

Village Transitions

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Abstract

The decline in traditional rural services namely the pub, Post Office and shop and the rise of 'new' niche entrepreneurial ventures has led to some villages taking on a different socio-economic identity. This shift has led to some, including the proprietors of traditional services, to argue that villages are becoming disjointed and polarised in terms of a 'them' (incomers) and 'us' (long term residents) culture and that this is detrimental to their survival. One solution is for traditional service providers to draw upon their entrepreneurial skills to respond to the new opportunities associated with a rural economy that is increasingly driven by consumption demand (Slee, 2005), thus helping to ensure their viability and sustainability.

A combination of primary and secondary research, however, suggests that in the main, traditional rural service providers have chosen not to do this for a combination of reasons. This paper will elaborate on these issues in the context of a wider rural literature that describes a rural renaissance (Fieldsend & Kerekes, 2011) based on a growing and increasingly affluent population (Woods, 2005) and associated business growth (Bosworth, 2010).

Introduction

Traditional rural services namely the pub, Post Office, shop and garage have seen their number dwindle over the last few decades. Some villages which once had all of these services have witnessed a shift in their service composition. They have seen a rise in the number of 'new niche' entrepreneurial ventures. This shift has not taken place synonymously throughout rural England; some villages have witnessed it to a much greater extent than others. Some villages such as Helpringham, south Lincolnshire, have experienced a situation whereby the traditional services are declining but there has been no introduction of new niche services. In contrast other villages have seen a scenario whereby the rise of new enterprises running alongside the continuation of traditional ones has been perceived by some, including the proprietors of the traditional services, to be to

the detriment of the long term survival of traditional village services. The main argument being that they disrupt the village composition and change its atmosphere. This paper uses case study examples and data from both primary and secondary sources will examine why, in the main traditional service providers are not drawing upon their entrepreneurial skills to respond to the challenges they face and respond to the opportunities associated with a rural economy that is increasingly driven by consumption demand (Slee, 2005). In the context of this paper, a rather subjective preconception of “rural will be used. It will be taken to mean any villages and hamlets which contain and/or are surrounded unequivocally by open countryside (adapted from Francis et al, 2001). This paper is not concerned with statistical or spatial data and thus the reader will be able to adopt their own ideas and conclusions regarding what this space looks like and the types of traditional and niche services that operate within it (Curry and Webber, 2012). The paper will start by looking at a case study example of Helpringham, a village which has seen a decline in traditional services but little to no introduction of new niche enterprises. It will look at the type of opportunities the remaining traditional service proprietors in this village could adopt to ensure their viability and sustainability and it will look at why they has, in the main, elected not to take advantage of such opportunities. This will be followed by a case study example and discussion of how the introduction of new niche enterprises is changing the socio-economic identity as well as the cultural image of the village and leading to scenario whereby, some including the proprietors of traditional services are arguing that the long term viability of their businesses and the village is being put ‘at risk’.

The paper draws upon both primary and secondary research. The former comes from data collected as part of an on-going PhD. The data was collected in accordance with a grounded theory approach and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of individuals ranging from village residents through to traditional service providers namely, the proprietors of village shops, newsagents, Post Offices and pubs.

Case Study - The village of Helpringham

Helpringham, is a village located in South Lincolnshire, it has a population of approximately, 500. This village in the 1960’s encompassed many traditional rural services including two pubs, several village shops – one of which housed the Post Office, a garage, a butchers, a bakery, a hardware store and a forge (Helpringham History Society, 2012). Over the course of the last two decades many of these services have disappeared. The decline did not occur over night it was a gradual process. For example one the pubs closed in the 1960’s the butchers did not cease to trade until the mid 1990’s, it then reopened post

