

Re-opening a village pub after long term closure: the aspirations, trials and tribulations of the Hog village pub entrepreneurs

The Hog in the village of Horsley had a population 820 in the 2011 census. It is and five miles from the nearest large town, and has only been open in its present form since 2013 after it had been closed for seven years. The village has a shop, a school and buses pass through it every hour or so in the day. The pub has been completely refurbished with the kitchen visible at the short end of the L shaped bar. It is owned by a property developer who used some of the land adjacent to the old Bell and Castle to build some profitable domestic houses. The pub is leased to a married pair of entrepreneurs who are Co-Publicans and at the time of taking over the Hog lease the female partner (Helen) managed their extensive daytime café in a nearby town.

Since reopening The Hog, they have also renovated a Bank in the middle of in the nearby town turning it into a Cocktail Bar for evening use, which appears to be very successful and they have their offices there. At least one of them is present in the Hog most days and Helen is usually there on weekend evenings and their 18 year old son is a bar manager there just completing his apprenticeship in Catering. This is their story.

The past

A national pattern of PubCos selling their pubs to make a large profit from rising house prices means pubs are still closing at a rate of 13 a week and the pub in Horsley village was one of these casualties,

What happened was a wonderful couple who used to work in another local came in as new landlords. They spent a lot of money refurbishing this place, thousands and thousands of their own money. They got it up and running. I was living opposite at the time. I'd just moved in and I watched them literally turn the place around. They had a drinking society again in here and they had a food side that was doing really well. So the brewery waited until the books looked brilliant and then they told them they were selling up and taking it out from underneath them' [Bethany].

The Bell and Castle, as it was known, closed in 2009. This was a blow to the village which had a long history of having a pub in the past and was a central part of village life,

Everybody used the pub back then whereas now they don't. They were locals. They all grew up here. All the old boys used to drink with the young people. There was no age differentiation. Everybody drank together. They had quiz nights in here and the whole village used to come in and take part in the quizzes. This was the hub of the village. We had the village hall next door and anything to do with children was done in the village hall. Anything to do with adults took place here. We had a Horsley 'It's A Knockout' when I was seven and I can remember all the little hamlets had different teams and then we came in here to celebrate the winner and the cup was given out in here but things began to change in the '90s' [Bethany].

Villagers were less transient than nowadays,

I guess fifty/sixty years ago people grew up and they tended just to stay where they were. They didn't travel; families didn't move whereas now so many people don't stay where they are born. I think people now realise that if new people don't come to

live here the village probably won't exist because people will take jobs elsewhere and move families. I think that's probably why this this pub is so important because it draws people to the village and keeps people in the village because it's such an important part of the village [Amy].

The story of the village pub in Horsley since 2009 is an example of how PubCos had begun to sell off much of their stock and how one village's attempts to maintain a pub in the village was fraught with complications,

The pub had been closed for a while. Then a guy from London decided he was going to buy it. He held a village meeting and told everybody what he wanted to do with the village pub and that he was going to do this and this and this. He was going to call it the The Cross and told everybody that he was going to put The Cross back and put the maypole back in the village. He was going to open a community shop at the back of the pub, as a contribution to village life because he wanted to sell off the pub's car park and build houses for profit [Bethany].

The village was interested in doing a deal with the developer,

We talked about issuing shares for people. We had a village pledge system, and there were others more involved than I was but people were pitching anywhere between a few thousand pounds and £25,000. We wanted to see if we could buy it as the parish council as well, on the basis that we could buy it with a developer and, therefore, we would put housing in where the three houses are now at the back of the pub and then do the pub up as a pub site [Hugh].

However, the developer, 'had discussions in the village hall with the whole village and then he went back on every single thing he said. So, of course, he was refused planning; so he then altered it and it was refused again because the local council were keen to support a pub in Horsley. He then found out that he could actually get away without paying any council tax if he took the roof off and then he sold it to a Development company who took it over [Bethany].

The Development Company built three houses on land once owned by the pub and the PubCo. When the Parish Council members approached this new developer about buying the pub he put too high a price on it, 'We did a valuation and they said, this place was worth about £200,000 as a pub and the developer wanted £400,000 because that was the valuation of it as a house but we said, it's only worth that for a building if you've got planning permission as a house, which he hadn't got because the local District Council wanted to keep it as a pub, so he wouldn't accept £200,000 from us [Hugh].

Meanwhile the current leaseholders, who were locally based and already had a café business in the nearest town, had shown an interest in taking over the pub if the village could not afford it. They 'attended all these meetings in their parish, in the church, sitting there just listening to what people were saying. To be truthful we very strongly hoped there wouldn't be a co-operative because in our opinion when you run a pub and put all the hard work in, you want to run it as your own business. We wouldn't want to work for anyone else. Imagine being told I don't like that beer; a committee is just not a business model, and it doesn't really work [Helen].

The developer agreed to renovate the pub and lease the pub to the current publicans and they re-opened it in 2014.

Developing the pub – the early years

Alongside establishing a business basis publicans had to continually enhance the pubs image across a wide social breadth and geographically, as far as they could reach. They worked hard to create a positive ambiance and relevant connections, making the most of their entrepreneurial creativity and gaining a good reputation and awards.

