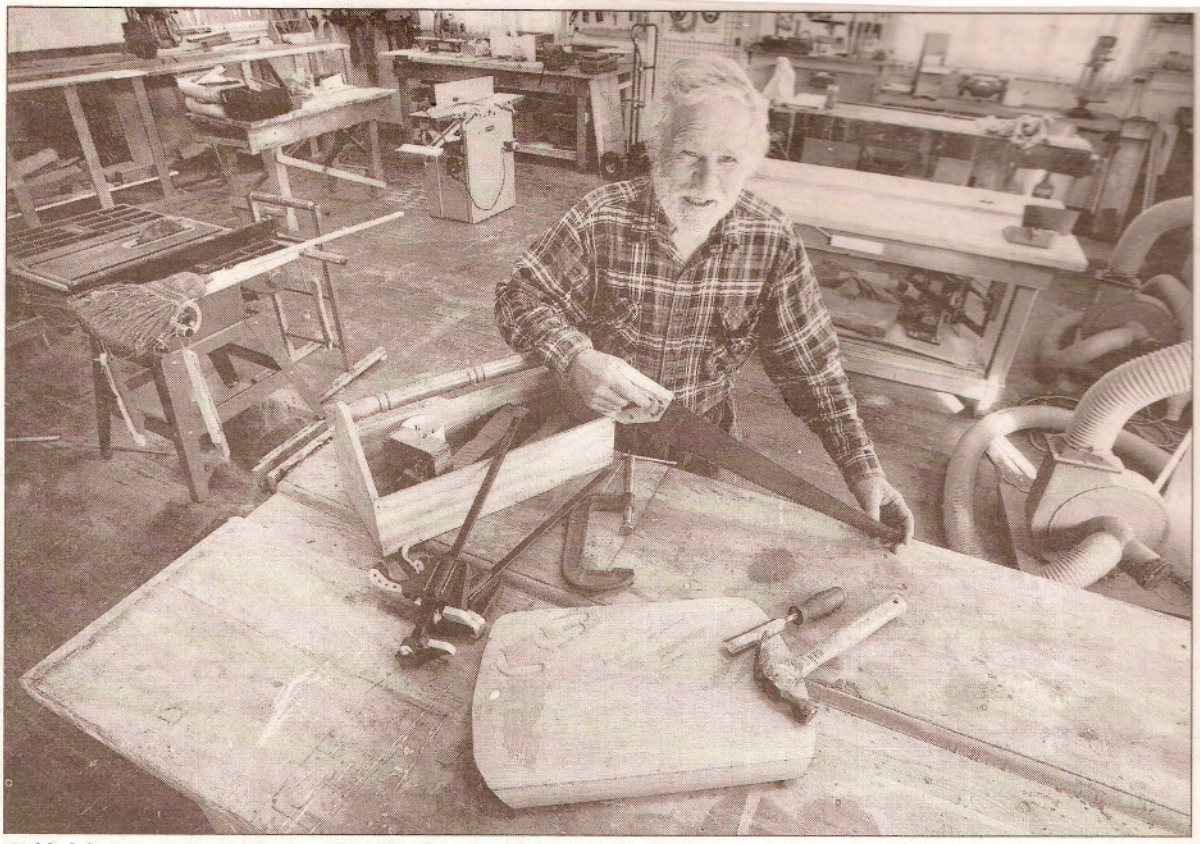




"Adding Value To Our Community"



Weld club, Frem style: Handyman John Kitching says the Men's Shed helps men learn new skills. Picture: John Mokrzycki

Freo project sheds light on male issues

TIFFANY LAURIE

If a man's home is his castle, then his shed is the private playground where he can escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

But the iconic and almost sacred Australian institution of the garden shed has become an impossible dream for many home handymen as they trade their backyard for smaller, more manageable properties.

For retiree John Kitching — and a growing number of WA men — the answer has been communal sheds such as the Fremantle Men's Community Shed where they can tap into the essence of being blokes without annoying the neighbours.

The Fremantle shed looks like any other garden workshop — there are tools on the walls, cluttered work benches and the smell of fresh sawdust in the air.

But rather than being the domain of just one handyman, members are encouraged to pool their talents to complete either individual projects or work together on a big communal project.

Mr Kitching said the shed had been a lifeline since his retirement.

The 66-year-old former public servant recently finished refurbishing a 12ft yacht donated to the shed for a communal project. He was now working on shelves for his home.

"I've always been interested in handyman work and building things and . . . I have a shed but there I am by myself," Mr Kitching said.

"I mainly enjoy the company of like-minded people — it is the chance to mix with other people and use my hands, and my wife encourages me to socialise. You can certainly see people who have been lifted up and lifted themselves up after being involved."

Shed co-ordinator Bill Johnstone said the project had a more serious purpose than just allowing men the chance to bang a nail into wood.

A national survey of community men's sheds by the University of Ballarat found men who took part in community shed projects were happier at home, had a stronger sense of community, and often had improved health and a sense of wellbeing.

Mr Johnstone said the volunteer-run shed was a forum where men could feel comfortable discussing physical and mental health issues with their peers and learn practical skills.

"We've computers there too so they can come and build on their computer literacy and learn to send emails — which is especially important if they have children overseas," he said.

There are about 175 men's sheds in Australia, including several in Perth run by community or church groups.