Millennium only to close once again a few years later. Currently the village has one pub and one shop which also combines the Post Office. Helpringham, in the main, has not witnessed an influx of niche enterprise ventures, with the exception of the landscape architecture business which was set up in the 1990s, there has been no other 'new' niche entrepreneurial ventures. This, in part, may be due to its poor infrastructure; it does not have fast broadband or mains gas. However, these minor constraints pale in comparison to the opportunities available to the remaining traditional service proprietors to ensure their long term viability and sustainability. One local service for example, had the opportunity not long ago to not only package and deliver fresh fruit and vegetables to village residents but to also diversify into home delivery of goods and services however it elected not to. The reasoning was because it was deemed to much hassle for little financial reward. " we could deliver goods and we could make a profit however in the grand scheme of things it is more hassle than we want... we make a comfortable living....if our long term survival was in jeopardy then we would consider diversifying but until then we don't see much need" (Traditional Service Provider, 2010c). This attitude is not unique much of the data yielded as part of an ongoing PhD on the role of the rural public house has shown that unless traditional service providers are able to see a quick and direct return on their investments they are reluctant to diversify into niche markets. One pub landlord (2010) from a nearby village, was quick to state "we are a business not a charity or social organisation, I'm here to make money not friends or acquaintances". This attitude is one which may hinder the long term survival and viability of traditional services. There is a fine line between customer relations and self interest. Clearly the goal of any business is to prosper, however in order to do this, there has to be good relations between the provider and the client. In villages this is vital; locals can make or break services. "I use my local shop because I want to show my support to my local village services, I could quite easily use the supermarket for everything but I choose not to. It is handy to get a pint of milk or loaf of bread from the village shop....when you go there it's so friendly and welcoming its personal.... if that atmosphere was to change then I would certainly stop frequenting and get all my groceries from the impersonal supermarket (Village resident, 2010a).

Case Study - The village of Navenby

In stark contrast to Helpringham the village of Navenby, has witnessed an influx of 'new' niche rural enterprises, including a glassware store, a travel agents, and a vintage clothes shop. This village, although it has seen a decline in the number of traditional services, still retains many traditional enterprises such as a bakery, newsagents and pub. In this village the new and the traditional appear to fir together in a harmonious fashion. Residents are able to enjoy a multitude of

services in one locality, with the ability to socialise and expand their personal networks. Service providers are able to feed off one another and in doing so help maintain their viability and sustainability. As one service provider remarked. "If we closed then the local services we buy our meat and vegetables from would suffer and that would be bad for them and the village's economy as a whole" (Traditional Service Provider, 2010a). In this village there is a sense of unity between the services providers, however it has been remarked by residents and service proprietors alike that at times there feels like there is a divide between the traditional and the 'new'.

"sometimes the village seems separated you have the pub, Co-op, newsagents and the bakery, the old school services then you have these upcoming services which in my mind haven't fitted into our way of village life. Don't get me wrong if they are willing to support the village and the traditional services then I'm all for it but they don't...take what happened to our Post Office...we lose this but keep a travel agents, it makes no sense to me" (Village resident, 2011).

This resident was remarking on the closure of their local Post Office which ceased in 2011. The Post Office in Navenby, had been an integral feature of the village for a number of decades, however in 2011 the then owners decided to retire. At this point the Post Office was put out for tender, however, there were no takers and thus when the proprietors vacated the premises there became no village Post office.

When a rural enterprise such as the village shop, the Post Office, the bakery or the public house ceases to trade there are far reaching implications for individuals, rural communities and local economies. It can be argued that when one rural commercial service ceases to trade the ripple effect can follow. Some rural enterprises rely heavily on other local commercial services to minimize cost, maximize profit and ultimately survive. A high percentage of small rural businesses, for example, make use of local Post Offices, if these close then those businesses either have to travel further afield to or relocate to another area (CPRE, 2006). One solution to try and minimise such implications is for other service providers to draw upon their entrepreneurial skills to respond to the new opportunities associated with a rural economy that is increasingly driven by consumption demand (Slee, 2004), thus helping to ensure their viability and sustainability. However, both primary and secondary however, suggests that in the main, traditional rural service providers have not chosen not to do.

Non-capitalisation of opportunities by traditional service providers

There have been many changes to the UK rural economy in recent decades. One of the biggest changes has been the shift towards an economy based on manufacturing and consumption rather than on industries which exploit the natural environment; notably agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining (Slee, 2005; Winter and Rushbrook, 2003). Part of this is due to changes in the global and national capitalist economy however demographic changes also play a role. Over the last few decades there has, for a number of interrelated economic and social reasons - including employment opportunities, been a migration of people from the urban to the rural (Bosworth, 2010; Woods, 2005). This counterurbanisation may itself have helped to shape the direction of the rural economy. Areas which have a high population tend to have a greater number of services and an ever increasing influx of new niche enterprises (CRC, 2010). Furthermore there exists an aspiration amongst many to visit or inhabit rural localities (Bosworth, 2010). The combination of these elements, it can be proposed, have helped to propel the rural economy into one which is profoundly based on consumption. Many rural villages such as the Lincolnshire village of Navenby as well as the examples provided by Slee (2005) have developed and expanded their services of consumption, namely pub-restaurants, craft shops and recreational activities such as organized shoots, to draw in residents and tourists who in turn consume the products being offered to them. In-migrants themselves have also aided the shift that is occurring in the rural economy. Research has indicated that in some locations not only are in-migrants the driving force behind many of the new niche rural enterprises but that in a high proportion of cases they are connecting with their community by employing local people and carrying out commercial transactions with other local businesses (Defra Rural Economics Unit, 2008; Bosworth, 2010).

