

## **Exploiting business opportunities while managing stress, a stroke, a pub fire and village politics- The Beacon Railway Inn, Haresfield**

The pub goes back to 1866 and displays a picture in the bar on the wall of the original owners. There are a lot of pictures on the pub walls celebrating the history of the village and the pub.

About 2000 a private landlord sold the pub to the PubCo Enterprise for £660K. Enterprise leased it for about eight or nine years to different publicans, one of whom paid £50K for the lease but they had never run pubs before in their life. Six months later they lost all their fifty thousand. Enterprise not only charge an annual rent they put the rent up if you're doing a good job and you've got to buy all the beer from their catalogue although you could have a guest ale from any brewer. They take half the fruit machine money as well. The profit from soft drinks was yours, as long as you bought the beer off them. However, nobody could make any money from the pub under Enterprise and they sold it at auction six years ago, for about £325K to a private landlord.

The current publicans came here on a 15-year free-of-tie lease in 2013 with the offer of buying the freehold later and after a couple of years we bought the freehold four years ago this year for £450K. The mortgage was a thousand pounds a month cheaper than renting it from the private landlord, so buying the mortgage was a no-brainer.

When they took over the pub it was all boarded up, because it had been closed down. The bailiffs had been in and it was quite a Tardis really. The beds were, half-made and they heard stories of the bailiffs not letting in visitors to get their bags out. They heard some really bad stories about the place when we came here six years ago but were determined to make it work and make it pay.

The business model has three streams of income, a third for the bedrooms, a third for the beer and a third for eating so there is always one of the three providing a cash flow. They now have five B&B rooms and they rent out two lodges at the back of their land that extends at the back of the pub. They renovated the skittle alley and now they've got three or four teams using it. That brings in the families for a basket meal such as half or quarter chicken and chips for a cheap evening out. The publicans see it as an old-fashioned pub thing, the basket meals, the skittle teams with the family for £6.00, £7.00 per head. The alley is also used for weddings and large parties, for example a coach load of 60 OAPs that come in once a month for a two-course meal including a roast and they may have bingo afterwards, until four o'clock. So, that brings in a lot of revenue, charging them about £9.00 for two course dinner and teas and coffees. They're happy plus they have a few drinks and they don't eat a lot because they're like older people, they don't eat...you know, one slice, they don't eat a lot anyway. Other younger coach groups they charge a little more.

The pub hosts a variety of different groups such as being the start for a Haresfield 5k running race which had 180 running there last year and 120 this year in June. They hosted 800 motorbikes last year from Birmingham. They were parked all along the village and we put on had a barbeque outside. Then they entertained about 50 vintage motorbikes, some from the 1900s. They have Morris dancing out the front once a year. One bank holiday we put a tractor and trailer outside and put a live band on out there with between 5-600 people enjoying it. They blocked the road off because the visitors parked along the cricket field and we had people dancing in the street. The pub has had bonfire displays behind the pub where they have some land rising up the hill raising £2,000 each time for the village, which is then

split between the church, the school, the village hall, the cricket club. Everyone gets involved and the pub gave all the money from the hotdogs they sold – about £700. We had over a thousand people last time. The WI then sell cakes and people make toffee apples, However, they didn't do it because it was getting too big and the villagers start saying, 'let's charge for getting in'. If they were to do that they would have to put on security and first aid. They put up a big Christmas tree outside the pub and have Christmas Eve carols and mince pies and on New Year's Eve they have a big party, to which 150 people come. Other music groups include the ukulele players. A recent innovation is a loyalty card; after so many Sunday lunches customers would get a free dessert or a free meal. These publicans have tried to make it an occasion to come to the pub and to make everyone feel welcome and warm, you know and that's why 'we've done all these different things to try and achieve that'.

They get people walking the Cotswold Way, people from Australia and all over the world. During the last Rugby World Cup they had Argentina supporters staying who said, 'this is a proper English pub; we've been all over England, but this is what we call proper England; the big hotels, do not have the same atmosphere'. George Ezra, the singer also stays there. The villagers come in on Friday nights but for the rest of the week, they get people from Swindon, Cheltenham, all over. They are only a mile away from the M5 motorway so a lot of people stay in the rooms and they are looking to increase this part of the trade.

In March 2019 they organised 130 people to go to a day out at the Cheltenham Horse Racing Festival. They have a pint and breakfast at the pub and leave at 10.30. They leave the racecourse at 7.30 and return to the pub for a curry and are charged £70 a ticket

Their Sunday lunch is now a new popular draw with the pub sometimes doing over 200 meals. They serve this lunch from 12:00 until 7.30. When they first started they did about 50 lunches and thought that was OK but it has grown exponentially. The publican serves the breakfasts and gets the Sunday lunch on. They start on a Thursday, stuffing food balls and then on a Friday they peel all the potatoes, carrots and parsnips. On Saturday they begin cooking the Sunday lunch, par boiling the potatoes. The only thing that's frozen are the sprouts and peas, everything else is fresh. They sell 60 kilos of hand peeled potatoes on a Sunday and 20 kilos of vegetables. The gravy is a recipe passed down from the publican's mother. They suggest that they have a good reputation for this lunch and are proud of the fact that they offer the gravy separately and home cook the cauliflower cheese. People book up to three months in advance, because, 'it's lovely, proper home cooked, what you'd expect at home'. It's music to our ears because we are off the beaten track.

