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How to save your local pub

Pandemic closures have forced many more communities to club together to save their boozers. Hugh Graham reports

Hugh Graham

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A village without a pub is like a scone without clotted cream, a bank holiday without rain,

Bake Off

without the innuendo and a crucial football match without penalties. It just isn't British. In property terms, they are as coveted an asset as a south-facing garden or a good school. "When I am showing buyers a house, every single time they ask, does the village have a pub," says George Burnand, a Hampshire-based buying agent with JM Chase Property Search. "If it does not, that has an impact on their decisions."

Yet they are getting harder to find. More than 13,000 or 25 per cent of British pubs closed between 2001 and 2018, and the trend was exacerbated by the pandemic: last year 2,360 pubs closed their doors for good. Now, fed up with seeing the decimation of their communities, locals are taking matters into their own hands, and buying village pubs to run for themselves. In 2020, in the midst of a pandemic, 12 new community-owned pubs opened in Britain, bringing the total to 150, up from four in 2001, according to the Plunkett Foundation, a charity that helps rural community businesses to get off the ground.

A community-run pub is defined as being owned by shareholders, and run democratically on the basis of one-member, one vote — an elected committee determines whether they are run by a team of paid staff or volunteers, or sublet to a tenant. Often they provide extra services such as post offices, shops and cafés, and profits are reinvested into the business or local community; some pay returns to investors. Community pubs have a 96 per cent long-term survival rate — could this model be the saviour of a dying industry? The movement received a boost last week when the government launched its Community Ownership Fund, a £150 million scheme that will allow community groups to bid for matched funding of up to £250,000 to take ownership of pubs at risk of closure.

The gold standard of community pubs is the Fox & Hounds in Denmead, Hampshire. In 2012, when the chain owners put it up for sale, developers were circling. But the parish council designated it an asset of community value, which prevents a sale of the pub for up to six months, and this bought the community time to raise the funds to save it. The pub now has 180 community shareholders, who raised £320,000 to buy it. Reopened in 2014, the pub has thrived. The tenants' rent is reinvested in the community: books for the school, local CCTV, £1,000 to a food bank. Not only that, each shareholder receives a 3 per cent return on their investment a year. "You won't get that on the high street," says Rob Stark, chairman of the co-operative that runs it.

Twenty-six miles away in Micheldever, Hampshire, the Half Moon & Spread Eagle is following a similar path. In September 2018 the chain owner put it up for sale. The villagers, who had already lost their shop, were horrified at the thought of the pub going to developers. So they too got their parish council to declare it an asset of community value, which gave them six months to find two local benefactors to buy it. They subsequently formed a community enterprise society and raised £500,000 to pay the benefactors back. Villagers volunteered to redecorate and refurbish the pub. "There was a rota, it was a lovely feeling, everyone wanted to get involved and make it work," says Laura Fishbourne, 46, an online fashion entrepreneur who

grew up in the village. “My husband painted the chimney, one woman did all the upholstery on the dining chairs, another interior designer friend got fabrics through contacts, everyone was doing what they could to help.”

Volunteers may have whipped it into shape, but when the pub reopened in December 2019, the community sublet it to tenants to run. It survived closures during Covid thanks to reduced rents by its benefactors: landlady Paula Wrighton also did takeaways, shopping for locals who were isolating and delivered roast dinners to the elderly. Indeed, village pubs are about more than pies and pints, says Charles Holden, a retired lieutenant colonel who is director of the community society that runs the Half Moon & Spread Eagle. “It is not just about meeting, it is about monitoring the whole community. If you have not seen certain people there for two weeks, old people for instance, it raises the alarm. It plays a huge part in the social welfare of a village.”

Since it reopened in May, the locals have shown their support, having family reunions and coming down to watch football matches during the Euros. “We did it outside to be safe, and lots of locals came and sat and watched it on TV, drinking Pimm’s and local bitters, everyone was over the moon, and that sort of spontaneity and laughter and excitement was something we have not seen for a long time,” Wrighton says.