The first two years were an exciting and creative time for the family managers. They enjoyed their ownership of the project, the opportunity to provide a social centre for the village, to bring new menus and ales to their business, to enhance local networks and to be creative in developing the village pub. Control over the operation of the pub was important in that it wasn't owned by a PubCo or a brewery that could restrict their management, 'The fact that it's a free house means we can have whatever we like. If there's something new that a company has, we can say, we'd love to have that. We can set the prices ourselves, which is awesome because we're not tied to a formula' [Helen].

Familial connections also enhanced commitment, 'Because my family owns it, I am more passionate about the business as a whole. My father often says that I care a lot more just because it's ours. I try to view it from the customer's point of view and I love to see it doing so well [Eliot]. Eliot has virtually given up his social life for his work and at this point was only 17, 'I've only got six really close friends. I don't go out to Stroud and go partying, which is kind of why I think I am a bit different because I work 35 hours a week. This is my life. I occasionally go out once a week, but it's not like I'm at college where I could go out partying as I'm not really into that sort of thing. If someone's ill I'll say, oh yeah, I'll cover your shift, that's fine' [Eliot].

A central characteristic of a publican is to 'enjoy people's enjoyment. Seeing the customer when they walk in, and go, "oh this is nice, a little bit different". And then, "oh the menus are nice, oh the beers are nice". You see them just sort of building and building. Then they come back the next day, or they come back with friends, and that's great' [Rory-co publican]. As the village population has changed so has the mix of people using the pub, 'There are the footballers who come in and then there are a lot of people like Oxford graduates, who have moved into the village and bought up a lot of the posh houses' [Helen].

Cabras [2011] researching in Cumbria found that village pubs acted as incubators and facilitators of community cohesion from the perspective of individual components... pubs tend to have a major impact on leisure activities within the parish which includes the presence of sporting events (such as cricket, football and rugby matches), youth activities and elderly activities. There are arrangements with groups such as the local football team, 'The footballers come on a Saturday usually when they're playing. They have an agreement to bring their opposing team with them and if the opposing team don't come then they don't go to the opposing team's place when they go there. I give them free chip butties...and they drink lots. It works really well. They're also having their dinner dance here. They're also coming in for a breakfast this week where they want beer with their breakfast before they go on a coach trip' [Elliot].

Social capital is often assumed to be a positive indicator of local well-being, as it favours the flow of knowledge and information on different components of the society. Accumulation of social capital tends to generate positive impacts on community cohesion defined as 'is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. People want to fulfil their potential and feel that they belong and contribute their local area [Cabras and Mount, 2017].

The village pub is a place to develop different kinds of social relations, an investment in an extended social life. There's intimacy between staff and regulars, 'It is quite nice; one of my favourite things is knowing everyone. I know all the footballer group and I know what they drink, and then I know all these regulars; I know all these guys on this table, and I know there's a couple that always sit on that table and have two fish and chips, that one of them doesn't like tartar sauce and one of them has peas. It gives me pleasure because they come in and I can chat to them; I know all their interests and I know all their names' [Elliot]. Being part of the publican's world is 'like a big family because it's their house, they live upstairs. They're here all the time and they try and make everyone feel as happy as they can. Yeah, it's brilliant. I love working here, so I don't think I'm going to go anywhere else if I'm honest [Henry].

Children were another group of customers making a return to the pub. The growing emphasis on food also pointed this way,

We haven't really had any problems with kids. Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon the parents will be in here, and they'll sit chatting and they will let the kids run around if there's no-one else in the pub, that's fine. But if there are other people in the pub and it's bothering them I would expect them to sit. We have loads of babies in here: it's no problem. We're really kid-friendly in that way. I love them [Helen].

Music is a part of all the pubs in the sample and people congregate to listen, appreciate or even just to be part of the congregation as do other specialist groups,

Two locals arrive and sit at the bar and get a lager barrel changed to accommodate them and a few others leave but the band keeps on playing. Two people clapping can be heard above the chatter and occasional shriek. The lead singer announces their penultimate song and tries a joke which is lost in the social revelry [FN-Mon. 31Aug, 2015].

The pub gained from being seen as more than just a pub business by making a contribution to village life. The village Horticultural Show offered another opportunity, 'The publican throws herself into things and she organised the Produce Show as well as providing the bar. So we're getting out. We're not just in the pub; we're getting out into the community, literally physically' [Amy].

The early years were successful but it was hard work,

We've both been doing sometimes 100 hours a week or more. We've put our hearts and souls into it; the year's gone very quickly. We've turned over three times what I forecast which is amazing. I never realised. But the challenge is to make the profit now we've been here a year. Our next strategy is to really, really screw down the prices of the food and look at making more profit in every area because that's what it about really. We've got the basics right, people like us. We've got good food, we've got good drink you know there's a good atmosphere here now we've got to make it into a profitable business because I gave up nearly 27 years as a midwife to manage this business [Helen].

Entrepreneurial Creativity

The Hog publicans renovated the accommodation above their pubs for renting as flats for Bed and Breakfast, as did the Carpenters Arms. 'It's going really, really well. We've got them with AirB&B. It seems like I'm getting one every weekend. The flat is rented by a gentleman long term' [Helen], which means that 'By the time the tenant has paid his rent on that flat upstairs this whole pub is almost rent free' [Bert].

