



# PRACTICAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB HAWKINS

Once involved in events management, Chris Bamber has turned his skills to camper conversions under the guise of Kahuna Campers, but he's also the one to get his hands dirty

**T**he campervan conversion market appears to attract a variety of specialists with a wide assortment of experience. In most cases, these specialists are often enthusiasts to start with, but some are skilled in carpentry for instance, or once fitted kitchens for a living. Whatever their backgrounds, they must quickly adapt to learning several other skills to be able to complete a conversion or at least know what needs to be done and who to employ. After all, many of these conversions aren't exactly straightforward when it comes to cutting a huge hole in the roof for a pop top conversion, installing two-way electrics along with a diesel heater, or plumbing in a sink and hob.

When I first met Chris Bamber of Kahuna Campers, I initially wondered whether he merely project managed his conversions, especially when he explained that his education and previous jobs were all involved in events management. However, such initial thoughts quickly changed



upon seeing inside his workshop and meeting his father, Dennis. Between the two of them, they appear to have everything covered themselves.

It seems that Dennis provided the inspiration and encouragement for Chris to dive in at the deep end and establish Kahuna Campers in 2013.

Having been involved in buying and selling cars in the motor trade for the past thirty-five years, Dennis is now happy to be officially retired, but loves the chase of finding vans that are in good condition and are ideal for converting into a camper.

"From experience we have learned

that the T5s and T6s are where it's at in terms of something that will hold its value and there will always be a customer for them," says Dennis. "Over the years, we have built relationships with a number of suppliers that know our criteria: very genuine, low-mileage vans that have been looked after. That's not to say you can't find the occasional van listed online somewhere. I spend a lot of my spare time scouring the internet and the odd bargain can still be had, if you put the time in. Finding the right base van used to be easier, that's for sure."

Growing up, Chris was used to being around and driving a variety of vehicles, although he admits, "I was never that interested in cars; it was more motorbikes and especially motorbike adventure travel and I did a fair bit of it in different countries, including India, Vietnam and throughout Europe. Although I was always slightly envious whilst setting up my tent of those with a camper, I especially liked the look of the VWs. I just started to naturally get more and more drawn to them then, probably a little obsessed."

Following a motorbike trip to New Zealand, he decided to sell his BMW GS and put the money into a VW T4. "It was a great van with a pretty poor conversion on the inside that my dad had found during a visit to a motorhome dealership," Chris recalls. "Over the following summer I decided to change a bit of the interior. Before I knew it, I was stood in an empty van looking at a pile of wood and wires on my dad's driveway, wondering what the hell I had just got into. That night I couldn't sleep, my mind whirring with



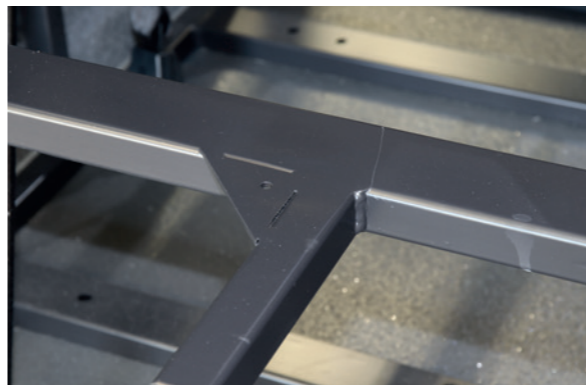
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ideas, questions and possibilities about what to put back into the space. That summer in 2013 on my dad's driveway was a steep learning curve as I slowly started to build my first camper. I was pretty chuffed with the results!"

Chris quickly realised he could earn a living from campervan conversions, although he had lots to learn, as he

recalls, "When I first started, I found a local conversion company and a guy called Jason Gross. He helped me a lot and mentored me really, he even let me use some space in his workshop to work on my vans in the early days."

Nowadays, Chris buys in a number of products that require expert manufacturing, such as the pop top



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conversion, the framework for the two-seater rock & roll bed and the swivel bases for the front seats.

"I've had a few suppliers of beds over the years but nothing that impressed me very much," he explains. "Along the way I met Steff from SJ Dzign. With over twenty-five years' experience in fabrication and welding, he was working for a bed manufacturer. When we met, we connected over our eye for detail and great design. Over the course of a year or so, we developed a rock & roll bed to my specifications and, using Steff's unparalleled skill, created the

Kahuna Rock & Roll Bed, fully tested and certificated. I'm convinced this is the best on the market! We continue to innovate and work on further ideas together and have some really amazing new products to introduce later this year. The Big Kahuna or 50/50 Kahuna anyone?"

The rock & roll bed that Chris fits is secured through the floor of the van with a spreader plate fitted underneath. A single latch at the front releases the framework, allowing it to slide forward and lay flat. The built-in headrests drop down and fill any gaps against the rear upholstery to create a full-length bed.

Whilst these bought-in products are perhaps essential, Chris has concentrated on the manufacture and development of many other aspects of his conversions, such as the kitchen unit and wardrobe.

"When it comes to furniture, the easy option is to buy a pre-assembled kit and go down this route," he says. "This will do the job and is certainly easier. I don't. I use the 15mm laminated lightweight ply you would expect from a high-end conversion. I believe a far better finish is achieved by building each piece of furniture bespoke to that van. Even though all the vans are the same, I can tell you they differ slightly once you add the ply lining and the flooring etc."

Chris explains that each build differs slightly from the last as he readdresses the overall look and finish, listens to customer feedback and researches ways to achieve more useful storage

solutions. "I think good design is something you use without knowing you have used it, if that makes sense."

Use of space is perhaps one of the most important considerations that Chris has adopted with his conversions. The overhead locker over the rear seats and the lockable safe incorporated into the front swivel seat are perhaps nothing new, but what about the removable table that hooks into the rear of the van when the tailgate is open? Or the other removable table with foldable legs that is stored inside the sliding door? The rear table is one of Chris's inventions, whereas the table stored inside the sliding door is a Loc8 kit. "It's super easy to fit and still leaves room for a bit of insulation," he says. "The best thing about this table is you don't know it's there, but it's incredibly useful; you always need an exterior table when camping. There are so many extras out there for the T5/6. If there is something a

customer has seen and would like fitted at the same time as the conversion, then bring it in and I will fit it."

One key aspect of Kahuna Campers that Chris appears to have recognised as being important is branding. It's all very well striving to make a good-quality conversion, but people need to be able to recognise who has done it. So, whilst Chris may not become as big as the likes of Devon, Viking and Westfalia, he's keen to ensure everyone knows what Kahuna Campers stands for. And this is starting to pay off with a first place in the T6 class at this year's Camper Mart. ■



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