

...in a Nutshell

by Roderick Stewart

The years following the War were dominated by austerity. Luxuries were scarce and expectations of comfort were astonishingly low, yet leisure was a rapidly growing market.

This was the background to the 'Nutshell' caravan, one of the more extraordinary of Wm R Stewart & Sons (Hacklemakers) Ltd many diversifications. Somehow, perhaps through the RNVR onboard HMS Unicorn of which my father, Rennie Stewart, was a keen member (and later Captain), contact was made with inventor Arthur Cooksey who designed plywood sailing dinghies in the south of England. He was looking for a manufacturer for his design for a tiny, folding caravan, to be called the 'Nutshell'.

Five sheets of marine ply, each slightly curved to give stiffness, formed the ends, sides and roof, and they were mounted on a plywood 'hull' shaped like a pram-dinghy. This was grandly described in the brochure as "stressed skin ply, built on aircraft principles".

The bunks were two more sheets of plywood padded with rubberised horsehair matting and there was a tiny child-shelf at one end. The chassis was a welded steel box-section 'T' with rubber-block suspension and the mudguards were the two halves of a plastic baby's bathtub! The door was a section of one of the sides which lifted up to horizontal and was propped by two poles, and a tiny awning could be fitted around this to provide a microscopic changing or cooking space.



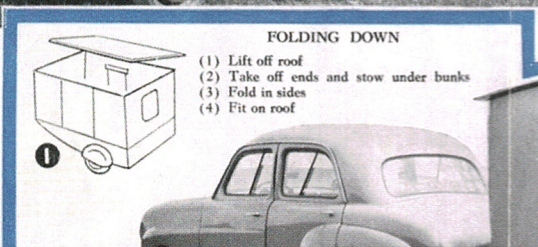
The entire caravan weighed less than two hundredweight and had handles allowing it to be easily lifted by two men.

Astonishingly, it could also be towed, legally, behind a motorcycle and sidecar combination!

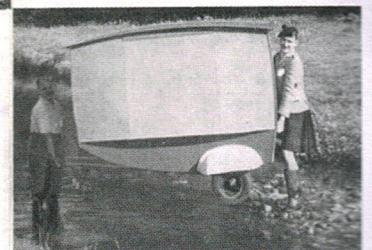
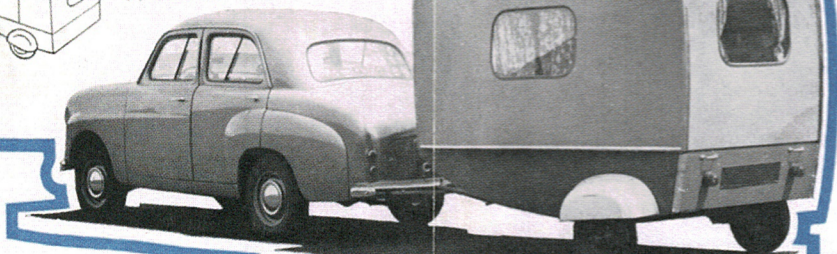
To fold the caravan for easier towing (also a requirement when towing behind the motorcycle combination), the roof was removed, the two ends were folded inwards, the sides then folded over onto each other and the roof was replaced over the sides and clipped down.



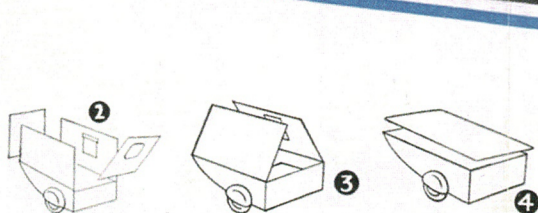
RELAX IN THE SUN
with every comfort conveniently
to hand carried in a "Nutshell"



- FOLDING DOWN
- (1) Lift off roof
 - (2) Take off ends and stow under bunks
 - (3) Fold in sides
 - (4) Fit on roof



EASY TO HANDLE . . .
and so light that the "Nutshell"
can be lifted over obstacles by
only two people





Father and Mother, in typically smart 1960s style, with our two Nutshells in the garden at home.

As a publicity stunt, one Nutshell was taken, by an intrepid band of Royal Marine Reservists and hill-walkers led by Fleming Baird, to the summit of Ben Nevis. Once there, members of the party changed into evening dress and summer frocks and posed with champagne. Sadly, the ingenuity of the exploit was not matched by the quality of the photography.