Nevertheless, the effort put in running pubs in the past and early on in this business did take its toll and the landlord had a stroke four years ago, on the golf course. He had to learn to walk, talk and to learn to cook again, He couldn't eat and although he'd been in the trade 30-odd years, when he went down to show someone how to clean the beer lines he couldn't do it, 'I just broke down'. The publican suggests it was the stress and strain of being ripped off on his last pub where they had worked for 13 years but the brewery that owned it wanted it for development as a Morrison's and they closed it down. So, sixteen months later the publicans are engaging a manager, beginning his job in the middle of March 2019 who has children who go to the village school. They will live in a renovated flat above the pub in alongside a warren of rooms on two upper floors that make up the B&B side of the business. They have made a success of the pub in spite of the landlord's demise and the turnover is now between £5-600K a year after six years of running the pub and the whole business and pub is now worth £900K.

In another trial for the publicans a tumble dryer, expanded and caught fire. They were doing all the washing for the kitchen, bar and B&B rooms themselves. They were away at a trade

show in London and their daughter heard the fire alarms and she discovered thick smoke and left the building. Apparently, she was very lucky because the fire alarms warned her. The rooms were black, everywhere upstairs and down stairs was ruined. However, two gerbils, living in a cage in the dining room survived although unfortunately when they died when moved into a colder hallway. They didn't close the pub but regretted it as it added stress and four months later he had his stroke. They were then disappointed by the renovations carried out by the property owner who at this time had leased the pub to them so it was 'a bit of a nightmare'. We'd had a quote from someone who was going to do this, do that and we'd never been very good at [interruption]. A little time after the fire their elderly chef fell down the stairs and broke her ankle, came back after that and then she fell and broke her hip. But she still got over that, and still works for us at the age of 70. She works from ten until four.

Relations with the village are mixed. Some traditional pub activities have declined; there is no darts teams because there's no-one in the village who plays these original pub games. The demography of the village has changed in that it used to be families and following generations who used the pub. People are moving in from London, buying the houses because it's on the railway route and they commute there which is why you don't see them all week because, 'if we just relied on the village we wouldn't survive'. In spite of having locals who use the pub, particularly on a Friday evening as with other village pubs they estimate that only about 20% of the village support the pub regularly. Their relations with the Parish Council have been strained at times with the landlord being on it for a time but he couldn't put in all the hours that was demanded by the chairperson. Then a gin evening began in the village hall. The publicans saw this as a challenge and they we decided to do a gin night with the first 25 people getting a gin and tonic free and from then onwards they did a gin and tonic for three-fifty all night and now they have groups booking nights at the pub. The village gin night turned into a wine club but the publicans may well compete with that as well because they and their suppliers feel that the pub should be supported as an asset to the community. They have also had a dispute about advertising the whereabouts of the pub in the village with some boards as it is in a cul-de-sac leading to closed railway station. When they did put up some signs they disappeared. These minor disputes seem unfair to the publicans as they have supported many village projects such as raising the first £300 for the village defibrillator, which now they've got situated in the phone box. They have used their property for local car boot sales and cake stalls and for the Queen's Jubilee a couple of years ago a fire was lit on the adjacent the beacon and the pub hosted the participants with teas and sandwiches. They are helping the cricket club, because they've been struggling by ensuring that all the charity money they raise is going towards the cricket club.

Staffing is more of a problem nowadays for publicans due to protection rights meaning they cannot just sack anyone on the spot; they've got to have evidence of an offence. However, they do have a dedicated chef, which is a boon, an older woman who has been with them from the beginning. She's an ex-landlady, been in the pub trade all her life; she's 71 now. There's another girl who works for us two nights a week. They have had about 20 youngsters from the village working for them since they started there providing not only work experience for them but an opportunity to develop their social skills and experience.

These publicans have made a success of the business since taking it over and have purchased a house in the village, where the female publican now lives and once the new Manager takes over the publicans will live in the house to 'take the stress off them'. They are looking forward to spending some time with their grandchildren but he will still work in the pub 5 days a week but on reduced hours. They know the new manager well and he has managed the pub previously when the publicans were away and they have a good relationship with your new manager. It is to be hoped that this new initiative maintains the existence of this village

pub that has worked hard to provide a wide variety of activities and support for the village itself.