

# The Role of the Public House in Sustaining Rural Communities

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on the social role of the public house in rural communities and the implications that the decline in number is having on rural residents and communities. Specifically it looks at how the rural public house helps to create as well as strengthen social networks and examines what the decline in number really means for those living in rural localities. In doing this it draws on the authors own primary research and briefly discusses the cultural role of the rural public house in sustaining rural communities, as this is often interlinked with the social role. The paper, whilst recognising that public houses are commercial enterprises facing significant pressures and that change is inevitable, argues that the decline in the number of rural public houses has significant implications for the sustainability of rural communities.

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## Introduction

The public house or, as it is known to most, the pub is iconic. To quote Gorham, (1950, 16) "...it's a place where you can buy a drink and drink it without the obligation to do anything else, such as buying a meal". It is, however, much more than this, it is a cultural and social hub, it offers insight into England's history/heritage and it is a place where networks can be created, strengthened and extended. Although iconic the public house is a taken for granted institution. It has merged into everyday life, people are fully aware that it is exists. For many the pub is 'just there' and always will be. This type of envisagement can be seen as naive and highly erroneous. It has been reported by the campaign group CAMRA (2010) that approximately 39 pubs cease trading each week. This equates to 2028 pub closures annually. Public houses are ceasing to trade in both rural and urban localities. However, it can be perceived as being more significant in rural areas. In contrast to village pubs, town public houses often get taken over and reinvented into establishments such as theme bars, luxury restaurants and hybrid clubs (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001). Although, the rural public house is seldom taken over in this manner but it has over the decades undergone much change, its appearance has altered and there has been a shift towards the retailing of food. Additionally, as a partial consequence of the previous two changes, there has been a change in term of clientele. The public house, in contrast to Pre-World War Two and the immediate decades which followed, now has a broad range of customers, including both sexes of all ages, singles, couples and families (Jennings, 2007). There are many interwoven factors behind the changes that have occurred to the rural public house, as too there are behind the decline in their number. These range from changes in the capitalist

economy through to policy and legislation. Although there has been a decline in the overall number of rural public houses there has been little to no decline in the importance of the rural public house. Rural pubs play an important social, cultural and economic role. It is in light of this that this paper takes place.

The paper will start with a discussion on the existing public house literature before going on to detail the main changes that have occurred to the rural public house since World War Two. Following on from this it will look at the decline in numbers of rural public houses and will explore what the decline means for rural communities. Whilst the paper will principally focus on the social impact of the decline, it will briefly touch upon the cultural and economic impact. It will do this because the three roles of the public house are interlinked and thus it is difficult to examine each role separately from the other two. The paper will draw upon data collected from face to face interviews, completed as part of an ongoing PhD and from sustainability literature, to argue that whilst public houses are businesses, whose overriding goal is to remain economically viable, the decline in the number of rural public houses has implications for rural communities and their sustainability.

Before proceeding, it is important to momentarily focus on the meanings of 'rural' and 'communities' and the context in which they will be used in this paper. The term 'rural' is elusive; it means different things to different people. Consequently there is no one uniform definition but instead there exists a vast array of differing ones. As Woods (2005) demonstrates many of the classifications of 'rural' can be critiqued leading to the identification of problems and, in some instances, merits. As with 'rural', 'community' is also elusive. In recent years this phrase has gained momentum and become a buzz word, particularly amongst politicians and the media. However, it is far from being a straightforward term. There are different categories of communities including interest (Moseley, 2003; Poole, 2007) and geographical (Bryden *et al*, 1997; Moseley, 2003; Poole, 2007). Although different, there is a degree of overlap between these categories. At the core of both is the idea that a common bond exists between people, that those involved are aware of this bond and through this bond interaction occurs (Moseley, 2003). It is here where problems can be identified and conflict regarding what means to be part of a community can arise. As Liepins (2000) argues 'community' is essentially a social construct. The bond, therefore, can be experienced and perceived in a variety of differing ways depending on the individual concerned. Consequently a degree of caution needs to be taken when applying the term to a group of people. The paper is concerned with exploring the social role of the public house and how it impacts upon individual experiences and perceptions of rural communities. The approach taken, therefore, is to let the data speak for itself. The term sustainable is a contested concept but it is not the purpose of this paper to enter into this debate. The paper is concerned with rural public houses and social networking. It is, however, necessary, so that the reader is able to contextualise the paper, to specify the definition that the author is using in the research underpinning the paper. The working definition of 'sustainable' being used in the author's PhD is as follows: the reproduction, through time, of various capitals – e.g. social, human, environmental, cultural, and economic - to ensure the long term viability of entities such as 'rural communities' and public houses (adapted from Cheltenham Observatory, 1998, cited in Moseley, 2003:20).

