

Life behind the bar at BA Sheepscombe or Inside the BA Sheepscombe

Introduction

The employment of staff in pubs is a continual merry go round of temporary appointments that change very often. Locally employed young people move on, older folk may stay longer but still move on regularly as their life circumstances change. In particular, the turnover of chefs is notoriously high. Village pubs have problems in that not only do young people move on but that the few bus services and their geographical location means those not living in the village have to be able to drive as there are no bus services after 6pm and for many and taxi fares are too expensive. One publican described the situation thus,

No, it's not easy at all. When we get them, we try to keep them and treat them right. But they've all got to travel eight miles, in a car, and they're often not on much more than minimum wage. Most of them are on 7.50 an hour, seven or eight, but I give them a bit extra, because I know they've got to travel. If they work an eight-hour shift, we'll feed them. We went through a period, one or two years ago, we couldn't get any staff, not at all. We put an advert out with an agency, for a 17 to 21-year-old, full time position, giving them a three-year apprenticeship and in a year, we had no replies. Not even one. It's the location, they can't get here. When you're talking about 16, 17-year olds, they can't drive. They can't get here. They had to rely on parents to drop them off to work and that doesn't usually work in the long run. (Chris-CA).

Another factor in some more wealthy villages is that there is not the pressure for young people to get a job as another publican suggests, 'I don't think they have the pressure from parents to go out and get a job like maybe once upon a time I did. I first worked in a pub when I was 14. Then I've worked ever since. Every weekend, £1.50 an hour'. I just don't think it is as encouraged. School work etcetera is encouraged more than getting a part time job' (Angela).

Some villagers may not wish to be seen behind the bar encountering many of the neighbours with whom they may not have comfortable relations. So, the stories of village pub survival must include a focus on how they manage their staffing needs.

One pub, the Butchers Arms in Sheepscombe, Gloucestershire have several staff who have been at the pub for some many years and they travel between 4 and 15 miles away taking up to 30 minutes. Ashley, who works three lunchtime shifts days a week has worked at the pub for 11 years since 2007. Barney, the chef, who works full time, a 40-hour week, has worked at the pub for 10 years. Barry, who works about 32 hours a week, has worked at the pub for 7 years and Anita also works full time and has been there nearly five years with Abby having been here 3 years, working part time. The current publicans Angela and Ben have been there for 12 years. We identified three significant aspects of these long-term employments, Coming to Work, Working Relationships and the Added Value of this job in this particular pub.

Coming to Work

To begin with the staff recognised their work as a job that satisfied them in terms of remuneration and conditions of work.

The nature of work

There was something about this service role that led to job satisfaction,

I suppose you come out and you feel like you've come to work as well. I worked as an art technician, but I didn't feel like I was going there, and I was working. I didn't go there and feel it was fun and I didn't go there and feel like it was fulfilling work either. So at least with this sort of job you feel like you're going to work, and you've served your customers so you feel like you've done a job, and you can stand back and think, oh, we've been really busy today, we've had a lot of people in, (Anita)

They enjoyed sharing the load and took pride in doing a good job with few staff,

On Tuesday we did 30 odd lunches. Angela cooking, me on bar and Anita washing up, making sandwiches, doing sweets, serving tables. You know, we do a good job with a minimum of staff. Then yesterday when Barry was on the bar, we did 50 lunches. Barney was cooking and there was two of us

doing floor roles - making sandwiches, serving tables taking food out collecting table and doing all the washing up. Barney is amazing, but when he gets busy Barry steps in and helps him and I'll jump into the bar, (Ashley).

Nevertheless, there are times when it is quite an exhausting job though engaging at the same time,

I always say it's like a love-hate thing, because I love it when it's busy because you get a bit of a buzz and you're just sort of on a mission serving people but afterwards you're just exhausted, you're tired, and then you need to try and regain your energy. So, it's nice when it's busy and hectic because it's a good buzz. On those bank holidays you can see everyone having a nice time, but if the sun is out you're thinking, 'if I wasn't at work I'd be those people enjoying themselves', but, at the same time there is just a good buzz with everything really and with everybody, (Anita).

She goes on to assert that 'working in this job is better for your mental health'.

They like the challenge of 'stepping in' and adding new knowledge, 'In my eyes you never stop learning in this trade, be it in the kitchen, be it in the bar, everything, you never stop learning. I enjoy keeping my hand in, in the kitchen, because obviously if Barney ever goes off sick, there's always Angela and myself who can jump in there straightaway' (Barry).

Job attraction

The place itself has is an attraction, 'Look at that view out the window of the pub. That inspires me every day and the drive here from Gloucester, where I live, is good. So, I can walk out there, to clear outside tables or whatever in the morning and just think this is my job. That's probably what's kept me here', (Ashley). The 'drive in is lovely through Slad with all the views. It's better than being stuck on a motorway for half an hour, (Anita).

