

The Village Pub, A Creative Enterprise

In 2011, there were a plethora of pubs offered for sale from several of the Pubcos, many of these establishments had been failing for some years, partly due to the dire lack of investment in the buildings and public areas. Ellie Sainty who owns and runs the Old Spot Inn in Dursley with the assistance of a manager, recognised this as an opportunity to find a project and create another quality village pub. Ellie and Ric bought the Fox and Hounds, as it was known then, in 1993 during the Beer Orders and set about fully renovating it and changing the name to The Old Spot. The pub went on to become CAMRA National Pub of the Year in 2008 and has continually won a fistful of accolades over the years. It was this experience that she intended to put to good use again.

The Victoria in Eastington was a Punch Tavern and had been offered for sale as both a lease purchase and a freehold but attracted little interest. The pub industry was experiencing a period of malaise at that time so eventually it closed, and the steel grilles went up on all the windows and doors. Following its purchase by Ellie and partner Julie, the ladies undertook a major renovation and refurbishment and created the Old Badger Inn. 'We are loathe to change a pub's name as there is so much local history attached to it. However, we live in modern times of the Internet where its past is stored and we need to remove or bury the less attractive history. The pub needed a new' suit of clothes' in order to have a fresh start and to live again. The Badger also went on to win many awards and became a hugely busy enterprise based around good beer and food'.

After six years at the helm, Ellie wanted to take a step back and have a little more 'down time' to enjoy some relaxation. The pub was sold to Wickwar, large brewer and pub estate, who asked Julie to stay on and manage it for them. It was only a few weeks into the plan of semi-retirement when the Fox and Hounds in Coaley suddenly appeared on the open market as a freehold. This proved too tempting for this pair of publicans and the pub was soon snapped up, 'We had to pay full asking price as there were several interested parties and much talk about it becoming a village community purchase. It may have seemed cheap to the untrained eye, but there was roughly £200k that needed to be spent on it to bring it up to modern standards and make it a more inclusive pleasant venue. The pub had been closed for over 15 months, so it was in poor condition internally and most of the fixtures and fitting had been stripped out. The kitchen had gone and even the wood-burner had been taken'.

They saw it as a creative project transforming a run-down pub in need of renovating and up-dating and part of that was renaming it The Old Fox at Coaley. They did all the designs and liaised with their builders to check what was possible and what wasn't. The spinal wall was removed which had

created a pub of two halves, rather like 'two villages', and the bar was turned around to create a central servery which is visible and accessible to all areas of the pub. The bar is bespoke and made from English Oak by Pete Meredith from The Fine Wooden Article Company in Fretherne. It really is a centrepiece, being an 8 metre long curve; it acts as a room divider, servery and has plenty of storage for glasses, crisps, bar towels, bottles and all other bits and bobs needed to be close to hand.

I feel Pete Meredith has done a wonderful job, but it wasn't without its headaches in fitting this beautiful timber as it stands on a fabricated steel frame, so it had to fit to the millimetre. It's the first thing a customer sees when they come in and natural wood is a very warm and attractive material; it sets the scene for the ambience we create here.

Outside, the Cotswold stone building was sandblasted back to its former creamy yellow colour and was repointed with lime as the previous cement pointing had started to damage the stonework. A large storm porch was added and hanging baskets, new signage and flowerpots followed restoring the beauty of this pretty building.

Village support has been good although it was a slow starter. Trade is picking up well and the pub does all it can to fit into its community, something that Ellie and Julie feels is very important for sustainability. Ellie feels times are changing in the licensed trade and drinks industry and its very important to be relevant to today's customer. 'I've been in this industry for over 30 years and that's a lot of pints pulled, but I have seen the changes and they have come on a pace in recent years'. Many pubs diversify to survive, becoming shops, cafes, delis offering book exchanges and laundry collection points etc. 'I am a bit of a traditionalist and so I find it sad that so many pubs struggle to make the figures stack up by simply being a pub in the original sense of purveying drinks and food. However, we cannot be Luddites and refute progress, we must evolve and give the customer what they want from their pub'. Ellie and Julie found it a

joy to transform a pub and then to see your vision confirmed when customers began using the pub once again. The villagers told us how bad the pub had become during the ownership of Enterprise, a PubCo; cold and empty; no regular opening hours and little to offer in the way of good beer or food.

Ellie argues that 'we are in the hospitality industry and its important to offer a good welcome as well as pleasant surroundings and quality fare'. She is critical of the past where 'curmudgeonly landlords with no interest in their customer, offered grey pork pies, ham sandwiches all curled up at the edges and beer that was more of a challenge than a pleasure'. She is 'left in no doubt that some changes are for the better'.

Coaley is a vibrant village. It has a very active Village Hall, but 'we try not to compete with their functions as we also have regular interesting events throughout the year in the pub'. The village now enjoys the opportunity to pop in for a drink or something to eat at their convenience because they are open all day except Monday when they open at 5pm for drinks. There is no food available on Sunday or Monday evenings.

The Fox is keen to employ staff locally; some of the part time staff are young and it's their first step into the working world. Ellie and Julie feel working in a pub is a very good environment to help build confidence and social skills as they work as part of a team doing jobs like pot-washing, waiting on tables and general tidying and cleaning. Most of the staff live within walking distance of the Fox.

The Old Fox at Coaley is close to the Cotswold Way and set in the heart of some of the best walking country in the Severn Vale so they also welcome dogs with a water bar and treats are freely available.

A village benefits from having a thriving local pub as it offers a convivial place where meeting friends for drinks or food, having a catch up together, chatting or discussing the topics of the day and enjoying some humour and bar banter is part of the social fabric of village life.

I'm very pleased with what we have achieved so far here at the Fox and we intend to continue to invest our time and money to ensure the pub continues to prosper in years to come. I love the atmosphere of a busy pub; it being a local for all walks of life; there is nothing better than sharing a pint with friends and enjoying all the conversation and laughter. I'll be coming in for a sherry when I'm 80.

Village pubs need enthusiastic and committed owners and tenants for their pubs to survive but they also need experience and people who love the lifestyle of being immersed in the community and the life of the place.

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