## **Public House Literature**

In contrast to other iconic services namely, the Post Office and the local shop, there has been very little research conducted on the public house. Much of the literature that exists merely charts the history and development of the pub in terms of its regulation and profit pursuit (see Brandwood, *et al*, 2004; Everitt and Bowler, 1996; Hutt 1973; Jennings, 2004; Kingsnorth, 2008a; Kingsnorth, 2008b; Martin, 2009; Pratten, 2007a; Pratten, 2007b; Pratten, 2007c; Wilby, 2008). Moreover, a significant proportion can also be described as being journalistic in style (Hutt, 1973; Kingsnorth, 2008a; Kingsnorth, 2008b; Martin, 2009; Wilby, 2008). There are some exceptions to this. Muir (2009) explored the value of the community pub focussing on its social impact whilst the Social Issues Research centre (SIRC, 2008) examined the factors which make the pub appealing to the masses. These two studies can be considered groundbreaking in so far as they helped to put the neglected topic of the rural public house onto the research agenda and highlighted that is worthy of social science research. The work of Muir (2009) can also be considered as providing the foundations for additional work on the public house. Muir's (2009) study explored the causes of the decline in the number of community public houses and proceeded to look at why these types of public house are important institutions. It did not, however, look at what the decline in number actually means for those who inhabit the locality and the community as a whole.

The research by SIRC (2008) had a different remit to that of Muir (2009). It focussed on assessing the qualities that make the public house appealing to people. In doing this it explored how often and why people frequent public houses but did not focus on the decline in the number of public houses and thus the impact this is having on individuals, villages and communities. SIRC's (2008) research, apart from the occasional reference, examined the public house as a generic institution. There are many different types of public house. There are, for example hybrid pubs, theme pubs, restaurant led pubs, drink only pubs, and chain establishments like Wetherspoons and Brewers Fayre. These types of public house tend to be located in towns and cities and can be described as being generic and, to some degree, impersonal. There tends to be minimal interaction between staff and patrons and also between different patrons. Conversely village public houses tend to be collective and personal. Their main audience tends to be those who reside in the immediate and surrounding area, as well as tourists. Although these types of public house exist in towns and cities they have become much more of a rarity. As the night-time economy has reinvented itself to maintain its commercial exploitability there has been shift towards the development of chameleon, theme and cafe style bars at the expense of more community orientated public houses (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001; Hobbs *et al*, 2003). By examining the public house as a generic institution, SIRC (2008) did not take into account that different types of public house and public house locations can have different meanings to different individuals and thus there is no clear dissemination of why people choose to frequent the type of public house that they do. The author's research aims to address of these questions, specifically it aims to examine the role of the public house in sustaining rural communities.

## **The Rural Public House Post World War Two**

Drinking establishments have been a feature of England for many centuries, although they have not always been called public houses. Historically, it is possible to identify three categories of social drinking establishments, inns, taverns and alehouses. The

first of these establishments; the inn, provided overnight accommodation alongside refreshments (Jennings, 2007). The alehouse, in terms of numbers outstripped the other two types of establishment, it was the establishment famous for selling ale, it was open to all and formed a focal point whereby friends, family and neighbours congregated (ibid). Both the Inn and the ale house existed in a variety of locations ranging from villages and market towns through to large cities. In contrast taverns existed almost exclusively in market towns and cities; their main specialism was the retailing of fine wines, leading to a client base mainly of the middle and upper classes (Brandwood, *et al*, 2004). As the centuries passed the distinction between these establishments became blurred and the public house came to be the umbrella term to describe drinking establishments. Over the course of time social drinking establishments have been subjected to both liberal and authoritarian regulation, and usually the latter has predominated (Jennings, 2007). The aim of much of the legislation before World War Two, with the exception of the 1830 Beer Act, was to suppress the number of drinking establishments, alcohol consumption and the perceived consequences of drinking namely drunkenness and disorder (ibid).

