



No Last Orders for The Merrie Lion

When The Merrie Lion was sold for development the residents of Long Compton took matters into their own hands

WORDS: JACCI GOODING

For decades pubs all over the country have been fighting for survival against cheap supermarket beer and wine, higher alcohol taxation, and our fast-paced, time-poor lifestyles. The 18th century Grade II listed Merrie Lion pub (originally just The Red Lion) in rural Fenny Compton, south Warwickshire, was on the brewery owner's Do Not Resuscitate list. After years of lack of investment The Merrie Lion closed in late 2010, a dreary and run-down shadow of its former self. You'd be hard-pushed to believe that it had once been the heart of this rural community.

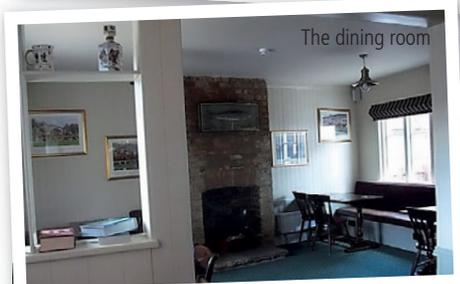
Overnight, one of the oldest buildings in the village was boarded up and put up for sale and village residents were powerless to stop it. The pub was soon bought by a property developer and it looked like another piece of the unique fabric of village life had finally rotted away, never to be replaced. At which point, enter Fenny Compton residents Nigel and

Daphne Leck. Of the many people in this rural community, they were best placed to re-open and run a rural pub, having spent much of their working lives in hospitality and related businesses.

"We nearly missed the boat on that one," says Daphne. "We knew the pub was up for sale, and had had our eye on it for a very long time, hoping that one day the price would drop to something significantly more realistic. Then, we went away for a few weeks in connection with work, and wham! . . . when we came back, the place had been sold."

Nigel and Daphne took an incredible leap of faith. They were advised by Pub In The Hub, an organisation that supports rural and community-backed pubs, where residents buy a share of their village pub and run it themselves along with a local shop and/or with a post office service. However, Fenny Compton already has a rural out-reach post office and a good shop, so these two village facilities couldn't be incorporated into any strategy

The Merrie Lion in a sorry state before the builders set to work



The dining room



The old bottle room was converted into the new bar



Above: Boarded up and waiting for redevelopment
Right: The Merrie Lion as it was in the 1950s



that would enable the The Merrie Lion to re-open along the lines of the Pub In The Hub initiative. They had to go out on a limb and do something else entirely: they had to think totally out of the keg if they wanted to get this pub up and running successfully again.

They approached the new owner of the pub and persuaded them to give it one last chance, with themselves the driving force behind it. "Talk in the village was often 'I wish we had a pub,'" said Daphne. "And so, inspired by the Pub In The Hub share idea, and with the support of the new owner Mark Sandford, we offered village residents an opportunity to invest in their pub like never before."

What followed, in June 2011, was an open meeting for Fenny Compton's villagers, where Nigel and Daphne explained their vision. Their plan was radical, but simple: to secure a future for the pub, for £500 minimum per investor, any village resident could become a shareholder in The Merrie Lion. Villagers would invest in the future of this prized village pub and would receive a 10% discount on meals bought at the pub.

"I was flabbergasted," says Daphne. "I really thought we'd only get a few people turn out that June evening, but overall, feeling was very positive about getting the pub going again, even if initially people were surprised by our suggestion. It's a tough climate to start any new venture, especially something like this, but we have been heartened by the support we received at that time."

Building work started in early February, after much discussion with the planning

"The residents turned out in force on the first day of opening and we have never looked back"

department at Stratford District Council. The door was always open – literally – during those early days, and people would wander in to have a chat and a look about, eager and excited to see their pub coming back to life.

"There was a long and lengthy planning process to negotiate, and we have been wary of every single penny of shareholder's money we have spent in refurbishing this wonderful building. It's only here now because of the villagers, and I hope it's still serving pints in another 60 years," said Nigel. Alan Parkes, a former fire-fighter from the Fenny Compton fire station, agrees. "The heart is back in the village," he says. Traditional Sunday lunch is back on the menu, the pub has hosted drivers and spectators from the Coventry Historical Run, part of The Coventry Festival of Motoring, and there are other local events in the pipeline. The stress of refurbishment is thankfully a distant memory now, as Daphne says: "The residents turned out in force on the first day of opening and we have never looked back." ■

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Our Twitter followers' pub recommendations



Bryan Jones

The Merchants in Rugby for a grown up night out - Three Horseshoes Princethorpe with the kids if the sun's shining

AnneParry

Can recommend @themoorings and @stagoffchurch great places and great food!

Jane Jones

Red Lion at Hunningham is very good, good food and next to 14th century bridge with river Leam.

Amanda Wilson

Has to be the Orange Tree Chadwick end #greatfood #greatstaff

The_Navigation

Come see us! New "inn keepers", full refurb, reopened five weeks ago and have the only Guinness on hand pull in the country!

NessStaite

Food = @StagOffchurch, Waterside = Saxon Mill, Music = @TheBellAldermin and @The_Halford
 Others to consider: Red Lion Long Compton; Boot, Lapworth; The Granville Barford; The Baraset Barn, The Crabmill, @lazycowwarwick

p_patisserie

I HIGHLY recommend @inn_farnborough – a truly great pub!

Anna Turney

@TheRosewarwick is fab, great food, service, ambiance and wheelchair accessible!

lucindaneal

Fave for food: The Stag, Offchurch (so good maybe more of a restaurant). Fave waterside: The Saxon Mill, Warwick

BenBorne

Went back to The White Swan SOA recently. It's had a refurb. Beer's great.

Have you tried any of these? Let us know what they're like. Send us a review. We'll publish the best in the magazine and there will be a bottle of something nice for the winner. Email: jane.sullivan@archant.co.uk