The nature of a village pub and its role as a destination pub also has its attractions,

When I applied for the job I didn't know where the pub was, I'd never been here, I didn't know where I was driving to, I didn't know that it was just in the middle of a little village. I don't think I'd want to be in a big busy pub in the middle of town with lots of youngsters and under-age drinkers. I like the fact that it's food and drinks, a mix of people, locals, people on holiday, people just from a stone's throw away such as Gloucester and Cheltenham, who come here regularly but also it's nice to meet people who you've never met before. You can have a chat with them, where are they from; you learn things, don't you, about where they're from and what their towns are like. When I worked on soft furnishings and sewing, I was working on my own or with a very small team, so I only interacted with those few people. Whereas here every day is different, you get different people in, there's always someone new to speak to, (Anita).

A major factor in job attraction is the flexibility built in by the publicans 'I've still got a teenager at home, but it was a brilliant job when the children were all at home. Ben was flexible with times and I was able to fit work in around school times, being there to take Jack to school and pick him up (Ashley). It was the same for Barry,

It suits me better doing two evenings and I'm happier doing a lot of more lunchtimes so I can be with my children, as I am the main carer'. However, it makes sense for me to do Tuesday and Thursday evenings when my children stay with their mum. Ben and Angela have been helpful especially when the children were younger and growing up. I quite often used to bring them in at the weekend. Obviously, there's been problems in the past where my youngest one has been poorly, and they've been very supportive of that. They say, 'don't worry, stay at home, it's fine' and I don't think I would have got that anywhere else to be fair.

Job security was another major factor, not something one usually associates with pub work,

It's nice to come to a job where you know that you're secure and you're getting a certain wage every month, and you're being able to live. Whereas, if I continued to work in soft furnishings, I would have had to have gone self-employed. There would always be the worry that you're always making sure that there's enough work coming through. I guess it's the security of knowing that you've got a place of work here. You get up and go there every day; it's a change of scene and you're getting a wage every month, (Anita).

Abby has had two maternity leave periods during her three years here. She only took 11 weeks of the first maternity leave period after the publicans agreed to give her leave even though she was not really entitled to it as she had not worked long enough at the job. They also tried to get her maternity pay even though she was not entitled to it. 'Yeah I was really surprised actually because, I think, a big corporate place would have just said get out' (Abby). The publicans did not want to run their pub like a big organisation,

Everything we've done here has been the antithesis of what we were doing in the previous company, because we were in a brand. So, everything that you would do with your staff would be formulaic. You followed procedure, from interviewing to induction to appraisals and nonsense which I don't like. Obviously, there is a formula I go through, but it's not as regimental. In a company you had to do your stepping-stones stage one and then you had to move on to your stepping stones stage two - all this malarkey that went with being in a brand and I didn't want any of that really, (Angela).

The nature of the work and the job attraction led to some significant commitment.

Commitment

Commitment included maintaining high standards,

The enjoyment I get is all working towards one goal, to keep the customers happy, to give a good impression of the pub. To keep the standards up, to keep us high on trip advisor. We're all probably passionate about keeping that going. I do talk about it being my pub. When I talk to people, I'll say 'you have to come to my pub'. It's important, the quality of what we do. We are a representation of Ben and Angela, I suppose. When they're not around, we're doing it for them and for Heartstone Inns really, (Ashley). (Heartstones Inns owns the pub but leases it to Angela and Ben).

That commitment also means taking on more responsibility and acting in the best interests of the rest of the team as a long-term experienced member of staff.

Having a member of staff who has worked here for some time should ease a little bit of pressure on the publicans because they have quite a lot of pressure focusing on the business and ordering and everything that they do. I've spoken to Ben about cold callers, and I try not to hassle him with them. I don't mind locking up at the end of the night, for example on a Sunday night which is their family time where they have a roast, I try not to disturb them on a Sunday and I just crack on and get on with things. If it was someone new, I would probably be ringing upstairs or calling them, whereas now I've been here long enough to know that's not important for them to know about that. I can deal with that myself (Anita).

The flexibility of the publicans with regards to work hours has its benefits, 'Having that flexibility that they gave me at the beginning when my children were young meant giving back 150 percent. It's helped me because of the situation I was in at the time, with two young children to bring up and a mortgage to pay and everything was difficult. I don't think I would have done it without Ben and Angela' (Barry). They believe that 'it's just nice to be nice. You get more out of people if you show them respect. That's how we look at it. We think they'll respect us if we respect them and they'll be flexible with us if we can be flexible with them, (Angela).

Staff commitment arises from being treated respectfully, having an attractive job and one that employs a positive working environment and structure.