Occasionally, the regulars have to come second to the opportunity to provide an alternative financially viable project,

We've got our fourth wedding reception, August, Friday, Bank Holiday and so we've got to get the bed and breakfast rooms up and running by then because they're staying in it. They want the bar closing until seven, and then they're happy to have other people in which is really nice of them. There'll be about seventy people so it will be pretty crowded. We're saying that we're fully booked; we're not saying that we're closed but the chef won't be able to take any spontaneous orders because he will be prepping and all the rest of it for the party [Helen].

In order to survive our village pubs have had to 'embrace change. You have to be really flexible, which is why we'll need to change the bar again. We have good days, for example, on Thursday last week we had a local education and care centre, the whole staff came up, and it was packed. It was really good, really happy; we did some food for them, like a buffet, and they were playing the piano all night. It was a really nice atmosphere, it was lovely. And the whole weekend was really good' [Eliot].

Embracing change means keeping up with new interests, especially when they offer the opportunity to be creative,

We have different cocktails that we create ourselves; you can always put your own spin on what you're doing. Esther, one of our other workers, walked in one day and said 'I fancy making a cocktail' and we served it for two weeks and everyone loved it, so you can come here and work and have a creative input. The publican is happy for us to be creative. He's a very creative man himself; he's a photographer, he did all the design and everything. So he is very creative and they're very accepting of other people's ideas because they like young fresh ideas, probably because they have young staff and they want to attract a whole range of audience [Henry].

So, the effort needed to ensure the village pub's survival is one that is taken with gusto by publicans and owners, acting creatively, for the benefit of the pub's existence, for the delight of the customers and regulars and also for the joy and emotional satisfaction gained from the experience itself.

Cabras [2016] notes that there has also been a change of business focus for pubs over the past decade, a the shift in rank order from leisure to food facilities and he confirms the significance of the gastro pub phenomenon in rural and remote areas of England, with possible positive externalities on local economies emerging from the shift, for example, pubs purchasing from local supply chains. The publicans worked hard to build responsive, supportive, integrated, symbiotic business networks with local suppliers, 'We try and get as much as possible within a 20 mile radius. I think a lot of people like that about the pub, so if they come here on a Sunday and they see local pork on the board, they appreciate that it's not travelled very far' [Helen].

Recognition comes in various forms, anything that will bring the pub to the notice of possible destination customers,

Publicans needed to gain recognition if they are to pull in customers from further afield and awards were one of the ways to do this. We entered one of our popular pies in the Pub Pie of the Year -The Hog Pie. It's a really popular pie here, the wild boar pie with boar from the Forest across the river. So it will be a great bit of publicity if we can win it [Rory].

Awards were crucial for the newly restored Hog to gain visibility given its closure for the past seven years.

Our award at the ceremony for the best Community Pub in our county area was good fun. It was actually on our wedding anniversary as well, and we had a table of ten. It was £50 a ticket and I paid half for all the staff. Then during the evening they all clubbed together and bought me and Helen a bottle of champagne, for our anniversary which was very nice of them. I think we had three articles in the paper about us, including winning the award and we certainly had a bit of an upturn in business. I think word gets around and you get a bit more business but it's a nice thing to have on the bar isn't it? [Rory].

This spurred them on to apply for more awards, 'And then we won another award, a skills award from the local District Council for recognition of being a good employer, training and staff support of particularly young people; young and old and we had a Young Business of the Year award' [Helen].

However, maintaining a good reputation is day to day work when businesses are subject to Trip Advisor comments,

Some people are very rude, I'm amazed. We had one bloke come in once, he was a very big commanding sort of man, and he'd just been playing golf and he came and he said 'What's with the furniture; when I come out I want to be sitting somewhere more comfortable than my own home, not on this tat'. People are very inconsiderate sometimes. He was horrible. I said to him 'I'm sorry, you're actually sitting at my kitchen table from my own home. I'm sorry if that isn't up to your standard but this is my standard'. It really offended me [Helen].

Issues, dilemmas and tensions

Many of the old industrial and village communities surrounding local pubs have changed out of all recognition, reducing the number of devoted pub regulars in some areas. Village pubs try to make their pubs look attractive to those with more money to spend and they encourage them to do so. Change was necessary for pub survival as there were important shifts among the villagers and the change in the role of the village pub was, at times, contested, by the new incomers,

You had some villagers who wanted it to be a vegetarian restaurant. You had some that wanted it to be this and that and everything else; it's a difficult thing to balance. Some villagers had ulterior motives. Some wanted it to be an arts centre but it's a village pub at the end of the day, and it just needs to stay a pub. At the moment we're trying to redefine that balance of it being a functioning pub and restaurant, because a lot of people view us now as strictly as a restaurant [George].

The incomers might well have an idealised view of 'their local', differing from the actual life of the village pub, which might include the occasional raucousness of regulars and some of the new strategies instituted by the publicans to ensure the survival of the pub,

Come Saturday afternoon when I have the football club gathered around the bar some people are put off, 'there's drinkers in here talking loudly about football; Oh dear'. The other night we had a 50th birthday planned. It was going to be a bit of a disco after nine o'clock in the evening. They saw the kit piled in the corner and they came in and saw, 'oh what's the disco kit here'? Oh there's a party on and then they'd say, 'oh we don't want to dine in a discotheque and they left'. I said, 'Well you're not dining in a discotheque, you're in a pub that's going to have a function later on.

