

Villages hit back in counter attack

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Maria Oxford (left) serves Hannah Pomerans in Polstead Village Shop

AMBRIDGE without its shop? Unthinkable. Even if Susan Carter can prove a bit irritating at times, you wouldn't wish it closed.

A shop has the same crucial role in The Archers as it does in real life: as well as selling a pint of milk, it's a place where people come together to pass the time of day, get to know each other better, and exchange important news.

“There are three things commonly said to be vital to village life: the shop, pub and primary school,” says Liz Anderson, from ViRSA - the Village Retail Services Association. “When all three of these have gone, what you often have left is a dormitory without any kind of heart.”

Over the years, as social demographics changed and retail parks sprung up on the edges of towns, many rural stores admitted defeat. But it's not all bad news. Communities facing a loss of facilities have opened their own shops, usually manned by volunteers and often backed up by grants.

There are now at least four such shops in Essex and nine in Suffolk. Many are going from strength to strength, perhaps widening their appeal by stocking locally-grown produce and reflecting a growing awareness among consumers of the damage of “food miles”.

Liz cites the recent example of Metfield as a success story. The owners of the shop retired and local residents saved the facility on behalf of the village near Halesworth. Resident writer Rachel

Kellett put up the money to mount a successful auction bid last November, and a company was formed to run the enterprise. Shares in the business, at £1 each, were sold to pay for refurbishment and stocking. The stores opened this spring.

Langham, near Colchester, is doing well, too; about £20,000 was spent fitting out a portable building as a shop and post office that opened in 2004.

Then there's **Monks Eleigh**. The owner of the commercially-run shop sought to retire, Liz explains, but didn't want to go down in history as the man who killed off the village store. He asked ViRSA for help and things moved forward.

The pub agreed to rent a brick outbuilding at a peppercorn rent, and the plea for help in funding the £50,000 cost of the project brought an incredible response: rather more than £10,000, she recalls.

“This was not just a couple of donations from a wealthy few. There were little old ladies going along with money they probably had stashed under their mattresses, handing over £100, and saying 'We want this so badly; we want our shop and post office to stay in the village, so here you are.'”

There was a £25,000 grant from The Countryside Agency and about £5,000 from Babergh council.

The old store closed before the community shop opened, so buses were organised to take folk to Bildeston in the interim - a smart move, says Liz, as it stopped villagers establishing new shopping arrangements they might have been loathe to give up when the new store opened its doors.

The Monks Eleigh shop, which opened in 2003, is now thriving, she says, with an attractive range of goods and later hours that suit people coming back from work.

“I think what it has done is to empower the village to think that 'If we can do this, what else can we do?' I am now directly involved, but I know they are looking at other projects as a result of having pulled this one off.”

Liz hates the slogan “Use it or lose it,” feeling it's up to rural shops to give people what they want: usually that boils down to the right products, friendly service, modern and clean facilities, and being open when people want to use you.

It's social focus is crucial, she says.

“There are a number of people who suffer rural isolation; who go trotting down to the shop for their newspaper at the same time every morning. If they haven't been in there by 11 o'clock, say, then alarm bells will start to sound and you will find someone will go to knock on their door to make sure they're all right. That's what it's about.”

THERE'S a sense of novelty about Rattlesden Village Shop, even though it's entered a second decade of business.

Up until recently, customers used to stand behind a counter and ask the staff for the items they needed. Now, thanks to a £15,000 makeover, it's much more spacious - and self-service.

There's a new doorway, an integral storeroom with a sink and a basin, a lovely wooden counter made by a local craftsman, new flooring, room for about a third more stock, and gleaming new shelving.

Despite the extent of the alterations, which included electrical work, the shop was closed for only one week. Everyone seems pleased with the new look, and grateful that grants from the county, district and parish councils met more than 60% of the bill.

Townies who believe rural shops often consist of just a stale bread-roll and a sun-bleached copy of yesterday's newspaper should peruse the shelves in Rattlesden.

There's fresh fruit and vegetables. Bakery fare is provided by Palmers of Haughley. Bacon, ham, cheese and the like are supplied by Grange Farm butchery at Woolpit. Free-range eggs come from Henley, near Ipswich. Then there's everything from birthday cards and Earl Grey tea to UHU glue, Calgon and Crunchy Nut cornflakes. You can even buy an Indian meal for two (stocked on a sale or return basis).

Best sellers?

“Hard to say,” muses Mike Voysey, chairman of the 10-strong management committee that runs the shop, guided by a formal constitution. “People love fresh bread, and there's always a clamour for milk on a Monday morning.”

