



Boxing clever

The bespoke Beeny Box is one of the unsung masterpieces of motor caravan folklore. **John Wickersham** watched their design, build and installation

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD the name, but do you know the product? Come to that, do you know where it's made? Like many motor caravan accessories, the Beeny Box was invented to meet a need that many of us will identify with.

'More storage space' is a common cry, and one of the worst ways to satisfy this problem is to install a clumsy, capacious plastic box on the roof. A roof box can carry a considerable amount of clobber, but if you value your vehicle's road handling qualities then the roof is a dreadful place to carry anything heavy. After all, a box shaped like a brick will hardly enhance your fuel economy.

That's why an engineer called Steve Beeny designed a low-level storage system back in the late 1980s. The idea of a sliding drawer idea was fairly simple. The hard part something that could be universally fitted, whatever your vehicle.

This problem has yet to be resolved. Even today, Beeny Boxes are not made for van conversions – and that's a great pity. Designing a low-level slide-out box for a coachbuilt or A-class is much easier, but even that isn't without difficulty. Different chassis constructions, coupled with all sorts of underfloor obstructions, mean that every Beeny Box is model-specific. Each one has to be made by hand and no two boxes are exactly the same. It's clearly a challenging task.

Individual challenges, however, are something that have always interested Paul Stimpson, who had set up a company called Coachcraft & Leisure in 1991. Paul is an accomplished craftsman and was able to call on 13 years of working in the caravan trade and four years working as a mechanical engineer. Following on from Steve Beeny's clever design, Paul officially took over the manufacture of Beeny

Boxes, and completed his first installation in 1994.

Since then he hasn't stopped, and when reflecting on the 600 or so boxes that he has built, Paul asserts that every one has been different. Nowadays they all carry a code number and his huge collection of photographs records the recent ones he has built. That's very important if a box gets damaged in an accident, especially if it forms part of an insurance claim.

Although Coachcraft & Leisure, located near Redruth, is still a thriving concern, Paul sold the company three years ago and now builds Beeny Boxes not far away in Camborne. I don't know about you, but Cornwall is a fair old hike from my home, although it's a place I enjoy for holiday visits. And that's how I met up with Paul; it formed part of a trip to that wonderful coastline.

So what's so special about Beeny Boxes, and what can they offer a motorhome user?

Like many owners of coachbuilt motorhomes, I've always been a bit short of space for dirty gear. Items like wheel ramps, a jack, welly boots, the tool box, warning triangle, blocks of wood and a coil of top-up hose have caused inevitable storage problems. To that list of commonly carried bits and pieces I also add muddy walking boots, wet canoeing kit, climbing gear, orienteering running shoes and an array of equipment used in my outdoor adventures.

Since this equipment is often damp, muddy or sandy, I certainly like the idea of having low-level external storage. As Steve Beeny obviously noticed, there's often a lot of unused space behind a coachbuilt motorhome's side skirts; that was certainly the case on my Fiat-based project van. And that's why someone told me to look on the Beeny Box website. Here, you get a clear picture of how the products are made. ▶

PREPARATION WORK



1 My one-off Mystique was built using a GRP moulding. Around the lower edges, a generous side skirt hid underfloor areas ideally suited for storage



2 I opted to have drawers on both sides of the vehicle. Measurements were taken underneath and any obstructions were noted



3 Masking tape was applied to the side skirts to protect the surface from the jigsaw and to allow Paul to mark a precise cutting line



4 Wearing safety spectacles, Paul cut the unusually thick GRP using Bosch T101 AO narrow jigsaw blades and an unwavering hand



5 On this motor caravan there were no obstructions, although Paul has built 'top hat' sections in drawers to fit around spring hangers



6 To create accurate 'shut lines' in the GRP, Paul meticulously trimmed the aperture and lid using an angle grinder and a file



7 The first fabrication job is to form the hanger brackets from which a drawer is suspended; these are made up using 16-gauge sheet



8 Now the main sections needed for each drawer are cut; the bends and strengthening flanges are then formed



9 Accurate cutting and shaping are crucial if a drawer is to be easily assembled. No worries; the fit was perfect first time

FITTING THE DRAWERS



1 A sealant is used to hold each bracket in place while its final positioning on the chassis is established. Holes are then drilled for its fixings



2 This bracket was fixed to the chassis and the substantial 19mm, GRP-coated marine ply which forms part of the composite floor



3 Different templates were offered up to check for ground, chassis and skirt clearance, in order to establish correct dimensions for the drawers



4 High-quality slider mechanisms contribute to the load-carrying capacity of the products, but they have to be accurately installed



5 After temporarily clamping the sliders to the underfloor hangers and checking dimensions, part of each slider is fixed to the drawer



6 Unseen bracing struts are cut and shaped. These add further stability and rigidity to the underfloor hangers

Though I don't have the equipment to make my own lightweight alloy storage boxes, I was keen to install one myself. The trouble is that the company doesn't supply kits. Customers have to book an appointment and have the product(s) installed in Cornwall.

