

Mick's marvellous Merc

A high-spec, self-build campervan that is the perfect wild camping sanctuary...

WORDS & PHOTOS Carol Kubicki

When Anthony and I bought our Morecambe bungalow, like everyone, we hoped we would find friendly neighbours that would chat over the fence and willingly give us a cup of sugar. We were lucky, not only does our new neighbour, Mick, have a workshop packed with useful tools that he lends generously and an all-round knowledge of DIY, he is also a campervan owner! Mick bought his Mercedes Sprinter to convert into a campervan the same week we arrived in Morecambe. You can imagine the campervan-focused conversations we have over the garden wall!

A retiree, Mick worked hard over 10 months converting the Sprinter into a luxury self-contained campervan. Once he had finished the project, we sat in his sunny garden and talked about his journey into the campervan community.

Mick told me that, although he had idly browsed motorhome showrooms in the past, he shelved the idea when he realised a motorhome wouldn't fit on his drive. Instead, he spent his money on a motorbike, strapped a tent to the back and set off touring. He loved motorbike touring but the idea of a campervan wouldn't go away and two things tipped him over the edge. A friend completed his own self-build campervan on a VW Crafter, opening Mick's eyes to options other than a large motorhome. Secondly, Mick experienced two Scottish motorcycle touring holidays where the rain fell in sheets for a week.

His biking days were numbered. "I didn't want another wash-out holiday," he told me, "And I liked the idea that, in a 'van, you can pull up and make a brew or cook lunch without unpacking."

Greg Virgoe's YouTube channel showed the way to go

"An off-the-shelf campervan wouldn't be what I wanted and they're expensive, particularly for a Merc," Mick said casually, as if completing your own conversion is something anyone can take on. Having decided to go down the self-build route, Mick set a budget of £30,000 and sought out a suitable Mercedes Sprinter, his van of choice. Mick likes to find a bargain and I knew he would search out discounts to keep his spending under control.

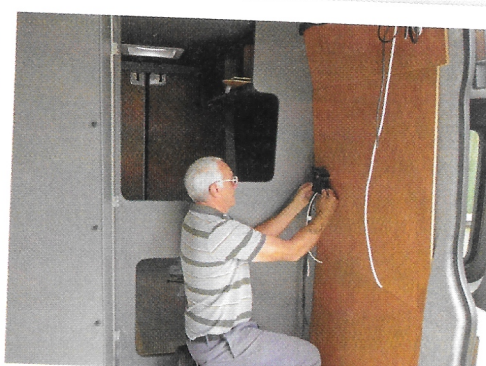
Mick's DIY experience over the years gave him the confidence to take on the task but even he needed some guidance and there is no shortage of videos on YouTube for the campervan self-builder.

Mick wasn't interested in a basic layout, he wanted to do what he called, "A proper job," and online searches and reading soon brought up Greg Virgoe's self-build campervan YouTube channel.

Greg Virgoe lives full-time in the 'van he converted and his videos provide step-by-step instructions with diagrams for all aspects of a self-build. A fully self-sufficient campervan, designed to live off-grid was the inspiration Mick needed and so, as his new neighbours settled in, he began turning his



Putting in the insulation and wiring is the first job in a campervan conversion



The campervan started to take shape once the divider between the kitchen and bedroom was in place



two-year-old long-wheelbase Mercedes Sprinter into a campervan.

Learning from mistakes

The conversion is pretty much all of his own work. Mick took the van to a workshop to have the two side windows fitted, as paying an expert to do this proved to be a cost-effective option.