The overriding goal of businesses enterprises, whether they are micro or macro, is to make profit and remain commercially viable. Thus when they see a gap in the market place the usual response is often to capitalize on it. Supermarkets have done this particularly well. They have capitalised on the fact that, in general, people have greater personal mobility and that local services often forced to keep their prices high to ensure incomings exceed expenditure. Supermarkets make use of low-cost pricing strategies to provide consumers the ability to purchase all their groceries at one destination at a relatively cheap price. Whilst this has clear benefits for the individual consumer it has implications for traditional rural enterprises. Village bakeries and shops are often unable to compete with the price and convenience of the large supermarkets; consequently they are often unable to remain profitable unless they are prepared to diversify and take advantage of the opportunities that are

arsing in the current rural economy. (CRC, 2007c). Given this, it is surprising that traditional service proprietors are turning down opportunities. For example, the Post Office in Navenby could have been incorporated into the current newsagent or into, as has been the case in some Lincolnshire villages such as Heckington, the vicinity of the local Co-operative. However, these options were not capitalised upon. This is a shame because such methods can have immense consequences for rural communities, the individual, the proprietors of services and the local economy. By integrating additional services the proprietors are able to acquire additional sources of income – this can result in a number of ways. First, if a traditional service such as the village pub or newsagent acquires the Post Office then they are provided with a ‘new’ source of income. Second, there is the possibility of cross-sale, whereby the consumer goes in with the purpose of buying for example, a postage stamp but ends up frequenting the other commercial enterprise resulting in increased trade and revenue (See The Countryside Agency, 2001). When traditional services take advantage of opportunities there are wide ranging benefits for local economies. For example, there can be the creation of extra jobs as well as an increase in cash flow which can help generate further economic activity. Increased tourism can be an additional benefit to local economies. Many people, before visiting an area, research what it has to offer. If they are alerted to a pub which has a good reputation or a unique selling point then they are more likely to visit that area and make use of the services it has to offer. This in turn boosts the local economy and contributes to the sustainability of local businesses.

The reasons for the lack of take up by traditional services to draw upon their entrepreneurial skills to respond to the new opportunities associated with a rural economy that is increasingly driven by consumption demand are often personal. They either do not have the financial means to cover the initial set up of the enterprise or they do not believe that the venture is a worthwhile investment. In the case of Navenby, the Post Office was being offered to other local service providers but with lower income contract than the then current proprietors were receiving (Interview participant, 2011). The outcome of this was that the remaining service providers were not prepared to accept the deal on offer to them, resulting in the eventual closure of the village Post Office. Primary research has found that, in the main, long standing traditional service providers are often set in the ways and not willing to respond to change even if it is a way to secure their long term survival. ‘I don’t want my service to change its demeanour, if this happens then the atmosphere may change and I don’t want that. This is a village shop which is friendly, welcoming and allows communication exchanges between residents to take place freely, should I go and plonk a service such as an internet cafe or even a Post Office here then

changes and whilst it might get me extra income it might not, in fact it may lead to a down turn in profit. I know some regulars would stop using my shop if it changed and that's a risk I'm not prepared to take' (Traditional Service provider, 2010b, paraphrased). This kind of stubbornness is not unique to this one individual. A documentary for BBC Wales (2011) highlighted some examples where publicans were refusing to diversify their business. They were tunnel focussed on keeping their pub the way it was and were not willing to adapt even if it enhanced their ability to remain commercially viable and sustainable.