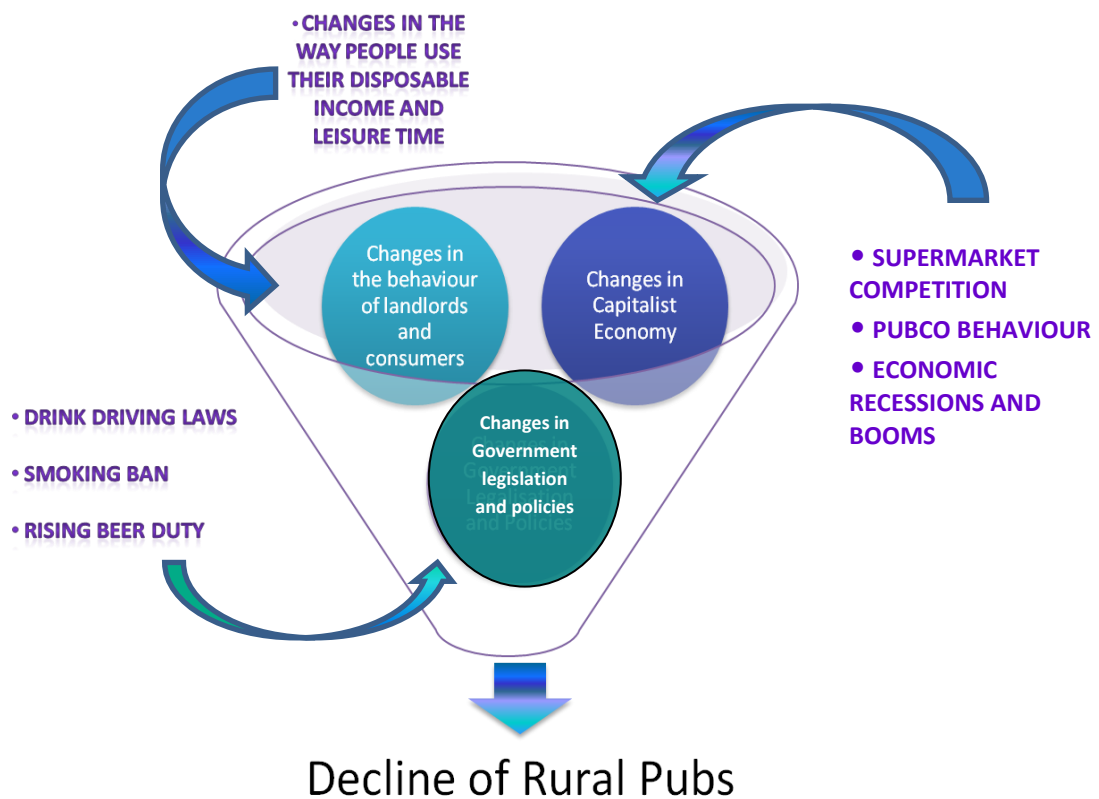
In the immediate decades that followed World War Two the rural public house embarked on a period of change; profit maximisation became the overriding goal of the rural public house. Although the origins of this change can be dated to before World War Two it intensified after the War (Pratten, 2007a, Pratten, 2007b). Rural public houses started to renovate their external appearance, install gaming machines, retail food, keg beer and lager; there was also an extension of the tie imposed on public house tenants by the breweries (Pratten, 2007b). Running parallel to this overhaul in imagery was a marked change in rural public house clientele. Rather than being a predominately male establishment there became a more mixed clientele, comprising of men, women and families, conversely there was, however, a decline in younger patrons (Jennings, 2007; Pratten, 2007b). Although a degree of this shift can be attributed to the strategies employed by the breweries to broaden clientele and maximise profit, there were other factors at work. Night time economies began to significantly expand towards the end of the 1960's. They continue to use the power of consumerism to promote the fantasy that they can provide individuals with something money can not buy unforgettable emotions and memories (Malbon cited in Hobbs, *et al*, 2003). These promises, combined with greater mobility, have lured, particularly, the young to participate in night time economies often at the expense of the rural public house.

