

Pubs are closing at the rate of about one a day, with rural pubs particularly vulnerable. Many reasons can be advanced, such as changes in leisure expenditure, low prices at off-licences and supermarkets, the increasing impact of drink-driving legislation, and poor rural public transport facilities. The foot and mouth epidemic and its aftermath have kept visitors away from the countryside. In addition, many councils appear reluctant to grant rate relief to pubs. In a recent article in *The Morning Advertiser*, Stuart Price, a financial analyst with West LB Panmure, identified the problems as the general state of the economy, business rates, the increased minimum wage, over-regulatory bureaucracy, and the pressure of competition.¹

Whatever the reasons, many rural pubs are in difficulties, and even rate relief would do little to make them really prosperous. As a result, many licensees are trying to extend their facilities to attract and retain customers, attempting to find new solutions to falling trade:

■ **Food:** The Stag Inn in Herefordshire was the first pub to receive a star rating in the *Michelin Red Guide*. As a result 'business has doubled... You need to book about a month in advance now to get a table at weekends'.² In the 2002 edition, two other village pubs, the Olive Branch at Clipsham, Rutland and the Star Inn at Harome, North Yorkshire, were given star ratings. Both had been closed before their new owners effected the refurbishment and revitalisation which restored their economic viability. In addition, the Trouble House at Tetbury, Gloucestershire gained a mention for good food at moderate prices.

Of course this is splendid news for the owners, and for the British catering industry, but it means that the pubs are more likely to be used by outsiders and are becoming less accessible to villagers. There are those who suggest that specialisation on food is the answer to declining trade. Bob Rose, a partner at chartered accountancy firm Larking Gowen believes closures will continue, as 'the traditional local is under severe pressure with alcohol sales declining as a percentage of total pub revenue. Food is the number one earner for pubs these days.... Landlords can add value by arranging entertainment at their pubs, while the number of high profile sporting events on satellite TV is another chance to attract extra custom'.³

Mike Smith, a partner at Lovewell Blake, another accountancy firm, insists that 'local licensees should not be tempted to compete on price... Food is often a major appeal for many out-of-town and country pubs... Real ale and good company may be more important'.⁴ Another possibility is the provision of take-away food from pubs. For instance, the Royal Oak in Tingewick now offers fish and chip suppers either on or off the premises. There is no fish and chip

Rural pub futures

John Pratten looks at the future of the rural pub and at licensees' attempts to reverse declining trade; and, below, **John Pratten** and **Chris Lovatt** report on the history of one particular hamlet, its pub, and the planning decisions that now blight the building

shop within four miles, so the venture has prospered. Many have a drink while they wait.⁵

■ **Post offices and shops:** Prince Charles has expressed the opinion that rural pubs should double up as post offices and shops,⁶ but many publicans are sceptical or feel that this is not practical for them. However, there are examples where such moves have been successful. Michael and Julie Davis have converted the pub barn into a post office at the White Hart, at Blythburgh in Suffolk, and have seen a major improvement in business. The Lion at Waters Upton in Shropshire has managed to expand its business considerably by acting as the local post office with grocery shop facilities and by setting up an Indian restaurant and take-away.

■ **Good beer:** The decline in beer sales and modifications to people's social lives has meant that the quality of the drink served is not necessarily the main reason for using a particular pub. Nevertheless, it is clear that there are still many customers who enjoy a variety of well kept beers, and the licensee who concentrates on the provision of a range of well kept draught beers can enjoy a good trade. The Swan, Little Totham, Essex even has a web site, updated every three days, to publicise its guest beer lists.⁷

The future

Tony Dadoun of the Countryside Agency has observed that the pub is the 'focal point of the rural community'.⁸ Many licensees, as can be seen, have tried to offer a variety of additional services for local people or to attract customers from outside the local area. This has not always been popular. Adam Edwards, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, praised the quality of food in an outlet, but complained that 'we were not in a pub'.⁹

Turning the pub into a local amenity also can allow financial salvation, but again does not meet the approval of every customer. Robert Gibbon, in a letter to the *Morning Advertiser*, maintained that the role of a pub was to serve beer: customers should not have to negotiate 'the aisles of baked beans, rows of trolleys... the queues of people waiting to collect their pensions... the cables from computers being used by the local internet class... the prams of the mother and baby meeting... the local priest who has decided to hold his service in the

pub'.¹⁰ No doubt some customers would prefer a more traditional pub, but most of these pubs are not attracting sufficient custom and may have to close.