“I would say our free-range eggs - and biscuits, drinks and sweets,” adds his wife, Hilary, who is volunteers secretary.

It was in 1995 that villagers were dismayed by news their last shop and post office were shutting. Concerned locals held a meeting, decided to pitch in to keep vital services alive, and many folk made loans of £100. A prime mover was retired businessman Ivor Jameson. A seat outside the shop is dedicated to his memory.

Villagers struck a deal to rent space in a hardly-used, stand-alone, sitting room for residents of warden-assisted flats. The building in St Nicholas Close is owned by Mid Suffolk council.

The post office franchise opened first, followed by the shop.

Finding people to manage it - for the benefit of a 800-strong community less than five miles away from Stowmarket - hasn't proved a problem. A team of about 30 people, generally working two-hour stints, allows the shop to open from 9am to 5pm. Two or three volunteers are in their 80s.

Volunteers make trips to a cash and carry warehouse in Ipswich to keep the Rattlesden shelves full.

None of the folk working in the shop is paid. And those who do the fetching and carrying, to replenish stock, don't draw a penny for travel expenses - just the cost of the goods they've bought. The absence of paid staff neatly sidesteps the bureaucracy that comes with being an employer.

However, in common with other shops, Rattlesden's is inspected to make sure it meets food hygiene and health and safety regulations.

“There's always a lot of humour and banter, and it's a real focus of the village. We really enjoy it,” says Hilary of the shop enterprise.

Indeed, the only sad smiles on the day the EADT visited were from Judith Angus, who really didn't need to apologise for introducing a touch of gloom, but rightly needed to get things off her chest. It was 11 years to the day that she took over the post office franchise, but she wasn't in the mood for celebrating.

Services are being sliced like salami. At the end of July, post offices will no longer be allowed to sell TV licences. And licence savings stamps are also being revamped: from the middle of next month, folk will need to have a card stamped at a PayPoint outlet. The nearest is at Woolpit.

It's all in the name of saving money, apparently.

With Jonathan Ross having been given a reported £18million three-year contract by the BBC, the irony doesn't escape her.

Web link: Village Retail Services Association www.virsa.org

IN the year Polstead Community Shop opened - 1984 - York Minister was engulfed in flames, it was announced that O-levels were being replaced by GCSEs, and the miners' strike was making headlines. It was Suffolk's first store run by local volunteers.

The last shop had closed about a decade earlier; the owner going out in a blaze of glory with an unsuccessful battle over VAT.

During the summer of 1983, WI member Ruth Crabtree suggested the village might be able to support a non-profit-making shop. A public meeting at Hallowe'en suggested there was enough backing, and a steering committee set March 31, 1984, as the opening date.

A local farming family, the Riddlestons, offered for a nominal rent a site in the middle of the village, and the Le Voi family donated a large mobile home.

It was transformed over the winter by nearly 30 volunteers and the shop opened bang on schedule.

The first bill for stock was £800, but goods were soon shifting. "All except some jars of pickled beetroot," laughs Erica Pomerans, current chairman of the management committee and one of the original triumvirate that pushed the project forward. "We had to give them away and haven't stocked it since."

By 1986-87, average weekly turnover was £311 - not enough to provide a living for a commercial shopkeeper, but definitely a sign the shop was meeting a need.

In 1986, plans were drawn up to build an extension to the village hall, increasing selling space from 180 sq ft to 414 sq ft. Grants met nearly 60% of the expected £10,000 cost, with the rest raised from donations, events, and the shop's trading surplus. A local builder drew up plans for free and a huge amount of voluntary labour saw the dream realised.

More recently the interior was altered to make it open-plan and self-service, and to make space for the arrival in April, 1999, of the post office.

Bread comes from a bakery at Lavenham, milk from a dairy at Sudbury, and meat from Boxford.

"We don't sell booze and fags. That is one of the decisions we made right at the start. We didn't want to compete with our neighbours at the pub, we didn't want to be seen as a target for thieves, and we were against tobacco, even in those days," says Erica.

There's a board where people can put up postcard notices - three rabbits looking for a new home, for instance - and space for posters advertising a Midsummer strawberry tea and the like.

"We also sell tickets for events in the village hall - for example, for digital film showings."

A graph of weekly takings is pinned up for all to see. Amounts vary - high around Christmas and Easter, dropping in holiday periods - and in 2006 have averaged about the £600 mark.

While Erica - a resident of Polstead for 47 years - recognises the shop's crucial role as social glue.

"People can come here without needing an excuse to pass the time of day. It is easy to come into the shop and share news and views: to find out someone has died, that there's been a burglary. That is a very important function."