You're still going to get a cracking meal; you just have to look at some music equipment sitting in the corner until the function starts' [George].

There is a conundrum for village pubs regarding village support. As we have seen village pubs have to search far and wide for customers making their pub a destination pub as well as a local. For it to be attractive as a destination pub they have to offer good quality meals and maybe charge more than ordinary pub grub for it to be seen as good quality. The publican experienced this is conversation with some of her villagers,

A lovely couple said, 'look, we really want to support your pub but you need to put on something cheaper'. I said, 'please tell me everything you want'. They said 'we want something for about six quid'; 'a dinner for six quid!' I said 'I'm really sorry, I can't do that, I really can't. I could probably put it on for nine quid, a one pot stew or something like that, but as you know, we have a name for good food; you have to be prepared to pay more' [Helen].

It's a tough business with so many variables affecting turnover such as: changing cultural habits and in some cases village antagonism; employment issues diminishing local use; competition; local structural transport improvements. 'They have to do food now. This isn't a drinkers' pub anymore because nobody can afford to drink in the pub like they used to. So it's not the hub of the village for the villagers or for the village activities' [Bethany].

The demography of our villages has change significantly over the last 30 years and although the incomers are often wealthy people from metropolitan areas who don't necessarily get a lot their social life via the pub, 'Horsley is a pretty unique English village and there are a lot of folks that view themselves as alternatively thinking. There are a lot of lovely, very talented, artistic folk but they can be very set in their ways' [Helen]. However, the publicans worked hard to meet possible village interests. They tried making the pub the source for the local school meals, 'The other thing is that we did tender to do school dinners for the school but it just wasn't worth the money. We would have made a massive loss on it - just couldn't do it. I think they said 87p per head and we just couldn't have done it, for that [Helen].

She then tried further village supportive projects,

So we've been doing things like a worker's pot after school. We would have something like a chilli or a curry or a casserole or something on every day. I think we charged £5, so after school, if families want some dinner and they can't be bothered to cook that night, they come up to the pub for a fiver. We've only had one taker, and I advertised that in the local paper. I did breakfast for a while. Down here at eight o'clock, cooking breakfast, waiting for people to come in. They just didn't come [Helen].

Publicans have to also ensure staff present a pleasant attitude or there's lost trade, 'I was on holiday, and one night my bar manager wasn't that welcoming, and they decided not to come any more. I was a bit pee'd off when I came back on Monday, [Rory].

Local competition and a limited support from villagers as well infrastructure alterations affect village businesses,

I need to change this middle area of the pub, because we're not attracting enough midweek punters, perhaps darts and things like that. The villagers are not coming in that much and I don't know whether it's because of money or because a pub up the road has opened as well. We're probably down by about 10 per cent, which means a lot. So I have to buy some pub games, like table skittles, that sort of thing, shove

halfpenny, all those traditional games. There are a lot of people that I haven't seen for a long time [Helen].

Family issues or illness again added to the precarious situation, 'Weary? Yeah. Unfortunately what happened was that my partner was ill over Christmas, and he took to his bed for three weeks, and I was doing everything for three weeks. His dad had died just before Christmas. He had pneumonia and he was grieving. But it meant that I was cooking in the kitchen here, as well as running the café and I just worked 100 hours a week for a long time, and I haven't really had a break since, which is why I'm not particularly that well because it's got me a bad chest infection, now [Helen].

Each publican has different pressures and one of them for the publicans at the Hog meant vacating the pub and not being on site 'I can't live above the pub in a flat with two teenage kids and an eighty-six year old mother-in-law in a two bedroomed flat. Can't do it. I'd be happy to live in Horsley; it's just that there's not accommodation. There is one house for sale and it's eight-hundred and fifty thousand. It doesn't have affordable homes' [Helen].

Public relations are crucial and where you have an open kitchen, as they do at the Hog, it may be more difficult to maintain a good reputation,

Although having the kitchen in the bar was a bit off putting to the chef when he first arrived, actually people sit there and watched and I think that's a theatrical aspect to it; that's part of why it works. However, it does bring with it some unusual rules, like no swearing in the kitchen. We did once have a couple sat here and she was pregnant and she was being a bit fussy about her food. Something got back to the chef about it and he said quite loudly tell them to go to KFC then with a few eff words in there and they heard him of course and they walked out. So the next thing that happens is it's on Trip Advisor which didn't help. So, you know, you've just got to remind your staff every now and again [Helen].

Keeping an eye on costs is a major part of a publican's life, 'We are going to have quite a big talking to the chef tomorrow. His kitchen budget has crept up. He's over-staffed, so we're reining him in tomorrow. He has to conform to the budget now otherwise he's going to go; we're going to tell him. We've got to make sure that the budget is adhered to. If not, we're going to get another chef' [Helen]. The chef left shortly after this confrontation and they had to step in again.