Working Relationships

The five people who took part in this research plus the chef have, in the most part worked alongside each other for at least 3 years and up to 10 years. While they don't necessarily work with each other all the time they have established long term working relationships.

As indicated in the last section 'Ben and Angela have always bent over backwards to help me, change my hours, been sympathetic and there has been a real sense of caring from my employer', (Ashley). This support extended to covering Ashley for 6 weeks,

Ashley became a granny and wanted six weeks off to go Australia to see her first grandchild, so we let her go and Ben covered it all by himself and then we welcomed her back. There's that level of flexibility, we will always work around their needs and even with the kids at university and re-employ them when they return, (Angela).

The publican's approach to their staff is one of consideration and magnanimity,

'Normally, if you ring up a place and say you're sick or something, you've got to put in a sick note and do this and do that or do the other. One of the girls turned up the other day and she'd done her eyebrows somewhere at a salon and they'd gone dramatically wrong and she'd had some sort of reaction. She turned up with her mum, obviously, looking a little bit nervous. Ben said 'that's fine don't worry about it, go away and get better. It was a Sunday, as well, our busiest day but he said, 'don't worry about it' (Abby).

The length of time spent working together has resulted in comfortable working relationships which enhance their time at work but also enhance the efficiency of the organisation,

I get on with everybody here. There's not much conflict. It's just easier to come to a workplace where people know you, you know the job and you know what you're doing. When you've been somewhere so long you know your colleagues and how you work together. I suppose if you know each other's personalities and the way in which they work, you know how to fit together (Anita).

Humour plays a large part in their working relationships, even to the extent of playing jokes on their managers, 'We have a good laugh yeah. I nearly made Ben pay a tab he didn't have the other day. I just had to keep a straight face and believe it myself. He was going to pay me with a card. They're all a bunch of jokers here. It's genuinely a good laugh, it's just a nice place to be. I mean, I signed up to work Christmas Day this year so it can't be that bad. It's quite fun here; you can make up little rumours and cause a little bit of trouble and you know it all goes down very well because it's a small enough place that, they know you're only having a laugh, (Abby).

Humour has become institutionalised, 'There's a lot of joking and banter. You've got to know how far you can go and who you can do it with, but yeah, it's part of our daily working relationships. Obviously, there are serious elements to our job, of course, but we've never taken things too stupidly seriously, (Angela). Fun is a major factor in enjoying the job, 'To me the more fun you make in your workplace, the happier it is, the happier you feel it is and, again, it makes the time go fast. We're all together so it means we get on well, (Barry).

They work to support one another, sometimes beyond their normal working commitments, 'Ben dropped Angela off here at the pub and then continued onwards to Adele's play or something in Cheltenham. However, their car has keyless entry and Angela had the keys in her bag. When he got out of the car after switching off the engine, he realised he didn't have the remote key. So, on one of my Friday afternoon shifts I had to go and take the key to Cheltenham. It's the way of working here. I think, it is probably the nicest place I've ever worked', (Abby).

Their good working relationships built up over time spill into their time away from the pub in times of need,

The same with Ashley, we would do anything for each other. Barney's mother-in-law moved to a new house in the beginning of the summer and he was worried. I said I'll come over and give you a hand, it's no problem, so we went over there and moved house and then she tried to pay me, I said it I didn't do it for money, I'm not having money, I don't want money because we help your mates at work, (Barry).

The Added Value of working at the BA

Work plays a large part in people's life: it provides an income for sustenance; it shapes our daily lives; people probably spend more time at work than at home; it provides pathways for developing careers; it may also provide a context for a stable social and psychological life and it gives meaning to life. There are added values inherent within some work practices and, in the case of those working at the Butchers Arms in 2018, social and emotional connections developed into something of a family culture.

Social and emotional connections.

Working in a pub or a bar has a full range of social emotional connections that are not unique but may be unusual. The staff engage in relations with work colleagues, but they also carry out a service in a highly social environment. They are close to the people they serve physically, like a café, but they see more regular customers, maybe every day, and talking and chatting to customers is regarded as a large part of the ambience of the pub. They are not just 'serving' customers, they often engage in social discussions, sometimes intimate. If one thinks of other service industries it is difficult to think of one that is like a pub. A hairdresser may see lots

of different people and chat to them for an hour so, but they won't see that customer again for some time. Air stewards are only locked in a cabin for a few hours with their customers. A café does not really encourage staff to chat as they make their way back to the kitchen when they have served their meals. Conversations are a major aspect of a pub or bar culture and in some cases, they lead to long term relationships,

I've made friends with one girl I met here at the pub. She used to travel from London to meet her grandmother who's 102 and her aunty who comes in from the Forest of Dene and this is where they liked to meet for birthdays celebrations usually. I struck up a lovely friendship with her and have even though she's moved to Brighton when we were down in Brighton in the summer, we met up with her, (Ashley).