The community is so strong at the riverside Locks Inn pub at Geldeston, Norfolk, that when it abruptly closed in September 2020, a social media campaign to save it attracted 1,400 shareholders — the largest community pub yet, and some from as far away as Australia. They raised £600,000 in eight weeks to stop it being sold at auction, and it reopened in May this year. “It has been running as a pub since the 1500s, and has a strong place in people’s hearts,” says Graham Elliott, chairman of the community pub group. “It’s historically been a meeting place, it is at the locks on the River Waveney between Norfolk and Suffolk, it is no man’s land, neutral territory, so people come here from a 20-mile radius. We get all walks of life, from bikers to musicians.”

Since it reopened, business has picked up: having community shareholders seems to boost trade. “There is a real sense of ownership — people are immensely proud that they are drinking in their own pub. Even if they only put £50 in, there is no distinction in our rules between them and someone who put in £20,000.”

Before investors can reap any rewards, Elliott says the pub first has to splash out £100,000 in building works, but after three years they will pay shareholders interest on their investment. But this is not about cold hard cash, it is about kinship: “Now that it is a community pub, you feel more at home there — it feels more inclusive. It is less about dinners for two. You expect to talk to people. People say it has got its soul back.”

Stuart Williamson is fighting to save the soul of Ogbourne St Andrew, a village near Marlborough, in Wiltshire. Its pub, the Silks on the Downs, closed in March 2020 as the pandemic struck, and the owner is offering to sell it to the community. They have until the end of July to raise the £240,000 they need to keep it going — so far they have £170,000.

Plans for the Silks on the Downs include a daytime coffee shop, co-working spaces, meals on wheels services, a shuttle service, and club meetings. “There is no other space to come together,” says Williamson, 40, chairman of the pub campaign group, who works as a communications consultant by day. “Everything else is gone. The post office has closed, the coaching inn was demolished. One of the reasons I bought a property in this village was that it did have a pub. During the campaign there has been such a sense of community, I worry that if we can’t save the pub, we will lose that at a time when we as a society have never been so far apart. Pub closures have a big impact on communities, but there is so much opportunity to come together and do good.”

What you can do to help your local

- If you are worried about the future of your pub, register it as an asset of community value (ACV) with your local authority. Pubs that are ACVs require a planning application to change use or demolish them. If the pub that is an ACV goes up for sale, this gives the community up to six months to raise the funds to bid for it — in that time, the owner cannot sell to anyone else. A community group (a society, parish council, not-for-profit organisation or a group of at least 21 individuals) can nominate an asset to the local authority.
- The Plunkett Foundation offers free advice, business support, training and shared learning from a network of 700 community businesses. It helps community groups to access development grants and funds. Call its helpline on 08455 571469, or visit

plunkett.co.uk

- Select a legal structure. Most community pubs are registered as either co-operative or community benefit societies, which can reinvest profits in the business, donate earnings back to the community, or distribute interest to their members.
- Decide on the ownership model: a tenanted model, in which a tenant runs the pub and pays rent to the community business, or a community-managed model, in which a manager is employed and reports to a committee. Tenanted models are less hassle, and an experienced tenant will drive the business to make a profit. The management model allows the community to have greater control of the business, and ensure it serves a community purpose, but it is a higher workload for board members.
- Most community pubs raise start-up capital through community shares — in 2017 the average was £285,413 per community. Co-operatives also have the advantage of being able to raise funds from donations and grants.
- Community pubs often have lower running costs. Share capital, grants and donations help with purchase and refurbishment costs, so there is a lower debt than a private sector operator faces. Savings can be passed on to tenants by setting a lower rent level.
- Most community pubs are not tied into purchasing contracts with breweries or pub companies. This allows flexibility to negotiate better deals with suppliers. Many community pubs purchase from local and independent suppliers, which helps support local economies.
- Once a pub is in co-operative ownership, it should have an asset lock. This prevents the business from being sold and the assets being split among members. Instead, if a business fails or is sold, the assets must be given to another asset-locked organisation, usually with similar objectives. This ensures the building is retained for community benefit.

Related Images



The Half Moon & Spread Eagle pub was rescued by local villagers

ADRIAN SHERRATT



Campaigners are trying to save the Silks on the Downs in Wiltshire



The Fox & Hounds in Denmead has 180 community shareholders



The Half Moon & Spread Eagle pub's landlady Paula Wrighton with her business partner Andy Clark
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