Their absence from the pub, when they moved to larger accommodation meant a busier life for them making sure they were seen there regularly. One of the consequences of their removal from the pub and taking on new businesses has meant more staffing issues, creating continual problems,

'We had to sack another chef, which is really painful. But the girl that we took on wasn't up to it. She didn't work out; her food wasn't right. She'd come from a chain and she was used to putting out frozen vegetables on the table and that sort of thing. And that's what she did and I ended up actually working with her and sitting there looking at the food and sending a lot of it back. I thought why am I doing this? I'm employing a head chef and she's just not up to it. Well we had another one; he wasn't really up to it either. He really wasn't. He was so nervous, and I just felt uncomfortable when he was there because he was scared, he was actually really scared. You've got to be worried about your food because you've got to make sure it's a hundred percent; but you can't be so scared that you're trembling. So I'm interviewing another chap tomorrow and in the meantime, we have to be the chefs [Helen].

The third project

In their third year at the Hog they invested in another business, a cocktail and tapas bar in the centre of the local town. The Co-Publican – Rory - was fully aware that there are not large profits to be had from running a village pub and a café and therefore believed that one way to maintain the survival of the village pub was to be part of a business project in which each outlet added overall value to the business and therefore assisted the survival of each separate unit,

I'm beginning to see now how you build your staff structure, you get the right people, and that frees you up. The profits aren't massive but I think the only way to succeed in this is to have a couple of outlets. They're ostensibly different, but it's a similar model [Rory].

Their entrepreneurial approach meant spreading their personal investment more thinly but their projects stimulated them both with Helen having a close affiliation to the pub and Rory to expanding into the nearby town,

I want this next one to be another step up. I never particularly aspired to have a pub but I've always been interested in finer food and wine, so I want the wine bar to be really nice. I'm prepared to spend a bit of money on it and make it somewhere that I think the town will respond well to, as a foody town. It's personal to me: I want to succeed but my perception of success may be different from other people's perception. I mean, yes, we're busy here, and people say, 'oh you must be really pleased, it's really successful' but how do you define success? We've won awards, we made a profit in our first year; everybody likes the food and the beer. For me, it's good, but I know it's not the best I can do. But then I always have very high expectations of myself [Rory].

The regulars at the Hog had were delighted to have their pub open again and liked the new publicans so news of their third business project worried them a little,

A couple of people have said, 'don't leave us, will you?' and I said, 'what do you mean?' They said 'well, when you have your wine bar, you won't go, will you?' And I said, 'no, people don't need to see me and Rory in a wine bar'; it's a big wine bar, and it's going to be much more impersonal and we don't need to be down there all the time [Helen].

Nevertheless they were pleased with the speed of their project, even if it resulted in more staff turnover and a steep learning curve, 'Well, we're approaching a million-pound turnover now for all three. Apparently there are only two per cent of people in the UK that are like us. And for people who've never worked in this sector, which we haven't, we're learning fast. We are struggling on some things but I think overall we're doing well; we are both of us learning a lot [Helen].

Investing in three service outlets as the publicans at the Hog are doing meant that their reputation at one of them affected the others and may well have meant accepting poorer returns on one of the business to secure the others,

At the moment, though, it's really positive. I don't think anyone has been negative about anything so far about the new wine bar project. I certainly feel that Horsley would feel let down if we left. If we did, and we could as we have a get out clause in the lease, then they wouldn't come to the canteen, our third café project, and they wouldn't come to the new place. Our reputation is too important. At the moment, it's not a problem raising investment cash at all. People are saying, 'oh yeah, we know

you; we've heard all about you. We think you are really up and coming new businesses; we admire you and your partner'. They say 'you're brave, we love the look of your businesses; they're vibrant, they're young, they're a little bit different, and we think you've got a really good positive future ahead of you' [Helen].

However, this project approach did have an effect on the amount of time they could give to the village pub, 'So the breakdown is roughly that the town wine bar is the main player at the moment; the forecast was for between £500,000 and £600,000 a year, and we're on target for that. It's the main business out of the three but it's commanding the most of our time. It's making the most money; it's costing the most but for me I've got to see it as a success because in the first six months we turned over a quarter of a million and that's fantastic. The key is maintaining that and we're still here and I plan to remain here [Rory].

Their project was now a threefold project,

In a year's time I'm hoping that this place [the Wine Bar] will go really well and we'll be able to relax a bit. I want to then concentrate on looking at the areas of the pub, the cafe, and here, and making things leaner so that we increase the profits. That's my aim really, in a year's time to increase profits. We've got Nigel who is like a mentor, who we see once every two weeks and he makes us go through everything with a fine tooth comb and that's really, really helping and really good. And we've got Emma who is out operations manager now for all three places, so she will deal with the staffing effectively [Helen].

However, running three businesses meant inserting creativity into project meeting agendas, 'So what I desperately try to do to block times off for having focus groups. For example, I have a focus group once a month with groups of staff, saying, 'we're going to focus on something' and allow that creativity to happen in that time and earmark the time for that creative process [Helen].