A significant policy change took place in 1989; the 1989 Beer Orders introduced by the Monopoly and Mergers Commission were an attempt to break up the dominant brewery ownership of public houses (Everitt and Bowler, 1996; Kingsnorth, 2007b; Pratten, 2007c). In reality, power was transferred from the breweries to newly created, by the breweries, pub companies – PubCos (Brandwood, *et al*, 2004). PubCos even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century retain a significant proportion of public houses. In 2007 three of the biggest PubCos owned approximately 20,000 public houses, as with their predecessors, profit pursuit with minimum layout is situated at their core (Kingsnorth, 2007). This mentality has had a negative impact, particularly on consumer choice of where they can enjoy a drink. If a rural public house is not profitable, closure becomes the main option. However, to avoid being accused of damaging rural communities, owners do not always automatically close the establishment. Instead they often get young inexperienced tenants in, offer little pastoral help and let the appearance of the pub decay. They then justify closure on the grounds that the outlay to get the pub up to a high standard outstrips the financial benefits and the pub

is closed on the grounds it is no longer commercially viable (Haydon, 1994; Kingsnorth, 2007b). Authors like Kingsnorth (2007b) imply that this is a deliberate strategy however there is no evidence to either substantiate or contest this. There are other factors, besides PubCo behaviour, behind the decline in the number of rural pubs. In reality many of the factors are interrelated; however, it is possible to distinguish three types of factors: changes in the capitalist economy, changes in Government legislation/policies and changes in the behaviour of landlords and consumers. Each of these types has sub factors (see figure 1). The remit of this paper does not allow for individual coverage of each factor. (For coverage on the individual factors behind the decline in number of public houses see Muir (2009).

Fig 1: Factors behind the decline in the number of rural public houses

Source - Markham, C, (2011)



In order to survive and remain commercially viable some public houses are diversifying. The main methods adopted thus far have been into the retailing of food, with a focus on local produce, going back to basics and retailing real ale alongside other types of beer, providing overnight accommodation and providing a base for other services, namely the Post Office, to locate. Clearly there is an economic propellant behind all of these methods; however, in some instances, particularly with the last method, there is also a social one. In some villages, when the Post Office or other service has come under the threat of closure the landlord of the public house has stepped in and provided a location for the service and in some

instances taken on the responsibility of the service. In a high proportion of cases landlords have done this to ensure that the local community does not lose the facilities it values most (Countryside Agency, 2001).

## **Methodology**

To study the social role of the public house in sustaining rural communities' interviews with village residents, publicans (past and present), other local service providers, and the campaign group CAMRA, conducted as part of an ongoing PhD, were examined. The ongoing PhD makes use of the Glaserian (1978) grounded theory approach. Because of the time it takes to code in accordance with this approach data analysis is still ongoing. As a consequence the findings discussed in this paper are preliminary. The face to face interviews took place between June 2010 and March 2011 and took place in rural Lincolnshire. A variety of residents, publicans and other local service providers of all ages from approximately 20 villages, were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured. This was to enable the participants the opportunity to explore their own perceptions and experiences of the rural public house and the role it plays in rural communities. All the villages where the interviews took place can be described as being rural. For the purposes of data collection rural was defined loosely as villages and hamlets which contain and/or are surrounded by open countryside (adapted from Francis, *et al*, 2001). This was adopted so not to limit which villages data could be collected from. In the main, however, data has been collected from more sparsely populated villages. The interviews focussed on the sustainability of rural communities. For the purpose of this paper, it will be the principally the preliminary findings related to the social value of the public house which will be discussed. To complement the findings examples and comparisons from existing public house literature will be utilised.

## **The Rural Public House - A Social Icon?**

"Pubs once had an important socialising influence, particularly among the working classes. They were the only places, apart from churches, where teenagers and pensioners rubbed along together" (Wilby, 2008). Whilst this implies that the public house is more than a commercial venture it also devalues that idea by suggesting that it no longer performs the socialising role it once did. In one sense the social role of the public house has altered, but not in the way implied by Wilby (2008). Instead, it can be argued that the social value has intensified but in a different guise. Historically, the public house in general, and in particular the rural public house, was a place where mainly working class men would congregate to unwind from work before going home (Buckton, 2005). As one Lincolnshire village resident recalled (2010a) "when I was growing up it was only men who went to pubs, they would go there to socialise with work colleagues and friends of all ages". Similar sentiments to this have been expressed by approximately 30 interview respondents. Many respondents remarked that the rural public house was a social centre for men and that alongside the local shop and Post Office it formed the hub of the village. This gives the impression that the public house was a male dominated establishment. Women, did not tend to frequent public houses, unless accompanied by their partner for Sunday lunch, it was deemed an inappropriate environment for women (Titchmarsh, 2010). Times have, however, changed.

