Rural pub futures

John Pratten looks at the future of the rural pub and at licensees' attempts to reverse declining trade; and, below, John Pratten and Chris Lovatt report on the history of one particular hamlet, its pub, and the planning decisions that now blight the building shop within four miles, so the venture has prospered. Many have a drink while they wait.  

- Post offices and shops: Prince Charles has expressed the opinion that rural pubs should double up as post offices and shops, but many licensees are sceptical or feel that this is not practical for them. However, there are examples where such moves have been successful. Michael and Julie Davis have converted the pub barn into a post office at the White Hart, at Blythburgh in Suffolk, and have seen a major improvement in business. The Lion at Warton Upton in Shropshire has managed to expand its business considerably by acting as the local post office with grocery shop facilities and by setting up an Indian restaurant and take-away.  

- Good beer: The decline in beer sales and modifications to people's social lives has meant that the quality of the drink served is not necessarily the main reason for using a particular pub. Nevertheless, it is clear that there are still many customers who enjoy a variety of well kept beers, and the licensee who concentrates on the provision of a range of well kept draught beers can enjoy a good trade. The Swan, Little Thetford, Essex even has a website, updated every three days, to publicise its guest beer lists.

The rise

The hamlet of Shraleybrook lies within the ancient parish of Audley in North Staffordshire. The presence of running water and the meeting of roads, which would have been used to carry people and agricultural products, led to settlement by tradesmen such as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, and agricultural workers. In the early 19th century there was a community of 20 or 30 households. It included a pub, the Rising Sun, which also acted as a blacksmith's shop. The pub depended on an extensive passing trade, which generated work for the smithy and a wheelwright. Agriculture and its associated service industries were of considerable significance. Traffic through the hamlet was brisk, transporting corn to Boughley's mill, situated on the Audley Nantwich road.

In the second half of the 19th century, first open cast mines began locally, and then the underground Minnie Pit was opened in 1890. The railway came to within a couple miles of the hamlet in 1870, and this meant that more goods destined for the station were carried by road through Shraleybrook.

Thus, a century ago, Shraleybrook was a prosperous little hamlet. It was surrounded by farmers and populated by tradesmen, farm workers, and miners. The transport of agricultural goods and coal ensured that the hamlet prospered. However, the period after the First World War saw a serious reversal of fortunes.

The decline

The Minnie Pit explosion of 1918 killed 155 colliers, including nine inhabitants of Shraleybrook. Its subsequent closure led to mining families moving away to find work elsewhere.

The predominant landowners, the Boughey Estate, fell into difficulties, as the rapid deaths of three successive heirs amassed huge death duties, and the estate was sold. Tenant farmers bought their farms, but the estate workers drifted away in search of employment. The depression in agriculture caused land prices to
However, there are signs that the least effective pubs are disappearing, and others can prosper. Pleurin's survey of pub prices for the year ending September 2001 showed a 2 per cent rise in the freehold price, with the ratio between sale price and turnover rising from an average of 1.41 to 1.5. Barry Bitterworth, the managing director of a West Country property agent, says demand for freehold pubs is outstripping供应, and Derbyshire property agent Guy Simmons reports a shortage of quality country properties.

Clearly, the country pub is not dead. It simply must adapt to survive. There remains a place for the ‘traditional’ pub, but it is only one type of retail outlet, designed for those who still wish to enjoy its amenities. For those who want to eat out, listen to music, or be with their children, suitable pubs exist, for the industry has adapted rapidly to the needs of its customers. Many will continue to reflect nostalgically on the past, but the old fashioned pubs could not trade profitably. Pubs must either adapt to meet demand, or close.

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Unfortunately, the boom in trade did not last forever. The opening of a new major road led to a decline in passing trade, and this coincided with the general depression in the public house trade in the 1990s, which was particularly severe in the rural sector. The Rising Sun’s trade began to decline, so that the bus lacked viability, and the brewing of beer ceased. The owners were periodically denied rural rate relief by the local authority, and the pub began to show signs of falling prosperity.

The downward spiral of the pub continued, with lower takings leading to lower expenditure on repairs and renewals, with the ensuing air of neglect causing further reductions in custard facility. The pub was no longer an attractive place to visit, and the atmosphere changed. The M6 motorway, which runs alongside Shalreleybrook, was opened in the mid-1960s, and this added to the noise levels, but also, together with empty and cheap housing, encouraged commuters to move to the area.

Change for the better

Demolition and rebuilding followed, so that the new or modernised properties gave the hamlet the appearance of vitality and prosperity. The Rising Sun had survived, relying on a few local customers and a small passing trade. The arrival of entrepreneurial landlords altered this. Their policy was to attract customers by offering a wider range of traditional beers and ciders, and the result was that customer numbers increased from miles away. The late 1980s saw the expansion of the pub and the brewing of beer on the premises. The pub became the centre of community life, and its success made Shalreleybrook a well-known destination for visitors.

The local inhabitants held mixed views on this, but tended to support the local pub and its social events. Noise and parking problems did annoy some residents, but the landlords tried to minimise these difficulties. They even bought an old bus and ferried groups of customers to and from their homes.

Notes
1 Morning Advertiser, 20 Sept. 2001, p.10
2 Morning Advertiser, 1 Mar. 2001, p.10
4 Not All in the Price. Press release, Lovewell Blake
5 Publican, 11 May 2001
6 Publican, 26 Jul. 2001
7 Morning Advertiser, 1 Mar. 2001, p.24
8 Quoted in BBC News Online, 31 Mar. 2000
9 Daily Telegraph, 23 Jun. 2001
10 Morning Advertiser, 6 Dec. 2001

Planning decisions and the interests of rural communities

plummet, and farmers rid themselves of labour, causing further unemployment and migration. The blacksmith and the wheelwright disappeared, and even the grocer’s shop finally closed in 1935. The only place of worship closed and a residential property was built on its site. Only the pub survived as a viable business, but the inter-war years saw a serious decline in the hamlet. People moved on, leaving houses empty and unoccupied.

The period after the Second World War saw a continuation of this decline. Mechanisation in agriculture reduced the demand for farm workers, so more families moved away. Part of the hamlet was placed on the electricity grid in 1946, but the remainder was not connected until 1960, which added further to the sense of deprivation. The M6 motorway, which runs alongside Shalreleybrook, was opened in the mid-1960s, and this added to the noise levels, but also, together with empty and cheap housing, discouraged commuters to move to the area.

The conclusion from all these events is self-evident. The small community of farms and residential property now has in the middle of it a public house that remains a public house and can only be sold as one. Yet it is closed and not really trading. Those who wish to take on such a business that has lost its customer base and the associated good will? This is particularly so given the general nature of the decline of the rural pub trade.

It is difficult to argue that this pub is an essential part of the local community, but it could warrant rate relief. It is now too late. The intransigence of the planning authority and government guidelines may mean that the building, which has no income, may go into physical decline and decay. Does this prospect adequately serve the needs of the local community, or is there a better compromise solution available?  

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