The rise

The hamlet of Shralebrook lies within the ancient parish of Audley in North Staffordshire. The presence of running water and the meeting of roads, which would have been used to carry people and agricultural products, led to settlement by tradesmen such as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, and agricultural workers. In the early 19th century there was a community of 20 or 30 households. It included a pub, the Rising Sun, which also acted as a blacksmith's shop. The pub depended on an extensive passing trade, which generated work for the smithy and a wheelwright. Agriculture and its associated service industries were of considerable significance. Traffic through the hamlet was brisk, transporting corn to Boughey's mill, situated on the Audley Nantwich road.

In the second half of the 19th century, first open cast mines began locally, and then the underground Minnie Pit was opened in 1890. The railway came to within a couple miles of the hamlet in 1870, and this meant that more goods destined for the station were carried by road through Shralebrook.

Thus, a century ago, Shralebrook was a prosperous little hamlet. It was surrounded by farmers and populated by tradesmen, farm workers, and miners. The transport of agricultural goods and coal ensured that the hamlet prospered. However, the period after the First World War saw a serious reversal of fortunes.

The decline

The Minnie Pit explosion of 1918 killed 155 colliers, including nine inhabitants of Shralebrook. Its subsequent closure led to mining families moving away to find work elsewhere.

The predominant landowners, the Boughey Estate, fell into difficulties, as the rapid deaths of three successive heirs amassed huge death duties, and the estate was sold. Tenant farmers bought their farms, but the estate workers drifted away in search of employment. The depression in agriculture caused land prices to

However, there are signs that the least effective pubs are disappearing, and others can prosper. Fleuret's survey of pub prices for the year ending September 2001 showed a 2 per cent rise in the freehold price, with the ratio between sale price and turnover rising from an average of 1.41 to 1.5. Barny Bettesworth, the managing director of a West Country property agent, says demand for freehold pubs is outstripping supply, and Derbyshire property agent Guy Simmonds reports a shortage of quality country properties.

Clearly, the country pub is not dead. It simply must adapt to survive. There remains a place for the 'traditional' pub,

but it is only one type of retail outlet, designed for those who still wish to enjoy its amenities. For those who want to eat out, listen to music, or be with their children, suitable pubs exist, for the industry has adapted rapidly to the needs of its customers. Many will continue to reflect nostalgically on the past, but the old fashioned pubs could not trade profitably. Pubs must either adapt to meet demand, or close. ■

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Notes

- 1 *Morning Advertiser*, 20 Sept. 2001, p.10
- 2 *Morning Advertiser*, 1 Mar. 2001, p.10
- 3 *Landlords Should Look for Diversification*. Press release, Larking Gowen, 17 May 2001
- 4 *Not All in the Price*. Press release, Lovewell Blake
- 5 *Publican*, 11 May 2001
- 6 *Publican*, 26 Jul. 2001
- 7 *Morning Advertiser*, 1 Mar. 2001, p.24
- 8 Quoted in *BBC News Online*, 31 Mar. 2000
- 9 *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Jun. 2001
- 10 *Morning Advertiser*, 6 Dec. 2001

Planning decisions and the interests of rural communities

plummet, and farmers rid themselves of labour, causing further unemployment and migration. The blacksmith and the wheelwright disappeared, and even the grocer's shop finally closed in 1935. The only place of worship closed and a residential property was built on its site. Only the pub survived as a viable business, but the inter-war years saw a serious decline in the hamlet. People moved on, leaving houses empty and unoccupied.