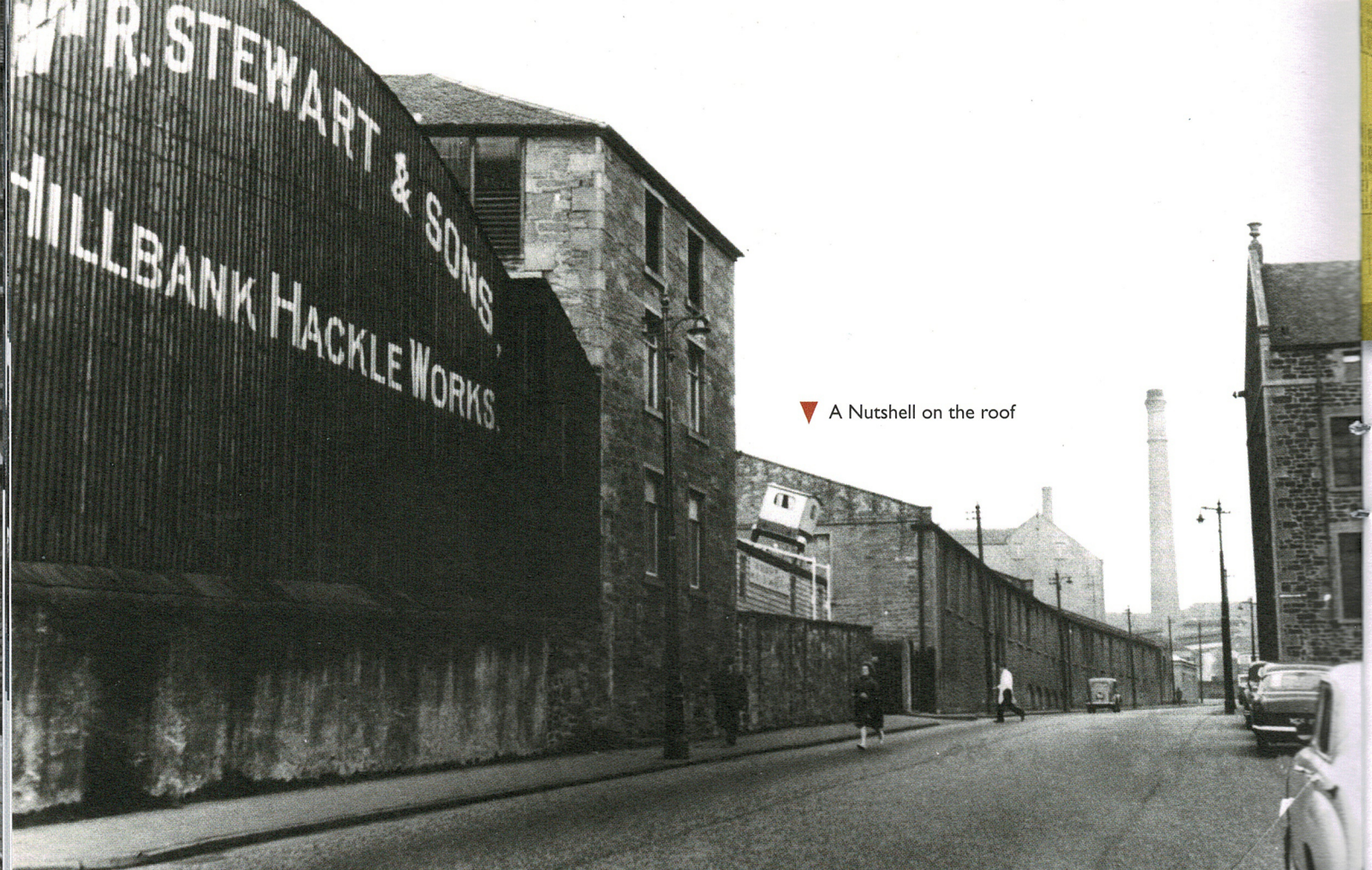
Mother and my two sisters posed for the brochure, while Dougal Steen, our chief engineer who was rarely seen out of his kilt, helped Peter Gorrie to lift the caravan across the Dighty!



We also had one Nutshell mounted at a jaunty angle, as an unexpected but eye-catching advertisement, on the roof of the old Hackleworks facing onto Dens Road. In an example of 'form following function' the large curved shed with its distinctive slatted sides was designed to allow air to circulate through our store of seasoning beechwood for jute staves.

We used to head out as a family each summer with two cars, two Nutshells, an extra roof and an assortment of canvas awnings. The Nutshells were parked side by side with their doors facing inwards and the extra roof then formed the basis of a 'tinkies encampment' with cars and caravans linked with awnings and suitcases jammed into the gaps to keep draughts out!





▼ A Nutshell on the roof



◀ Our two Nutshells with the extra roof made a curious encampment.

There was also a much larger, more complex design named the 'Oyster' which had more bunks and a much more complicated folding mechanism with a sort of canvas bellows. One prototype was built and the design was never put into production. I don't believe there is even a photograph of this design.

When first marketed, we sold the caravans for £86 but this was later raised to £98, and an old brochure states that there

were "HP Terms available". They were quirky little machines and several hundred were built over the years. I have a newspaper cutting from 1960 boasting that we hoped to increase production from ten caravans per week to ten per day.

The rise of the package holiday with cheap flights to the sun and improved demands for comfort resulting from increasing post-war affluence led to their demise, and

very few now survive. One used to appear at the Glamis Transport Extravanagza each year but has not been seen for a few years, and a Nutshell caravan sold on ebay in autumn 2013 for £1,300, quite a bit more than its original price of £98.

