stations often had their own pubs, which were an institution for the local area.

While Burles’s shed felt more like an art gallery, Fields’ feels like a museum – somewhere to proudly display his treasured fire service memorabilia, rather than letting it accumulate dust.

Fields’s pub is filled with photos of his fireman father, his grandad’s miniature bottle collection and paintings his uncle and aunt contributed. When visited by the crew of Channel 4’s *Shed Of The Year*, the intense emotion of the place was felt. “The presenter – Laura Jane Clark – was here. We were stood chatting and she said, ‘Can we please stop’ and walked out. She was in tears,” he recounts, over a pint of Hobgoblin. “She said, ‘To be quite honest Kev, it’s one of the most emotional places I’ve ever been to.’”

What makes these places so special is that the sheds’ combinations of beers, fixtures, fittings and nicnacs are all so different, and all mirror the owners’ characters. You can see Burles’s dandy stylings in the fanciness of his beer glasses, Boulton’s antiquarian tendencies

in his crumbling chimney, and Fields’s cheeky smile in his disco light switch. These sheds aren’t just an extension of their owners’ houses; they’re an extension of their personalities.

**SHED OF THE FUTURE**

“How was it then, mate?”

We’re back in the taxi with Brad, heading to the train station. He eagerly listens to our

description of The Engine House, and compares it to the “log cabin” in his garden – half-Southampton FC and half-*Only Fools & Horses*-themed.

As I sit back, head slightly fuzzy from Fields’s lager, I realise that ‘sheds’ is an insufficient term. These places are more than just a back-garden dumping ground. They’re meeting points for communities, party venues, archives, museums, galleries and gin bars. Most importantly, though, they’re pubs. Sure, they may not have kegs, a menu or a licence, but they’ve built entire communities and will forge many new memories to come, while tapping into a culture slowly slipping away. They have one misty eye on the past, and one eager eye on the future.

Our taxi jolts to a stop at a red light. Brad swivels again in his seat. “I think I’ll have to visit this Engine House.”



Talking of maps, we’re blessed to have Google Maps, without which we would never have found the Steampunk Saloon – or rather the Southend home whose garden it inhabits. Yet once we reach the art-deco front of the house, and owner Jason Burles takes us through to the garden, it’s impossible to miss.

A modern-day Renaissance man, Burles is half-geezer, half-Gatsby, obsessed with curios and art. Burles’s pub shed is like a gallery. It’s an emporium of heady, dark treats: cups from Alcatraz, a mosquito-topped cane from *Jurassic World*, a cod skeleton (“I love to go up to the Natural History museum. I actually bought a piece off them”), a bottle of ‘poison’ from a Harry Potter set, and an arresting array of taxidermy.

Like a curator, Burles has represented a theme – steampunk – through objects from all kinds of places, be it New York, Russia via Etsy, or “a skip”. Just as carefully chosen is his drink selection. His collection is dizzying, and gets me dizzyingly drunk. Beer brewed from chocolate and caffeine, (“have your dinner first”), American citrus IPAs, his own homemade whisky and a bottle of vodka with a scorpion in the top. Burles has created a steampunk-themed bar worthy of a capital city, let alone a garden in Southend. Yet, it still draws upon one of the most important



**THE STEAMPUNK SALOON**

**Location:** Southend-on-Sea, Essex  
**Landlord:** Jason Burles, 48  
**Most popular beer:** Yeastie Boys Bigmouth Session IPA  
**Number of seats:** 8

“The garage was just a dumping ground for stuff, really. I decided to clear it out, and I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with it. Then I had the idea to build a bar. I had a builder friend who had the skills to put it all together for me. From start to finish, it’s taken two years. People don’t often see this, so it fascinates them. And it fascinates me: I love coming in here, it makes me feel relaxed.”



It’s also achieved something even more valuable. “We’ve built a community and made friends for life,” says Bacon. When pubs close, it’s not just the tarnished taps and varnished bars that vanish. Along with the props go the characters that made the drama: the yarn-spinners, the tale-weavers, the raconteurs that pulled the wool over your eyes. The tight-knit fabric of the community.

It won’t come as a shock that most of the groups’ members are men. Pub culture’s mark on men’s

social lives is as irremovable as the chewing gum gobbets under their tables. The idea of creating your own out of a shed – another stereotypically male hang-out spot – is an appealing fantasy for many men. Naming your own local, choosing the draught beers, getting your mates round to your gaff; it all comes with the job.

This community spirit is the most important thing a pub can serve. “Enjoying a pint in a pub has a hugely beneficial impact on a person’s wellbeing,” says Camra’s ‘Friends On Tap’ report. “People who have a ‘local’ that they visit regularly tend to feel more socially engaged and content,” it continues. The worst case scenario? A pub closing down. As Camra’s chief campaigners and communications officer Tom Stainer tells me, “Once a pub is closed and converted to a shop,

**“ENJOYING A PINT IN A PUB HAS A BENEFICIAL IMPACT ON A PERSON’S WELLBEING”**

or a block of flats, the community never gets it back.”

**SOCIAL CENTRE**

In a sense, Pub Sheds UK has created a new type of community, connecting like-minded men around the UK. Considering that last year the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness estimated that around eight million men in the UK feel lonely at least once a week, this couldn’t be more important. Groups like Pub Sheds UK dispel any suggestion of isolated ‘man-caves’ and connects them all like a map of pub sheds.