The period after the Second World War saw a continuation of this decline. Mechanisation in agriculture reduced the demand for farm workers, so more families moved away. Part of the hamlet was placed on the electricity grid in 1946, but the remainder was not connected until 1960, which added further to the sense of deprivation. The M6 motorway, which runs alongside Shralebrook, was opened in the mid 1960s, and this added to the noise levels, but also, together with empty and cheap housing, encouraged commuters to move to the area.

Change for the better

Demolition and rebuilding followed, so that the new or modernised properties gave the hamlet the appearance of vitality and prosperity. The Rising Sun had survived, relying on a few local customers and a small passing trade. The arrival of entrepreneurial landlords altered this. Their policy was to attract customers by offering a wide range of traditional beers and ciders, and the result was that customers were attracted from miles away. The late 1980s saw the expansion of the pub and the brewing of beer on the premises. The pub became the centre of community life, and its success made Shralebrook a well known destination for visitors.

The local inhabitants held mixed views on this, but tended to support the local pub and its social events. Noise and parking problems did annoy some residents, but the landlords tried to minimise these difficulties. They even bought an old bus and ferried groups of customers to and from their homes.

Unfortunately, the boom in trade did not last forever. The opening of a new major road led to a decline in passing trade, and this coincided with the general depression in the public house trade in the 1990s, which was particularly severe in the rural sector. The Rising Sun's trade began to decline, so that the bus lacked viability, and the brewing of beer ceased. The owners were periodically denied rural rate relief by the local authority, and the pub began to show signs of falling prosperity.

The downward spiral of the pub continued, with lower takings leading to lower expenditure on repairs and renewals, with the ensuing air of neglect causing further reductions in custom. Finally, the owners applied for planning permission to surrender the licence and build residential accommodation on the site, but this was refused. The famous PPG7: *The Countryside: Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development* expresses reservations about the conversion of commercial premises to residential use, and pubs in many parts of the country suffer from a similar problem.

In some cases, diversification may be the key to increasing commercial viability. Here, the accent could be on maximising the assets and physical space usage of the pub. For example, rooms could be made available for regular community group meetings – adult education facilities and playgroups could be provided. Using, and perhaps modifying, the pub could make it possible to provide a wider range of services, including post office facilities and a consulting room for visiting GPs. Simple office functions like internet access and fax and photocopying facilities could be installed. The economic viability of these propositions would need to be assessed.

However, in this instance, the landlords would maintain that they have done everything possible to boost trade, but the general economic climate and the decline in rural pubs has overcome their efforts. It would be hard to argue that the Rising Sun is an essential part of the rural community. Only one householder in the hamlet frequented the pub on a regular basis, but

it was a local landmark, used by people from neighbouring villages. As such, it either deserves rate relief or should be treated like any other failing business, and be sold on for an alternative use if there is one.

The rest of the hamlet looks as prosperous as it had done a dozen years before. Houses are freshly painted and gardens well maintained. The farms continue their work, but there is no other evidence of commercial activity. Owing to the economic pressures, the pub has finally been forced to close its doors to the public. Even an appeal to the Lands Tribunal for rate relief has become a problem as it has been ruled that there must be a full appeal. This would require the expertise and services of a barrister. This again has an impact upon the landlords who do not have the same resources as the local authorities to pursue their claim.

The conclusion from all these events is self-evident. The small community of farms and residential property now has in the middle of it a public house that remains a public house and can only be sold as one. Yet it is closed and not trading. Who would wish to take on such a business that has lost its customer base and the associated good will? This is particularly so given the general nature of the decline of the rural pub trade.

It is difficult to argue that this pub is an essential part of the local community, but it could warrant rate relief. It is now too late. The intransigence of the planning authority and government guidelines may mean that the building, which has no income, may go into physical decline and decay. Does this prospect adequately serve the needs of the local community, or is there a better compromise solution available? ■

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