Ashley goes on to talk emotionally about what her job means to her, 'I've never made any secret of the fact that I love my job' and that means managing the bad times, 'without being morbid I've seen a lot of people come and go or pass on. Isn't it funny how one is a local here even though I don't live here? I'm trying to think of what his wife's called; she's lovely, she's got white grey hair, she's still alive. We become attached to our regulars; we also see them come and go'.

The emotional connections with work are enhanced by the extent of social engagement, 'It's quite nice that the younger ones are coming and going because it means you're working with different people every day. It's probably the mix of both. I work with Ashley every Tuesday and I love that I'm working with her every week; but then it's also nice to have the youngsters come in each week, and you're seeing different faces and working with different people', (Anita).

The staff recognise their good fortune in working in a pleasant and attractive environment, 'To me it's not like coming to work here, it's not, it's a friendly atmosphere, it's the fun element as well of it. You know all the locals, you're friendly with them, you look after them and they are always very polite, always very nice to you and I think it is just the friendliness of the place', (Barry). He goes on to say how much the social aspect of this job enhances his enjoyment,

Every week you see all your regular faces. You (the author and partner) were in Tuesday night and the guys that were sitting on the window there, they come in every Tuesday and there's other people that come in every Tuesday and yesterday lunchtime. We had the basket weavers in every Wednesday lunchtime. They do a basket weaving course in the village hall every Wednesday morning. They're great, it's just familiar faces all the time and lots of new faces. Everyone knows it's a friendly familiarity, you have a good chat and a laugh, and a joke and they enjoy it, and you enjoy it.

For those who are child carers, it provides a more adult environment for a change as do most work environments but this one has an added value in terms of its content, 'Pub life to me is marmite, you love it or you hate it. I wouldn't say it's an escape from family responsibilities but it's my chance to have intellectual conversations with people, to interact with people that I never normally would if I didn't work here. You could be talking to a Doctor of Science one minute and you could be talking to the builder the next, (Barry)

Family Connections

One of the main factors that ensure staff commitment and engagement is the culture of the staff organisation, 'It is 'a home from home. It is like a small family here really' (Abby). This aspect of its culture was built into from the beginning by the publicans,

We've always wanted to run this business as like a family. 'There's give and take as you would in a family situation. That's how we've always wanted to treat the place. If somebody has problems, they're more than welcome to come and talk about them. It just happens organically, it's a family (Angela).

Angela and Ben arrived with a seven-month-old baby - Adele - and their family culture permeated the pub culture, 'I've known Adele since she was in a nappy. I can still see her at the top of the stairs with the stair gate on, and she's now 13. As a youngster she was always around. Quite often I used to have to bring Jack to work with me in the early days, school holidays or inset days. Ben and Angela were great about just letting me be able to bring him to work and he would play with Adele', (Ashley). Abby popped in during her second maternity leave and, 'they would treat the kids as though they had known them all their lives. They know them by name, and they messed around with them'. Barry's two girls and Adele 'grew up together. When I first came here Lily, my youngest one, was just under three, Adele was six and Abi was nine. Abi and Adele still Instagram each other all the time. They keep in constant touch. My children love it here. We stay here every year, covering Ben and

Angela's holidays and it's a big highlight for girls. It's like going away on holiday. It's fun and now Abi my older one, works here. She's at that age where she can earn money and still have pocket money for herself as well (Barry).

Conclusion

The publicans of the Butchers Arms have been here for over twelve years now. They have seen their daughter through the village primary school and onto secondary school and they have embedded themselves in village life: Ben was chair of the school governors for a while and the three of them are regular participants in the annual village pantomime. They also run a very successful business, where on a Sunday lunchtime in January 2019 they delivered over 80 lunches to a clientele, 80% of whom had not been to the pub previously or only come a few times a year. The popularity of the pub, both for locals, regulars and occasional visitors is due to its location as a typical Cotswold pub but it is also due to the familiarity between staff and customers that has been built up over the many years they have worked together. They work as a family, committed to the pub's success but also to maintaining a working environment that the staff find attractive, enlivening and pleasurable.

Epilogue

At the end of February 2018 Ashley left her work to go touring with a close friend for three months although no doubt she will be welcomed back if she showed interest in doing so. Abby left about the same time for her third period of maternity leave and we have no information, at present, as to whether she will return.

Pseudonyms

Mark - Ben

Sharon - Angela

Lisa - Abby

Barbara - Ashley

Charlene - Anita

Rob – Barry

Howard - Barney

Kevin – Chris

Emily - Adelle

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