This inflexibility and resistance to change by traditional service providers, may be one reason why on occasions some are perceiving the influx of new niche enterprises as leading to their villages becoming disjointed and polarised in terms of a 'them' (incomers) and 'us' (long term residents) culture. For example, if the providers are un-accepting of change then anything which threatens to compromise either their surroundings or their business will be viewed with ambivalence. Many individuals, including traditional rural service providers, village residents and non-village residents hold views about what the rural should look like, what it should contain and how its community act and behave (see Woods, 2005, 2011). If the reality does not match up to perceived expectations or if the introduction of the new threatens to alter current ways then those who are ambivalent to change can end up polarising themselves but perceive it as a general consensus. The rural is changing, to expect it to remain static and unaltered in the global capitalist climate we live in today is problematic. If the rural economy is to prosper and villages are to retain services then we must accept that change is inevitable and that the introduction of new niche enterprises serves only to strengthen both the village and the long standing services. If the traditional service proprietors cannot accept the changes that are taking place or fail to respond to the new opportunities then it maybe appropriate for them to reassess their position and act in accordance.

On occasions the lack or demise of a traditional service can have positive repercussions for the long term survival and sustainability of a village, its community and local economy. It can provide the foundations for and the propelling of a new rural enterprise. For example, the village of Swaton in South Lincolnshire does not have a pub but in recent years has seen the introduction and expansion of a brewery store. This enterprise started out by brewing and selling beer, but has now expanded and houses a coffee shop. As one village resident (2010e) remarked, until the introduction of the brewery store the village was sleepy but now it gets tourists - sometimes coaches stop here on their way to their destination. The development of this enterprise can be seen as beneficial for the local economy not only is it putting the village and subsequent

area on the map but it is generating cash flow for the area and thus helping to ensure the local economy prospers.

Summary discussion

The continuation of traditional and the introduction of 'new', rural enterprises are, without doubt, invaluable to the continuation of a thriving UK rural economy. In addition to providing employment they facilitate tourism and aid rural regeneration, generating additional economic activity and helping to strengthen local economies. There have been many changes to the UK rural economy in recent decades. Notably there has been shift away from an economy based on industry to one principally based on manufacturing and consumption. Villages have had to adapt to this change. Some villages have seen a situation whereby the traditional services are in decline and there has been no introduction of either new niche enterprises or attempts by traditional service providers to respond to the new opportunities associated with a rural economy that is increasingly being driven by consumption. In stark contrast to this other villages have encountered a scenario whereby the new meets the traditional. This has, in some instances, been met with trepidation leading to some residents and traditional service proprietors to argue that their villages are becoming disjointed, in terms of a them (incoming new niche enterprises) and us (long standing residents and traditional service providers) culture. This is partly to be expected as consumers we are often fed images as to how the rural should be. It is, however, not possible for the rural to continue living in the past; if its economy is to prosper and its communities flourish then opportunities need to be seized by all concerned, including traditional service providers. In an ideal world the traditional service providers could, should and would work alongside the new niche enterprises and capitalise as and when they can on their entrepreneurial skills to respond to the opportunities arising in the context of the rural economy being driven by consumption.

There are a variety of opportunities that traditional service providers could capitalise on. When proprietors of a long standing service retire other services could use their skills to either take on or incorporate some of most lucrative aspects of the business into their own enterprise. In the main, this however, does not happen. Additionally, they are failing to respond to gaps in the market place which are being driven by economy based on consumption. Proprietors could expand their enterprise to incorporate delivery of their goods, but once gain few are opting to do so. The barriers between traditional service proprietors and the seizing of opportunities is multi-dimensional. In part, there is concern that there would very little return on their investment and thus the risk is not worth taking. Another overriding factor is ambivalence to change, traditional service

proprietors are often fearful that change will result in fewer rather than additional commercial exchanges. Change can be forbidding, however it may be necessary in order to ensure the long term viability and sustainability of traditional rural services. In the current climate of economic austerity, it is understandable that service proprietors are reluctant to invest in other ventures. In some instances they simply do not have the initial revenue to set-up the enterprise. Moreover some proprietors may lack the knowledge to propel other services forward. To ease this type of burden a potential way forward would be the creation of further non-profit organisations, such as 'Pub is the Hub' to provide guidance and information on the ever changing rural economy. This along with policy which supports the continuation of rural services, such as reduced rates and lower taxes could provide the way forward allowing service providers to adapt to the changes needed to ensure their business remain commercially sustainable thus increasing the chances of long term survival.

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