



# Heart of the community

The pandemic has made many of us more reliant on local businesses – and more appreciative of everything they have to offer. Elyssa Campbell-Barr spoke to three rural enterprises that have been working hard to serve their communities in challenging times

**‘W**e’ve become like a social glue, bringing a wonderful mix of people together to meet, socialise and talk

about real food,’ says Ed Johnstone, owner of mobile farm shop The Sussex Peasant.

Ed founded the business four years ago, with the aim of making it easier for people to buy local produce. He’d been shocked to discover how little of the food grown in South East England is actually eaten there, and a spell living in Argentina had shown him a different way of life, where communities have close connections with local farms.

Inspired, he set out to achieve something similar in Sussex. From tiny beginnings –



The Sussex Peasant founder Ed Johnstone (left) with business associate George Shaw

their food was coming from, and realised how important it was to support the local economy.

'We're totally transparent about what we do. Seventy pence of every pound spent with us goes direct to our producers; we keep the other 30p to run our operation. Our customers know they're investing in local producers and the jobs we've created.'

While the pandemic brought challenges, it also brought opportunities. 'Our mobile shops provided an opportunity for people to have a break from the stresses of work or not being able to see people. Also, more people were working from home, so could nip out to our trucks,' says Ed. 'We attracted a new customer base, and we're delighted that a lot of those people have carried on shopping with us.'

### Surprises in store

Almost 300 miles away in East Yorkshire, Bishop Wilton Community Shop also built a loyal customer base during the pandemic. The store provides affordable, accessible shopping to local villagers, stocking everyday essentials and locally produced goods including honey, oils, flour, oats and eggs.

'We opened at the end of January last year, so we didn't really have any normal operating time – we went from the initial honeymoon period to being in lockdown,' recalls Annina Diston, one of the shop's founders. 'But it was perfect timing for the local community that we were there. They no longer had to travel five miles to buy groceries.'

Graphic designer Annina is among the nearly 60 volunteers who set up the shop and keep it running, with just one paid part-time manager. After the previous village store closed in 2018, Annina called an open meeting to gauge local interest in taking over the business. Around 30 people turned up, and the project snowballed.

The villagers raised funds by selling community shares in the business for £10 each. The father of a resident offered to buy the shop building and rent it to the community for a peppercorn rent, and nearby estate owners generously supported the renovations needed to transform the dated premises – a former Methodist church – into a thriving community store with mezzanine café.

'The café was an important part of the concept from the start,' Annina says. 'It very quickly became popular. Older kids started coming in after school to do their homework over hot chocolate, and hang out together. We also had groups of young mums, and retired blokes who might otherwise have been isolated, coming in for coffee.'



Elyssa Campbell-Barr is a former editor of Walk magazine who now works as a freelance journalist from her home in Sussex.

Volunteering at the shop offers locals a chance to give back to the community, meet new people and, for teenagers and less experienced staff, add new skills to their CV.

### Shipspace shopping

The village of Longburton in Dorset is also benefiting from a recently opened shop – but its premises and business model are very different. Called The Larder, the shop inhabits a shipping container at the end of a pub car park.

'There was nowhere selling provisions in our village, so we decided to set up a shop,' says Becky Gibbons, landlady of the Rose and Crown. 'I didn't like the idea of putting the shop inside the pub, so I looked at other options and thought: "Shipping container – why not? It's big enough, it's sturdy enough – it's just what we need!"'



Annina Diston (left) and fellow volunteers

with just one converted horsebox, selling food from Sussex farmers and growers to customers in Brighton and Hove – The Sussex Peasant now has four mobile shops, 11 staff, 11 trading sites and ambitious plans for expansion.

As the business has grown, Ed has noticed consumers wanting more transparency around the food they eat and becoming increasingly anxious about the production practices of mainstream food retailers. The events of 2020 compounded people's concerns.

'With the pandemic happening at the same time as Brexit, there was new awareness of danger to global supply chains, and a greater respect for local producers,' he says. 'Consumers became more interested in where



*Becky Gibbons, son Kai and husband John with their pop-up shop at the Rose and Crown*

Becky, her husband John and son Kai have lived in Longburton for 18 years, running the thatched 14th-century pub for the past five. 'Before we got involved, the Rose and Crown had been through seven managers in seven years, and was on its knees,' she says. 'Locals had stopped using the pub, which was ridiculous – it should be the hub of the village.'