An electrician friend made sure the



Mick Jones

Base vehicle 2017 Mercedes Sprinter 314

Conversion type Self-build

Owned since October 2019

Drive Rear-wheel drive

Engine 2.1-litre turbo-diesel

Power 143bhp

Economy 30mpg

Gearbox Manual

Travel seats 2

Berths 3

Leisure battery 3 x 120Ah

Length x width x height 6.95m x 1.99m x 2.8m

Equipment Three 160W solar panels, 80-litre underslung water tank, 10-litre on-board fresh water, 40-litre underslung grey tank, Truma water and space heater, three-burner hob, oven/grill, compressor fridge

Insurance £360

COSTS SO FAR

The van£16,300

The conversion£13,546

Total costs to date£29,846

WHAT I LOVE ABOUT IT

The campervan fits on the drive and yet has everything I need, including a fixed double bed and loads of storage space

Best trip
so far

I loved wild camping in the sunshine on the gorgeous west Cumbria coast with a sea view and just the sound of the waves to send me to sleep!

YouTube didn't have the answer, Mick could call on his friend with the self-build VW and even occasionally would resort to asking his neighbours, too.

Mick is a perfectionist and will take his time, checking and rechecking measurements before committing, so he grimaces when he remembers the worst mistake he made on the conversion.

The first time he fitted the two Maxxair

to plan...

Cutting into your expensive Mercedes is always going to be nerve-wracking and Mick was apprehensive as he cut the two holes in the roof.

As it turned out, it wasn't the cutting that was the problem. With that done, he realised he had bought the wrong Sikaflex primer for the adhesive/sealant!

He decided to try and make do with white

rather inadequate.

After a spell of rain, Mick was disappointed to find that both fans leaked.

While waiting for the correct primer to be delivered, Mick endured some sleepless nights, worrying he had taken on something he couldn't handle.

Mick ruefully told me, "It took three times as long to take the fan vents out, clean them up and put them in again, this time with the



He loved motorbike touring but the idea of a campervan wouldn't go away...

Watching and learning

Before beginning each stage of the project, Mick would watch Greg Virgoe's videos two or three times before deciding whether to tackle the job Greg's way or his own. "The videos are really useful," Mick assured me, "I would recommend them to anyone converting a 'van, even if they're not following the same layout."

After fixing in the wiring, Mick began insulating the 'van. He secured 25mm foam boards on the floor and 50mm on the walls and ceiling with Rockwool in crevices.

Mick was soon ready to start putting the furniture in, an exciting step that starts to make a van seem like a campervan. Although Greg Virgoe's videos have lots of detail, they don't include measurements, as vans vary. Mick took his time and, before cutting the expensive Morland lightweight furniture plywood panels, he firstly made cardboard templates, then plywood templates (frugally recycling the van's original lining he had removed). Only when he was absolutely sure the shape was accurate did he commit to cutting and fitting the grey boarding into the campervan's interior. On dry weather days, the sound of a bench saw became a regular on our road, as

shapes (in a van with sloping sides, nothing is square). None of these were easy but the most difficult section by far was the large room divider that sits between the bed and the shower and kitchen.

As the project moved forward, Mick gained confidence and the incentive to finish got stronger. Nevertheless, Mick admitted that there were times during the 10 months he was working on the conversion that he had seen enough of it. On those days, he would turn his back on the Mercedes and take a few days off. Other hold-ups came with the weather; cutting the grey boarding for the furniture needed a dry day, as even his well-stocked workshop didn't have the space to cut and manoeuvre large pieces. In the northwest of England, we get occasional wet spells that hold up a self-converter without a large indoor space!

Bargain basement

Ever on the lookout for a bargain, Mick purchased items when the prices were right and stored them in his spare room until he needed them. This meant that, once the kitchen cupboards and drawers were fitted, the combined three-ring hob, oven and grill and 12V compressor fridge quickly followed.

campervan, Blue Bus, for a week and returned to a transformed campervan!

The sink sported a smart gooseneck mixer tap with pull-out spray nozzle (household, rather than campervan-specific), and a neat drinking water tap. While the former is fed from the 80-litre underslung water tank, drinking water comes from a 10-litre on-board water carrier.

The warm wood-block worktop has a useful hinged section, giving plenty of space to prepare dinner while gazing at the view from the big sliding door.