Now it is perfectly acceptable for men, women, couples and families to visit public houses any day of the week, any time during opening hours.

Although a marked change has taken place in terms, of who visits rural public houses, it can be proposed that the rural public house still remains the hub of many rural localities. It provides a place where individuals can meet (pre-planned or by chance), have a chat, enhance knowledge and generally have a good time. By doing this the rural public house, like other rural services, such as the village shop and Post Office, helps to create, expand and strengthen social networks. Research by SIRC (2008) and Muir (2009) draws explicit attention to the fact that rural public houses matter when it comes to social networking. The rural public house provides an atmosphere which is conducive to social interaction. It is an informal establishment where individuals are able to come and go as they please and interact on different levels, ranging from simple greetings through to in-depth social and conversational engagement with others (Muir, 2009). This lends itself well to the creation, expansion and strengthening of social networks. As several Lincolnshire village inhabitants remarked “pubs provide people of all generations a place to meet one another” (Village Resident B, 2010b). The village public house is “a good place to meet up with old friends and a good place to meet new people from different walks of life” (Village Resident C, 2010c). Sentiments such as these have been a common occurrence amongst interview respondents, not only from my own investigation but also from other studies, “I walk into the pub and I nearly always get introduced to people I’ve never met before... I wouldn’t necessarily be associating with them outside of the pub but I’d always say hello to them and ask them how they’ve been getting on and things and then I’d probably settle down with the group that I almost certainly always see in the pub everyday ... so it’s kind of a mixture really” (Interview respondent, cited in SIRC 2008, pp21).

The idea, suggested by Lincolnshire village resident B (2010), that the rural public house can play a significant role in sustaining community networks is one which warrants some discussion. An opinion poll conducted as part of Muir’s (2009) investigation yielded the notion that many individuals perceive the public house as being the number one social establishment for encouraging positive relations amongst individuals from differing backgrounds. On one level the rural public house may aid community networks. It is open to all and its atmosphere is one which invites and encourages conversation amongst users. However, it is questionable as to what extent this occurs for two reasons. First, some people visit the rural public house for personal space and time and thus do not want to engage with other users, be it their neighbours or strangers. As SIRC (2008) acknowledges, on occasions people elect to visit less familiar rural public houses over their own local on the basis that they can be anonymous. Second, whilst the rural public house is open to all, not everyone frequents it; some groups are more prevalent than others. For example, despite an increase in female patrons there is still a gender disparity; in general male patrons outnumber their female counterparts (Muir, 2009). As a consequence of these two reasons, it can be proposed that the role the rural public house plays in maintaining community networks is somewhat limited. Whilst it can undeniably facilitate social integration between different walks of life, it cannot make it happen - that requires a variety of factors including individual willingness to engage with others.

Although early findings from the research upon which this paper is based echo many of the sentiments disseminated by SIRC (2008) and Muir (2009) regarding the positive role the rural public house plays in the creation, expansion and strengthening of social networks, there have been some anomalies. Whilst many acknowledge that the rural public house can

add substance to social networks, some Lincolnshire village residents have remarked that the rural public house and its atmosphere can have negative consequences for social and personal networks. "I personally think [pubs] can have a negative influence, they are places where gossip can be spread and that can cause damage to individuals and their personal relationships ... ultimately helping to erode the community bond that exists in many villages" (Village Resident D, 2010d). Such a statement cannot simply be disregarded; it is possible that on occasions social networks can be impeded as a result of visiting a rural public house. Alcohol consumption, particularly if excessive, can affect people in differing ways ranging from getting merry through to becoming subdued or even aggressive (see Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2007). This, combined with the 'easy come easy go' public house atmosphere, can lead to words being spoken and interpreted in a variety of ways, the upshot being that tensions between patrons can occur, possibly resulting in breakdowns of personal and social relationships. As one Lincolnshire resident commented (2010e) you can make friends in village pubs but you can also lose them, especially if you get smashed, lose your inhibitions and say things you don't mean. This highlights that it is not the rural public house per se which can impede social networks but rather a combination of atmospheric and individual attributions.