The publican's family have had one or two short breaks but very few. The management of three businesses took its toll, 'Well, my ideal would be to be able to have good balance in my life. So that balance with my family and my wife, my down time, and balance with nourishing my yearning for creativity and entrepreneurship. So I want another project now but I know damn well to wait because I've got to consolidate. There are times that this has come between my partner and me and that's no good; we're working on that, aren't we? We have to have date nights where we make a particular time that we have to see each other and sit down and have a meal together and go somewhere other than our own businesses because otherwise it becomes about work, and it has to be about, 'remember when we got married' [Rory].

Running three businesses meant that administration increased exponentially,

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday I'm working, either at café or I'm doing office stuff, hiring and firing people and doing all the admin and actually planning down at the office at The Wine Bar. So I haven't had any days off for a month yet in a row. Running three companies means there's a hell of a lot of admin to do and if I slack off on it I find that there's a mistake that happens down the road such as failing to do performance reviews and things like that. If they don't get done and no one gets a contract then they quit and I don't have a leg to stand on; so all those things are really important not to miss, they still need doing. There's always a problem with staff. We employ 45 staff; there's always a problem with one of them, and if that's not foreseen down the road then that's my fault.

Everything is your fault if anything happens. All the good things are down to me. I'd like it to be less chaotic and it is sometimes chaotic. So this morning for example, before I'd left the house I'd had three emails that were presenting me with quite big problems. I thought, 'oh, God, it's only like a quarter past nine and it is quite stressful sometimes' [Helen].

The publicans had to deal with a downturn in the village pubs local support as indicated by another new manager, the fourth since they took over the pub, 'It's him that's alerted me to the fact that we really need to re-engage with the Horsley locals. They don't come in that much, and there's a view that it's lovely here, the food is lovely, but it's not a local pub. Well, that's what was being told to me. It's difficult, because you kind of get two different stories: "Oh, that pub's too posh for us, or that the people that do come and they love it, [Helen].

Meeting the expectations of the regulars became more difficult and local support began to slow down at the Hog,

So it's been really tough which might be partly why there's been a little bit of a downturn. I've have been here, at the pub but I've not been that visible to customers. They probably think that I can't be bothered any more. It has been hard. It's just been very hard. They don't see us here all the time, and they think that we're not here. I think it is really important. What I tend to do, if I'm not actually running the ship, I'm up and down the stairs like a yoyo every evening saying 'hi' to customers, checking that everyone is okay; so I am here still working. I might be on the computer upstairs doing marketing or something but I'm always popping up and down. However, if the customers don't see me, the next time they see me, they say, 'why weren't you at the pub the other night? [Helen].

Unlike other publicans they have had to spread themselves over their projects,

The café has had a complete makeover, so we've painted everything, bought some new furniture; completely done everything. So that was last week, and we got a new entrance as well, so I've already seen more people coming in, so that's great. Now I've got work here in the pub. So I, concentrate on one business and then concentrate on the other, and then move on. I can see one suffering if I'm not around all the time' [Helen].

However, they enjoyed the buzz of expansion, 'The architects that are working with us on the new wine bar are lovely and amazing. They're really quite confident in it and they said, if it does really well, there's no reason why you can't open six more', [Helen].

Road closure

There was more bad news for the Hog two years later when the main road to the pub from the local town was due to shut for three and a half months, which turned into five, to deal with the road sliding down an adjacent steep valley.

We had a meeting in the village hall about it, and it was a fait accompli, 17 weeks, so that's the 31st of July till mid-November. It was the worst time for us. Well, they gave lots of excuses why they had to do it; they said, yes, it's the driest but also because they didn't want to disrupt the school. I said, 'what, till mid-November, well, that doesn't make sense to me'. I said 'thank you for asking the school, that's really admirable of you, but did you ask me, no; if you'd have asked me I'd have said that's the worst time, please do it in January/February'. I was really pissed off with them. They said they would be happy to provide signs, 'Business is open as usual', but

that's all. I've got an events and marketing manager now who works for me full time, and we're going to sit down and have like a campaign of marketing for the pub and think about how we're going to play this; either we play the victim role, pub, 'poor pub, help save the pub' [Helen].

One of the consequences of the 50% downturn in footfall only three years after the pub reopened was that it had not yet provided a consistent good return on investment, 'It will only make about £30,000 a profit a year maximum, even if it's maxed out, we think. It's only one person's salary' [Helen]. Appeals to the village to help them out in this downturn were not particularly extensive although the hard core of supportive regulars did what they could, 'The villagers didn't really make an extra effort. To support the pub regularly means coming about once every two weeks at least; I would say probably about ten families have made an effort and I see them much more often, but they used to come quite a lot anyway. They're mostly people who have retired to the village; they've got a bit of extra income and want to support us' [Helen].

Even when a village has regained its pub, as did Horsley after seven years of closure and after a complete renovation, viability was threatened by the closure of the main road,

I think it will be the end of them. I hate to say it but I really do. The only way is for us to have a route in and out of the village that's easy instead of having to go all the way round. They need to allow us to come up through a nearby village and down through another as a one-way system and that is the only way this place is going to stay afloat. Yes, it's going to be hell on earth for everything. It caused hell the last time it happened [Bethany].

