

A phoenix arising from the ashes full of passion to be a ‘proper pub’

The Crown Minchinhampton

The Publican’s story

The pub closed in 2014 and was owned by Enterprise Inns. It has now re-opened in November 2019 fully owned and completely renovated and extended by the Lucky Onion Company owned by Julian and Jade Dunkerton. Julian’s lifelong friend Richard Terry has become the current general manager and publican of the Crown. ‘We opened 10 days ago, and locals are continually arriving to have a look round at our refurbishment, even when we have stopped serving lunches’. Richard and Julian talked about the value of the British pub some 25 years ago in a village pub called the Two-Mile Oak in Devon and during the last few years, while Richard was in the film business and Julian was in the rag trade they have continually talked about ‘the importance of the local pub as an integral part of being British’.

The Lucky Onion Group has some hotels and bars and now has four pubs, The Wheatsheaf in Northleach, Hollow Bottom in Guiting Power, the Wild Duck in Ewen (closed until the summer of 2020 for refurbishment) and the Crown. They also own boutique hotels that focus on accommodation with bars; No.131 The Promenade and the Number 38 The Park along with bar / restaurant The Tavern, all in the centre of Cheltenham. Julian lives in the Cheltenham area and likes to have pubs in his group that he can go to himself for a pint. He promotes organic products and has taken over the Dunkerton Cider Company from his father Ivor & Susie Dunkerton who originally owned it.

Richard says his commitment to the Crown is passionate,

I’ve given up a creative industry travelling to make films for the BBC, Animal Planet and National Geographic. I love food, ale and people so I have transferred all my passion from making films into being a host in a pub. I couldn’t be happier. I love a social life. Minchinhampton is proving to have a wide range of diverse people whom I find to be genuinely warm. There seems to be a lack of pretension from the people who live here. There doesn’t seem to be any showiness like you can get in other towns. I like what I see so far, and it feels like home.

Before they opened the Crown, Richard made friends with the Cotswold Club four doors down from the pub and became a member. On the day of the village’s summer fete in the summer this year he opened a pop-up bar in front of the Crown.

I borrowed a wooden bar from Dunkerton’s cider and the Uley guys came up and we had pints of ale and I had a glimpse of how thirsty the locals were as they drank us dry in a few hours. We also ran an electricity line from the pub for a stage in the market centre for music. Minchinhampton life magazine agreed to put in an advert for staff for us; the Club, let us use it to interview staff when the pub was a building site. They gave me a tour of their cellar and I was hugely impressed by the quality of it. It was immaculate. I feel we have been wholeheartedly welcomed.

He is passionate about ale. ‘I grew up appreciating cask ale being influenced by my uncle Bob, a retired senior police officer who has always loved real ale, his favourite being Harvey’s Best from his local village pub near Lewes Sussex. I never drank lager as a young person. My early life drinking was all done in Devon village pubs drinking old school ale. At each pub I have firstly refurbished the cellars and bought in good cooling systems and put all the barrels on horizontal lines and replaced all the lines and stillage’.

The local distributor they use is The Beer Agent and he has become 'my very dear friend with whom I go to beer festivals and he is also from Devon. He is a massive influence on me. When I am not working, I go out with him and his friends and drink beer sometimes in Cheltenham, but we have also been to the CAMRA Bristol, Postlip and Gloucester beer festivals together. He is introducing me to breweries as far afield as Scotland, Kent, Nottingham, Birmingham, Newcastle, Devon, Cornwall, South & North Wales. I will alongside these keep some local ales. I want to have a variety of type, strength and flavours, hoppiness and classic ales. I will work with him to maintain a balanced range and to keep it moving and keep it interesting'.

The first two weeks after opening, the cask ales were moving fast and at present are larger than the dry sales, 'We are turning over our casks quickly which, along with clean short lines, is the main way to keep ale fresh and keeping interest in our different ales from independent breweries. I have never seen the amount of ale drunk here in any of our other outlets'.

He argues that Julian and he are interested in 'proper pubs' where you come and have a pint.

There were some builders and tree surgeons apologising about their overalls and I said 'absolutely not. I would be upset if you didn't come in here and put your helmet on the bar in your boots having come straight from work'.

From Monday to Thursday when it is quieter the pub will serve lunch in this main bar area and in the adjacent bars, however, in the evening diners will use the dining room and spill outwards into the area that joins the bar with the latter. There will 'categorically be no eating in the bar area on Friday/Saturday/Sunday. Customers will eat in the dining room/restaurant. The main bar area will be a boozier. If the restaurant is full of reservations, then its full and we will not allow eating in the main bar. I explain to those people who cannot get a reservation that the owner and I want the Crown to be a proper pub'. He believes that 'You have to be firm otherwise you have people drinking who feel awkward standing in the bar next to those who are eating for perhaps being too loud and upsetting diners. If we are full diners can always come back another time. This is going to be a community pub with the main bar set aside for drinkers. That is a categorical rule'.

They have recruited all local staff who are recognised by locals and some young people who they are nurturing and training. 'They are all warm bright characters and willing to learn. When one young person started here, we thought it was not going to work out; he didn't look engaged in the job. When I went on about the cellar, he became interested and followed me around, asking questions. He has asked to learn how to do the lines'. Richard sees himself as a role model for the staff and particularly for the young people.

They see how I treat the customers with passion as I do the ale and how I hold a glass full up to observe its clarity, being able to count the grains in the wooden bar through each pint, with a lovely head on it. One can see them looking at me and thinking, 'I want to know about this wonderful live product. These young people are lager drinkers and I am getting them to try real ale. Its not a young man's thing but we should be proud of it as British product that is growing in traction. The new Craft Ale movement gets them interested but alongside that we need to talk to them about classic real ales. They watch me drink them and see the joy on my face and now when I give them a staff drink after a busy session, they are asking for a pint of cask ale.

He likes putting the cellar to bed himself to make sure all the casks are vented ready for the next day, everything resting, everything in the right order and the correct spiles in the casks and he likes to hose down the whole cellar and make sure all the empties are out. The staff

are already saying ‘don’t leave any empties down here or he’ll not be best pleased. Its like an armoury for a battleship, its pristine so that if we have to change anything at any time its ready to go’.

An early drinker was one of the villagers who donated, ‘a hemp rope and drayman’s hook that had been used in the pub for 40-50 years and he said, “I want you to have it”. I was quite moved. I have used it for every single barrel that is down in that cellar to date. That’s a sign of acceptance’. One afternoon an elderly lady had lunch and eventually told Richard that she had once, with her husband, been the publicans here.

On a tour of the cellar her daughter told us they used the same hemp rope we had reinstalled to lower barrels into the cellar. When she left, she was clearly moved and told me that her husband had passed away in the pub. I was gratified to note that she was now living in Brixham in Devon where I grew up. It turned out that the woman’s other daughter went to the same primary school as did I and I recalled her clearly as my first love at 9 years old. It sent shivers down my spine.

The Lucky Onion Group has made an investment of hundreds of thousands of pounds, but they want it to be profitable as ‘it is not a vanity project’. They want to show how it is possible to run a British pub for profit and for it to remain a ‘proper pub’. They see the Crown as not only being a Flagship for real ale and cider but being the first of a possible PubCo whose mission is to save the British pub, to make it profitable and most importantly to transform positively the life of local communities.

This is a heartfelt project by Julian and me to create proper pubs producing decent products. It is not just a money-making machine, or a heartless chain. It is to give back what we both grew up with in our rural existence. We want to have proper British pubs.

Bob Jeffrey

www.villagepubsurvival.org.uk