Now that I've seen two bespoke boxes made and installed, I understand why this isn't a DIY operation. Even though my motor caravan doesn't have an inconvenient exhaust pipe, a spring hanger to negotiate or underfloor obstructions, it still took two long days to install two boxes.

I admit that when I first heard about Beeny Boxes, I thought that £395 was rather a lot to

pay for each one. Let's face it – it's only a drawer! But I was wrong, because this drawer system is incredibly strong. Even in its weakest position, which is when it's fully extended on the sliding rails, a Beeny Box will carry equipment weighing up to 45kg (99lb). When the box is closed and locked, this load is well within its true maximum carrying capacity.

Then there's the structure itself. The containers are currently fabricated using 16-gauge Alochrome, which is chromium alloy sheet. This is folded along all the edges, and the flanges add additional rigidity to the container. A sealant is also applied along all the internal seams, preventing

water from seeping into the container along a join.

To stabilise the main suspension brackets even more, discreet alloy bracing struts are mounted as well. In addition, aluminium deflector shields are installed when a box is anywhere near the motorhome's wheels. The reason for this is that the latest Beeny Boxes are constructed in such a way that driven water from the road doesn't leave their contents wet.

Obviously you wouldn't store a laptop computer in one, and I was somewhat sceptical about this supposed ability to keep things dry. However, I left Cornwall in howling winds and driving rain, driving through

heavy road spray that persisted up the M5 to Bristol. Then I checked the boxes. Incredibly, there were only five marks from dried drips in one box; the other was totally dry.

Without doubt, the hardest part of the installation is to shape, strengthen and attach the removed part of the side skirt. On some motor caravans, a flexible plastic surround trim is attached around the aperture and the cut-away section. On others, like mine, the rigid GRP skirt looks better without this addition. As explained, every installation is individually made to suit the vehicle brought to the workshop.

As regards the installation of a Beeny Box on a motor ▶

THE FINISHING TOUCHES



1 Each drawer is fitted to check for clearance and operation before the sliders are coated with a film of Ambersil Ejector Pin Lubricant



2 Considerable time is now spent fitting and aligning the cut-out pieces from the skirt. Locks also have to be mounted to secure each unit snugly



3 Once each drawer is adjusted to be vibration free when it's locked, a clear silicone sealant is applied around all the seams



4 Lastly, it's attention to detail. Touch-up paint and caps to cover the four bolt heads are applied and the results are very smart

caravan still under warranty, many manufacturers are fully aware of the high standard of Paul Stimpson's workmanship and engineering skills. In fact, Auto-Sleepers has given a written confirmation that the addition of a Beeny Box will not affect its warranty at all.

As a further affirmation of faith, Auto-Sleepers' staff have since been trained to install a Beeny Box as a factory-fit option on several of the company's models. That's further recognition of their quality; approaching 100 boxes have already been supplied directly to the Auto-Sleepers factory in the Cotswolds.

That aside, it would still be prudent to get other motor caravan manufacturers' written approval to confirm that a Beeny Box wouldn't compromise the terms of a warranty. If it won't, this is probably the best solution to storage problems you'll ever find ■

i INFORMATION

Beeny Box

Station Garage, Trevu Road,
Camborne, Cornwall, TR14 7AE
Tel: 01209 711093
www.beenybox.co.uk

The installation of Beeny Boxes is carried out next to Camborne mainline railway station on a site shared with Eden Motorhomes. This is a separate company run by Mike Foster and pre-owned models in the £7000-£25,000 price range are sold from the compound. www.edenmotorhomes.co.uk

BEENY BOX INSTALLATIONS ON OTHER VEHICLES

The job took much longer than expected but much more work is involved than I had visualised.

To show Beeny Boxes fitted to some more conventional coachbuilts,

together with the products they may have to carry, the four illustrations below focus on different installations.

These photos show the diversity of several previous projects. Paul

Stimpson reckons he can fit a Beeny Box to about 95% of recent coachbuilt and A-class models. You name it, he can do it – he's even fitted boxes on the back wall as well.



The asymmetrically shaped front to the box was a feature on this Auto-Sleeper Pollensa, built on a Ford Transit



The owner of this Auto-Trail Mohican used the Beeny Box for carrying typical items, as well as a large, red shovel



The rear location for this Auto-Trail Cheyenne's leisure batteries made inspection difficult, so the owner had them moved to a Beeny Box



The owner of this Mirage 5000 found he couldn't use the Channel Tunnel with a fixed gas tank, so he had a cylinder system fitted instead