Things got worse for the Hog publicans after the main road had been closed for longer than originally announced, three months,

The Wine Bar, being young as well, is doing well but it's still getting on its feet. The Café we own has bailed out the other two businesses. To lose over half our income due to the road closure has been, being really frank with you, very damaging; on payday on Monday, we've got to find £21,000 to pay our staff for the month. We're about £8,000 short. That is crunch time. I think we'll find it from somewhere, I don't really know, but it's crunch time. We've gone, five months with The Hog doing badly. We should have shut it. But emotionally, we're so attached to this place. It's been really tough [Helen].

Their financial situation had become much worse but Helen was still optimistic, 'I haven't got any money left. I've got none left, it's all gone. It's all gone into the Wine Bar that refurb, everything. I've got nothing left. That's why my partner is unwell. We're hanging onto these businesses because we want them to work because we know that in a year's time you could actually have half that money back. In a year, we could have a million pounds of turnover. If we make ten per cent profit then £100,000 would help us get back on our feet' [Helen].

She was determined to survive and keep the open the Hog,

We don't live here anymore. But I work here, on Friday nights, Saturday nights and Sundays and I am doing a shift here, at the moment, to support the chef, Hope. As it's an open kitchen, if I see someone I say 'hi, how are you' and often come out and make a point of coming and talking to people and engaging with them. I'm here every day at some point during the day; sometimes I'll pop in for half an hour. However, I'm not as visible as I used to be; that's tough for people who want me here but I'm only one person and I hope that they understand that. I'm doing as much as I can. It would be easy to let go now, it's tempting; it's really tempting to kind of let it go but

I'm not, I'm determined. We both put blood sweat and tears into this place and I'm not about to let it go. This pub is really important to us. It's our reputation that's at stake [Helen].

The leaseholders were forced into more expensive strategies to save their businesses, 'We've been negotiating for a 20 year lease just because of the road closure. We thought we really are in trouble if we do have to sell up, as we need to make the product sellable, and a new five year lease isn't very sellable. So we are negotiating and they're happy to do that to extend it to 20 years [Helen].

The road re-opened just before Christmas 2017 and together with another new manager; they had a good one with villagers supporting their revival in more ways than one after Christmas as well,

The gas cooker broke down so we had to do Sunday lunch for 72 on two small gas camping stoves. I don't know how we did it. I phoned round the village saying, anyone got a gas camping stoves. I managed to get two and we did 72 covers, full roasts. Bethany ran across with a camping gas appliance as did someone else, who lives just round the corner there and does bed and breakfast rooms. I said, 'I'm not cancelling 72 people, I am not greeting everybody on that doorstep saying no' when they've come for Sunday lunch because they can't book anywhere else, everywhere else will be full. I said, 'half these people are walking, I've got birthdays, I'm not saying no; let's find a solution'. I just said 'this is what you do, and we're doing it' and they did it. Not one single complaint, everything went out lovely, fresh, hot and on time. That's the thing you have to do, you have to do that in this job; there's always something that goes wrong, but you have to find a solution [Bert].

Another form of investment was to consider partnerships with investors to help manage the business and the leaseholders decided to look for new business partners The company they approached owned a brewery and had various other distribution services in soft drinks but they wanted 50% share of all three projects and after a few months,

What they've offered is that they'll do all the marketing one day a week there'll give us their marketing lady free. They'll do all the admin; they'll pay all the bills. It'll go on their database. And they would run the whole back of office, everything, payroll, accountancy, everything, would be part of what they would do. What we have is the imagination, the flair, the vision, a product. They would be able to help us by giving us about £60,000 to buy a portion of the business, so they would be business partners in our companies. And in about five years, we would open another one or two in Bath or Bristol, or somewhere else, with them as back of office businessmen and we would be as creative as we want to be [Helen].

However, after a few months thinking about it they decided to try and tough it out and they again were creative in finding solutions to maintain their commitment to the village pub, 'I've said to the owner of the building, we need a conservatory out there, so you go from that window there, make that into a door, that's your conservatory and it needs another dining area. The whole middle bit needs to be a bar, because people don't come often enough just to drink. We need to have a bar area and upstairs, the flat needs to be converted into bed and breakfast, alongside the other two, and using their three businesses, the pub, the wine bar and the café, to advertise the rooms [Helen]. And interestingly, the developer said,

'I'll probably be able to put a conservatory on here pretty cheaply and do your room upstairs, but we will increase the rent' and we said, 'yeah, okay, it depends on what you're going to increase it to, because if you increase it too much, you will price us

out of the market and the pub will fail'. If he did the renovations I'd feel really confident that this pub can work really by making sure the bar is smaller and making it a drinking area so that people of Horsley can have their drinking pub back because they lost that, effectively, when we had to increase our service to destination visitors. That's really what I want to do, ideally [Helen].

They were also planning to engage the villagers more by responding to their requests for simpler meals again, 'we're going to be doing an earlier menu but just a fixed price, so it's like a one-pot menu, so like a pie and a pint, or something like that, from 5:30 onwards; so you can just come in early and have dinner with a drink straight after work [Bert]. The new manager is a driving force and keen to keep the main publicans, engaged with the village,

We've got Burns Night; and. I said to Helen, 'I want you to be here because you're the landlady and I want you to go round with that tray of a whisky shot for everyone when they arrive or during their meal and you give it to them; you're the face that they want to see. It's important that you're still recognised as the face of it; so she's coming up tonight and doing that [Bert].