When a rural public house ceases to trade the ramifications can be described as immense. There can be an impact on individual village residents, the local community, the local economy and the imagery of the village. In some respects it is difficult to separate out these impact as they are often interrelated; however, an attempt to look at them individually, as far as is possible, will now occur. When a rural public house terminates so too does the social gathering point it provides. When this is lost those who rely on this place and space for their social interaction and networking may experience a decline in their quality of life. It has been documented by the Commission for Rural Communities (2007) that certain groups living in rural communities, e.g. older people, frequently experience isolation and loneliness. It can be proposed that the closure of vital rural services compounds this. "Some people rely on village services such as the pub to keep their social lives alive, when they shut, those people can withdraw from village life and become isolated" (Village Resident F, 2010f). This holds implications, if individuals withdraw from village life, they run the risk of experiencing further loneliness and possible social exclusion. This is especially the case if they decline or show no willingness to embrace offers by others to frequent either other rural public houses or community social events. Slowly, offers by others could be withdrawn, thus leaving the individual on their own, alienated from the rest of society. It is not only individuals that can suffer when a rural public house closes so too can the community it serves. As services become fewer, communities have fewer places where they can discuss matters and organise events. If there is no gathering point for community members to mingle and chat there potentially becomes an attenuation of the community. The lack of a physical space may mean that communication between members becomes at best sporadic. As Scruton (2006) notes, when important social institutions cease to exist, communities can experience isolation and members can become alienated from one another. The potential upshot of this is that a breakdown in community spirit could take place leading to a disjointed or divided community.

When any rural enterprise ceases to trade there are economic repercussions. However it can be argued that intertwined with this there are further implications for the social sustainability of rural communities. When one rural enterprise ceases it can have a knock on effect on the survival of other enterprises (Burgess, no date, cited in Hill, 2008).



This is especially the case if one rural enterprise makes use of other rural enterprises for goods provision. For example, if the rural public house gets its food provisions from local sources but then ceases to trade the sources from which it acquires its goods will lose custom, potentially resulting in produce providers becoming commercially unviable and unsustainable in the long term. The implication of this for communities is that they lose yet another local service, and therefore another place of congregation. "When villages lose their social meeting places communities die ... [the village] becomes sleepy and the life is sucked out of its community" (Village Resident G, 2010g). This type of attitude is one which is not held by all. Some individuals such as Hands (no date) cited in Hill, (2008) hold the view that it is not villages and their communities *per se* which are under threat by the decline in the number of rural enterprises but rather people's perceptions of villages. This is an interesting point. For many years villages have been portrayed by the media as being harmonious places in which the local services and community forms the basis of all its inhabitants' existence. In days gone by, this was pretty much the case (see Titchmarsh, 2010). However, as times have changed so too have villages and their communities. In contrast to previous decades a high percentage of those who live in rural localities work and socialise in or around other, particularly urban, localities. This, combined with greater personal mobility, has led a number of residents to have other commitments and responsibilities outside of the village. Consequently, whilst these residents may embrace their local services and community, they simply do not want to or cannot afford the same level of commitment that previous generations did.

"When you have lost your inns, drown your empty selves, for you will have lost the last of England" (Hilaire Belloc, 1943 cited in Hutt, 1973, pp7). This famous quote by Belloc to some extent sums up the cultural value of the village pub. For some village residents, particularly older people, the pub and its sign offer reassurance that their village is still a real village with a beating component. "When villages lose their pub it's a shame, it makes the village feel gloomy and unoccupied of life" (Village Resident H, 2011h). To some extent this is understandable if the pub is the only service remaining in a village. When it ceases to trade then the village essentially becomes a collection of dwellings which could be described as a location rather than a place. Whilst some see the public house as an indicator of the health of a village others, like Kingsnorth (2008b) and Faulks (2008) see it as a unique and integral part of English history. For Kingsnorth (2008b) public houses and public house signs are a connection to the past and when they are lost so too is our link to the past. Initial findings from the research upon which this paper is based suggest that some village residents hold similar views to those of Kingsnorth (2008b). For example, a number of interview respondents argued that wherever you are in England the sight of a village public house and its sign signals a sign of comfort and reassurance. Approximately 14 felt that the public house, and more importantly, its sign transported them back to their past as well as their present village of residence. Whilst on the surface such notions may seem slightly perplexing, on reflection they are merely resonating with what many of us subconsciously think. The public house sign is usually one of the first things we notice about a village public house and it shouts "come in, all welcome". This is the same wherever and whichever village public house you venture into. Once inside, you are hard pressed not to notice similarities between the village public house you are currently in and ones you frequented in the past, since the drinks served are more or less the same as too are the conversations amongst publicans and clients.