The family covered most of the shop's costs, but they also applied for funding from Pub is the Hub, a not-for-profit organisation that helps communities introduce useful services in local pubs, which helped pay for electrical works.

The Larder sells a mix of essential groceries and freshly made produce. A retired baker from the village supplies fresh bread and cakes, the pub's chef bakes pasties, and John, a former butcher, does pork pies and meats.

Friday is the busiest day, with a fresh fish van also operating from the car park, while a mobile post office enables locals to send parcels and do their banking in the bar. In the evenings, musicians play live music in the pub marquee – a lifeline for those whose usual venues have been closed by the pandemic. 'We're all helping each other out by working together and supporting each other,' Becky points out.

'The biggest challenge for us during the pandemic is that we're an independent, family-run business,' she adds. 'Even when we don't have bums on seats, we still have to pay our bills. Having the shop and a takeaway service has kept us afloat.'

'It's also brought the pub back to being the hub of the village, and pulled the community together. People have appreciated us, and we've appreciated them, more than ever.'

### The personal touch

One thing all three of these businesses have in common is the personal service they offer. With some customers housebound during the pandemic, Ed and his team took groceries to their doors on foot, while Becky delivered takeaways from her car.

It was a similar story in Bishop Wilton: 'From day one of lockdown, we became a community hub,' says Annina. 'A group of volunteers immediately came together at the shop to organise home deliveries. We've found, especially during coronavirus times, that some residents come in every day just for a chat.'

The success of all three businesses is a particular cause for celebration at a time when

## 'People are very proud of their shop. It's really brought the village together'

many rural pubs and shops are struggling. In the decade to 2018, almost a quarter of UK pubs closed their doors for good, according to the Office for National Statistics, with smaller pubs disproportionately affected. Coronavirus has compounded the crisis in the hospitality sector, with almost 6,000 licensed premises lost during 2020 alone.

For village shops, the decline is less steep, but still significant. The Plunkett Foundation, which supports rural community businesses (including the Bishop Wilton shop), notes that around 400 are closing every year. But there is

also cause for optimism; enquiries from communities wanting to save or set up a local pub are up by 50%.

'Because we're owned by the community, people are very proud of their shop,' says Annina. 'It's really brought the village together. It's a fantastic feeling when people come in and say: "What a lovely shop!" and we say: "Yes, we know – we own it!"'

### Building on success

Ed shares her sense of achievement. 'To see an idea I had four years ago having a real impact in the local area is something I'm immensely proud of. At first I was just driven to bring local produce to communities. Now, I feel we've become a valuable community asset.'

Last year his company was a Silver Award winner in the 'Connecting People and the Countryside' category of the CPRE Sussex Countryside Awards. 'We at CPRE Sussex are very excited to see the success of The Sussex Peasant,' says Lady Egremont, chair of the judging panel. 'Ed's belief is that to link farming and consuming underpins key values of society, health and life. This seems to me to be exactly the sort of enterprise that CPRE Sussex should support.'

Rupert Hardy, chair of CPRE North Dorset, is equally enthusiastic about the Rose and Crown. 'Pubs and village shops are the beating hearts of our rural communities. However, pubs have suffered terribly during lockdown, so we were very pleased to hear that John and Becky were opening a village shop, both to diversify their business and also to support their community.'

Having achieved their initial aims, all three businesses intend to build on their success. Ed is expanding The Sussex Peasant to several nearby towns. Becky, fresh from winning Pub of the Year from the West Dorset Campaign for Real Ale, is considering starting an on-site brewery. And, as coronavirus restrictions ease, Annina hopes the community shop will host more workshops and events. So, do they have any advice for other fledgling rural enterprises?

'Just go for it!' Annina and Becky reply instantly. 'You can't sit back on your laurels, you have to be ready to fight,' says Becky. 'Many village pubs have already diversified, just like us, and I think we'll definitely see more of that.'

'It's ridiculously hard work,' adds Annina, 'but you'll be amazed at what you can achieve if you all come together as a community.'

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Do you know any local businesses going the extra mile? Tell us at [cpre@thinkpublishing.co.uk](mailto:cpre@thinkpublishing.co.uk)