He is determined to revive the fortunes of this village pub and along with the main publicans ensure its survival as a welcoming home from home place,

Well, that's it; everybody who comes in thinks they're special. I don't worry about muddy boots for it'll take me two seconds to sweep up; or, if it's been raining outside I'll say, 'give me your jacket', I'll turn the heat up and chuck it on the radiator for two minutes; or I'll provide the dog with a bowl of water and a biscuit. It's just making every single person that walks through that door feel like they're special because at the end of the day it's their money they're spending, and that's what we want. You've got to make sure they feel special otherwise they're not going to spend that money. It's taken me a long time to get to know everyone's names and what they like, so I know when Bob walks in he wants a pint of his special or that his wife wants a glass of Pinot and I know their kids' names. On New Year's Eve I had loads of families in. I was getting kids drawing pictures and sticking them on the wall, and doing paper aeroplane races. Then I got the next load in at eight o'clock. It was the same over Christmas; I was buying sweets and different colouring packs and different bits to make everyone feel welcome. You've got to appeal to so many different stages of people, right down to the little baby that comes in, to the old lady who's 90 and comes in and has a sherry maybe once a month [Bert]

Once again the manager/publican is showing the same sort of commitment that the main publicans value and so building a valued village pub.

Conclusion

Village pubs have had to broaden their appeal as good food places with restaurant style service. They all lay tables ready for food so the pub looks like a restaurant with reservation slips or markers. They seek awards and commendations to improve their popularity. The Hog leaseholders: developed websites and Facebook profiles; attended regularly to Trip Advisor and other assessments of their hospitality; they tried to generate interest through offers, charity events, special events, regular pub clubs and quizzes, musical entertainment, family days; children's events, advertising local walks and converted parts of the pub for bed and breakfast. They made strenuous efforts to embed the pub in the village community but, as indicated, there is not enough support alone, in the village, to keep the pub going. All these efforts demanded very long working hours by the publicans and continual and consistent well-being.

The relationship between the Hog and its village could be seen as one of tension and ambiguity. On the one hand the villagers wanted a pub to exist in the village but they understood that their patronage will not ensure its survival so they had to recognise that becoming a destination pub was an essential factor in maintaining its existence. This means that the Hog had to attract visitors rather than just regulars with some creative menus, some priced higher than much pub food and car parking near the pub became an issue at times as did the necessity to hold loud celebratory events which may have affected the occupants of the nearby houses.

The Hog leaseholders described themselves as entrepreneurs and when the village failed to raise enough money to buy the pub the villagers were grateful that these entrepreneurs had stepped in. The leaseholders were buoyed by their success at running a café in the nearby town and so keen to expand their business portfolio by re-opening the renovated pub in Horsley. After initial success, with qualitative awards being gained and the business growing steadily, they quickly embarked on another service venture, the conversion of a bank in the nearby town into a wine bar, which again was successful and at the time of printing this project was again steadily building its business.

However, the couple had sunk significant savings into the project and family illness and the unexpected closure of the main road to the Hog meant financial difficulties as income dried up. They began to look at an amalgamation to provide much needed capital and they gave some space in the wine bar to an Asian food business, near the wine bar whose premises were destroyed by fire as another creative way to boost income. The adopted business has renovated the Wine Bar kitchen to suit their needs and they paid the publicans a rent, providing some much needed revenue for their businesses, however in the early days the expected income increase in sales in the Wine Bar did not materialise. They left to go back to their own premises some months later. The amalgamation was eventually considered a loss of control over their businesses, a step too far.

The road is now open and the Hog had a good 2017 Christmas in terms of business but January is a quiet time and they are working hard to regain the custom they lost. Nevertheless, they are an entrepreneurial family, keen to start and save new businesses but they have to install managers so when they have paid them about £30K, plus a chef, each business must either make a good profit or subsidise one of the others. This could of course be advantageous at times when one of the businesses suffers a downturn as did the Hog.

They always have a creative plan or two up their sleeves, which village pub proprietors need to ensure pub survival. They understand clearly the precarious nature of making a living from leasing and managing a pub and have had to get used to a plethora of changing managers and chefs as the former often realise its limited career prospects and the latter are keen to improve their careers and move for a new experience or to reduce the high working hours needed. These are issues inimical to the pub trade.

The leaseholders are determined to ensure, not only the survival, but the development of all their businesses and providing they have the family capacity - their son looks like he is ready to step up and manage the Hog – they may well succeed. They are committed to maintaining the village pub for the benefit of the village and their businesses project. However, like all the pubs in this research they will need continual support from their village, a continual and rising footfall from outside the village appreciative of the quality of their product and a continual surplus of available enthusiasm, determination and commitment.

Epilogue

The leaseholders of The Hog faced a significant drop in trade due to the main road closure in late 2017 and in the middle of 2018 the wine bar project failed and the entrepreneurial couple parted company. After a year managing the café and the pub with a new partner Helen sold on the lease of the pub to her brother in law and his new partner. She is back where she started running her café. However, the new publicans were unable to sustain the pub's existence and they closed it and moved back to Yorkshire at the end of February 2020. Later in the year during the Covid 19 lockdown a local family took on the lease, who had close business relations with Helen and have now re-opened the pub much to the relief of the village.