Over the last few decades the rural public house, like many other rural enterprises has diversified. Whilst some rural public houses have diversified as a means to remain economically viable, others have done so to try and ensure that the community they serve remains sustainable in the long term. There have been different levels and types of diversification. The rural public houses which have been principally concerned with profit margins have tended to focus solely on the diversification of retailing good quality locally sourced food. In contrast those that have taken a key interest in helping to keep the local community sustainable have taken more novel approaches including the housing of another rural service, namely the rural Post Office and/or village shop. There are several examples where this has taken place including The Craven Heifer Hotel in Stainforth, North Yorkshire and the White Hart Inn, Blythburgh, Southwold, Suffolk (Countryside Agency, 2001). In both of these places the reaction amongst village residents has been positive. There have also been some real benefits to the local community including the keeping open of vital services and a focal point where individuals can congregate and community meetings can take place (Countryside Agency, 2001). Although in these instances the housing of one service in another has been warmly embraced, some Lincolnshire village residents have concerns about the changing ethos associated with this. The initial findings from my research suggest that whilst many village residents would go along with the idea they do not like it and would prefer services to remain separate from one another. As one Lincolnshire resident (2010h) put it “Pubs should stick to what they are good at, selling alcohol and food...Post Offices in village pubs is wrong. Village services should, as far as is possible, remain separate. That said if it keeps services open and gives people a place to meet it could be a worthwhile venture”. Initial findings also suggest that whilst residents do see social and community value in the housing of one service in another they also believe that it lessens the individual services, the image of a village and its status. “I think one service in another is problematic, whilst it does maintain the services and provides communities with a meeting place it devalues the worth of the services and the village as a whole. Ultimately the services lose their identity and the village loses its character and its charm” (Village Resident, 2010i). This suggests there is some ambivalence amongst some residents. On one hand they dislike change but on the other they recognise that change may be needed for the villages to survive.

## **Summary**

The rural public house has been a feature of the English countryside for many centuries. In spite of this it has been a much neglected subject of social science research. Much of the existing literature on the public house is old and/or journalistic in style. Moreover it has tended to concentrate its attention on the public house history and regulation. There are, however, two exceptions to this: SIRC's (2008) study and Muir's (2009) study. These are clearly landmark texts on the public house in so far as they explicitly highlight that the public house is worthy of academic research. Although these studies have been a step in the right direction there are some shortcomings with them. Neither looks at what the decline in number of public houses actually means for communities and thus both fail to examine the role of public houses in sustaining communities. What is more, neither look specifically at rural public houses. It was in light of this that I decided to embark on a PhD looking at this issue. It is the initial findings from this ongoing PhD that have formed the bulk of this paper. Whilst the rural public houses play a vital economic, cultural and social

role in rural communities this paper has principally focussed on the social. It is possible to summarise the initial findings as follows. In the main rural public houses can help create, expand and strengthen social networks. This, however, can be limited as not all residents use the public house or want to engage with fellow customers. When rural enterprises such as the rural public house cease trading there can be immense implications for village residents and rural communities. There is a loss of a social gathering place, which can lead to some experiencing a decline in their overall quality of life with increased isolation and possible social exclusion. In relation to communities the loss of a gathering place can lead to sporadic communication amongst members and a general breakdown of communities. To combat the negative social effects of rural enterprise closure some rural public houses have offered and embraced the idea of delivering other services such as the Post Office. This idea is one which has in some instances been received warmly and in others with some trepidation. The main concern from my own research participants is that this change devalues the services and the imagery of the village. Many villagers interviewed expressed the view that services should remain, as far as is possible, separate. They believed that separate services and traditional characteristics (in the case of the rural public house its name and signage) are indicators that a village is still a village with a beating heart.

To conclude, whilst there has been an undeniable decline in the number of rural public houses there has been little to no decline in their social importance. They continue to be a social lifeline for some residents and provide communities a focal gathering point where they can mingle, have a chat and generally discuss community matters. As a consequence they play a vital role in helping to sustain rural communities in the long term.

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