



The Walty team. Photo: Meg Lovell

The villagers who bought THEIR PUBS

A village pub is the beating heart of the community. So, when hard times forced closure, these communities stepped in to buy and run their locals. We hear about the successes and challenges they've faced along the way... and why they don't regret their decisions one bit

WORDS: Catherine Welton

THE NEW INN, Halse

At the heart of the picturesque village of Halse, sits a quintessential English country pub called The New Inn. With its lovingly restored interior, tempting menu and warm welcome, it attracts locals and visitors alike.

Just a few years ago it was a very different story. The pub, like many others in rural areas, was facing an uncertain future. Then, in May 2020, the villagers decided to step in and save it themselves.

Over the next two and a half months they raised the funds to buy the New Inn as a community asset, before renovating it and reopening it under their own management in October 2020.

The project depended almost entirely on volunteers. 'Within the village we had a lot of the skills we knew we'd need to succeed, the only skill we didn't have was hospitality,' remembers Mike Davis, one of the original committee members and now vice chair, who is responsible for running the pub. 'Sometimes you have to accept that you don't know everything. What's the worst that could happen we asked ourselves?'

Mike's first task was to raise the funds. 'I hit the village high rollers first,' he laughs. 'I pointed out that research shows house prices would fall by 5-10 per cent in villages without a pub, so that helped.'



The Bayford Inn.

Photo: Sam Lane

Once the New Inn was officially under community ownership, the renovations could begin. Locals were consulted about what they wanted from their pub, so as well as tackling the bar and dining area, part of the skittle alley was turned into a café, and B&B rooms were created upstairs to maximise revenue.

Annie Hoole, a retired teacher, was put in charge of the pub's interiors. Working with a limited budget, she had to get creative. 'Nothing got thrown away. All the furniture was brought to my barn and restored. That was so much more satisfying than buying new.'

As with any renovation, there were times when she admits the task felt overwhelming. 'I remember one day standing in the skittle alley, wheelbarrowing out rubble and thinking, this is never going to be done. I'd never worked on such a big project, but it's given me a lot of confidence.'

Today the pub has over 260 shareholders and a staff of 20. It's an inspiring story of what's possible when a community works together – and it's a story that's being repeated all over Somerset, and the rest of the UK. There are over 180 community-owned pubs countrywide according to the Plunkett Foundation, a national charity supporting community-led initiatives.

THE BAYFORD INN, Wincanton

It was a beautiful, sunny July day in 2024 when a group of villagers from Bayford, near Wincanton, went to an auction open day for their village pub, The Bayford Inn. 'We definitely had our rose-tinted spectacles on, there were so many happy memories of that pub, so we decided we needed to buy it as a community,' remembers Samantha Lane, now the vice chair of the pub's committee. In November they picked up the key – and the reality of what they'd taken on hit home. 'The rose-tinted specs were ripped off and trodden on. Damp, mould, piles of rubbish – we went to switch the electrics on and the fuse blew. We thought, what have we done?'

Once again, it was community spirit that saved the day. 'From that first day locals were clearing rubbish, knocking down and making safe. We had a plumber who lived next door to the pub, a building contractor on the committee and a week later, the building was safe enough to do an open afternoon.'

A year and a day after they completed on the sale, the pub opened its doors for its first proper trading day. 'It had taken thousands of hours of volunteer time,' says Samantha. 'We had one guy in his 80s doing the weeding, one local lady supplied material while another made the curtains – it really brought the community together.'

The Somerset flag proudly flies at The Bayford Inn.

Photo: Sam Lane



THE ROYAL OAK, Stoke St Gregory

This coming together of community is, not surprisingly, a common theme. The Royal Oak in Stoke St Gregory is owned and operated by a community enterprise called the Heart of the Village. When they bought the pub in 2020, it needed a lot of work. 'It was more than just decorating, for sure,' says Paul Fielding, from the management committee. 'The work was done in large part by volunteers, mostly established village residents, and that in itself fulfilled part of the aim, which was to bring people together. A lot of people got to know other people they hadn't known previously.'

On opening night, the pub had a special VIP behind the bar. 'We had an elderly resident in the area who was actually born in the pub so we got him in to pull the first pint,' Paul remembers. 'I think the volunteer angle means it feels more like "our pub" not just "a pub". There's a real community sense of ownership and pride.'

THE WALDEGRAVE, East Harptree

The Waldegrave (or 'The Waldy', as it's affectionately known) in the village of East Harptree was purchased as a community asset in May 2024. When asked what



The community of East Harptree came together to save The Waldy

motivated them to take on the pub, committee member Daisy Thompson says, 'You look at the alternative – a village that's just a collection of houses – and you think to yourself, well, that's not a village is it? I don't think it's because we're big drinkers – although we do love a cider – it's because we see the need for a place where everyone can get together spontaneously. It's different from a village hall, you don't need a reason or an event to turn up.'

The decision was made to run the pub as a leasehold, but when the tenancy ended in April this year, the locals rallied round to keep the pub open. 'Villagers from all walks of life, all ages, have rolled up their sleeves to pitch in, helping with the gardening, maintenance, book-keeping and pulling a few pints too,' explains Chris Kay, who is the local volunteer currently standing in to manage the pub. 'It really does take a village (and then some) to keep things working in a community-run pub.'



The Waldegrave Arms,
affectionately known as
The Waldy.

Photo: Meg Lovell



The Alhampton Inn is celebrating three years as a community-owned pub. Photo: Rose Hubbard

THE ALHAMPTON INN

In the little village of Alhampton near Bruton, the 'Ally' is a quaint country pub, complete with roaring fires and local folk bands. In 2022, however, after an historic 350 years of serving local residents, it was forced to close. As one of the first villages to buy its pub, the pioneering community came to the rescue, and a Community Benefit Society was created. 'It left a genuine void at the heart of this small, close-knit village,' says Julia Burks, the manager. 'The kind of quiet, aching gap you only notice once the lights go out and the doors stay shut.'

Today, on the cusp of celebrating three years in operation as a community-owned pub, the Alhampton Inn stands as proof of what a community can build when it invests not just money, but time, trust and belief in one another.

Julia reflects on what they've achieved; 'Three years on, the Community Benefit Society model has shown that community

ownership is not a sentimental gesture. It is a genuinely sustainable way to keep local institutions alive.' Built on the ongoing support of a generous owner who bought the pub to lease to the CBS, shareholders willing to invest, volunteers, and loyal regulars managed by a general manager, served by a team of staff and culinary expectations met by a resident chef. All overseen by an accessible and dedicated voluntary management committee.

THE CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

While the villagers who've done it are overwhelmingly positive about the experience, they're also keen for others to go into it with their eyes wide open. Mike from the New Inn now advises other communities who are considering buying their pub: 'One of the first things I say is, that if you're serious, you need to accept you're going to be running a business for

free and commit to that for at least five years.' For that reason, he also advises making sure they have enough volunteers so that the responsibility doesn't weigh too heavily on just a few shoulders.

Despite the hard work involved, every community pub that opens adds to a growing sense of confidence that they are viable, sustainable solutions for rural areas. 'The economy isn't going to change in any significant way to make it more appealing for commercial pubs to get back into villages. So, people with initiative are picking up on the idea of community pubs and making it happen,' says Paul from the Royal Oak. 'There's a momentum and a confidence because others have done it.'

Back at the New Inn in Halse, Annie and her husband Steve are reflecting on what the community has achieved. 'If you think, five years on, what would it be like if we didn't have the pub?' muses Steve. 'It would be unthinkable,' says Annie. ●