With a cutlery drawer, three deep, easily accessible drawers and a wall cupboard, there is stacks of room for pans, plates, tins and packets in the kitchen. The conversion has a further eight wall cupboards over the bed and in the living area for clothes and bits and bobs. The huge storage area under the bed (accessed from the rear doors and an interior hatch) swallows up the levelling blocks, external fitted screens (a second-hand steal on eBay) and chairs. Even with the gas cylinder, which has a bubble tester to detect leaks, and the line of three leisure batteries, there is still plenty of space left for any gear for any future hobbies Mick might fancy taking up.

above the kitchen sink. From here, Mick can activate the inverter, switch the gas on and off, check the levels of fresh and grey water and the solar panels and leisure batteries, isolate appliances and control the Truma heating and water heating. There are also plugs for 230V should he decide to use a hook up, and 12V.

The comfort zone

The Mercedes came with a double bench seat in the cab and Mick fitted a swivel to this, giving him an open and spacious living area that has an envy-inducing two sofas for four adults in comfort. There are five sunken rooflights along the 'van, and the living area and bedroom both have a strip of LED lights which change colour in response to music for that touch of bling.

The table is mounted on a swivelling leg that can be moved between these two seating areas, ensuring a beer is always close at hand.

A TV is mounted on an extending bracket above the seating. Vents from the Truma boiler underneath the sofa keep the cab, living area, washroom and bedroom all toasty warm and mean the washroom can



The fixed bed is a luxurious king-size one at the back of the campervan



The kitchen has a smart goose-neck mixer tap with pull-out spray nozzle

double up as a drying room.

On the floor, Mick used Altro slip-resistant practical flooring. This is high-quality but expensive and, keen to spend as little brass as possible, Mick searched around for a bargain. He found someone selling bankrupt stock nearby in 10-metre rolls; he knew he only needed five metres but the price was too good to miss. Mick used what he needed and sold the remaining five metres online to another self-builder, not quite making a profit but certainly hardly depleting the budget.

An outstanding feature of the Greg

Virgoe conversion is a fixed bed. At night, there is no need to mess around putting together a jigsaw of cushions in Mick's 'van, the bed is king-size and is always available. The comfy bed has a solid base with an air mat to allow the mattress to breathe, and two reading lights. The 'van is quickly transformed as day turns to night. As soon as the curtains are drawn on the two windows and the full-length curtains are pulled shut across the cab, this is a cosy space to curl up in.

Like many self-converters, Mick has resisted adding decals to the outside of his Mercedes, so it could be just any other white van; all the better for stealth wild camping and parking.

Job's a good'un

Leaning back on the sofa in his campervan, Mick looks around and tells me how pleased he is with the work he has done, and so he should be. He kept within his budget of £30,000 with £153.59 to spare! If I hadn't been his neighbour and watched his progress across the front garden, I certainly wouldn't have known that this conversion hadn't been carried out by a professional company. "I've enjoyed doing it but I won't be doing another one," he told me emphatically. Mick expects this campervan to last him at least 15 years and there is nothing he would change.

We are lucky to live near to the Lake District and Mick's maiden voyage in his 'van was to a quiet part of Cumbria, finding a wild camping spot along the west coast.

With the solar panels and three leisure batteries, he can live off-grid for many days, even in winter.

Having tested that everything works, Mick is now planning a trip to Scotland. He will revisit some of those places he drove through on his motorbike and saw from the door of a damp tent. This time, he'll be king of the road in his marvellous Mercedes. Once he has got Scotland out of his system, he is keen to travel further afield and explore France and Germany. If you see him on the road, stop, say hello and take a gander at his



Useful
links

Greg Virgoe's YouTube channel

[youtube.com/channel/UC1Eww0kp0Npz2JWtdhdryw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1Eww0kp0Npz2JWtdhdryw)

Mick bought parts from many places but rates Magnum Motorhomes for its excellent stock and helpful attitude [magnummotorhomes.co.uk](https://www.magnummotorhomes.co.uk)