

BEA 4: Parish Magazine Article on Benenden Community Shop

Benenden's Community Shop

Frequently dubbed 'hub of the village', Benenden's Community Shop has quickly established itself as a very popular venue in the neighbourhood.

The impetus for this ambitious project emerged when two local requirements became apparent concurrently. The Parish Plan survey of businesses in Benenden revealed a need for more accommodation for staff at Benenden Girls School. This coincided with the ongoing unproductive marketing of the village stores, which raised the undesirable possibility that the village could lose its shop. If school staff needed accommodation and the village were enthusiastic about keeping their local shop and post office, why not combine the two? In November and December 2014 Martin Pexton and Steve Simmonds began initial discussions with the School, who, under the headship of Sam Price, were happy to collaborate. In February 2015, ten more highly motivated, creative and courageous people, Robin Dalton Holmes, Grant Matthews, Paul Leek, Paul and Nancy Tolhurst, Alan Pickett, Deborah Jenkins, Tracy Claridge, John Burbage and Sheila Hume united with Steve Simmonds under the very capable leadership of Martin Pexton. The venerable Alan Pickett, a gentleman resolute in his determination to save the shop for the village, introduced them to The Plunkett Foundation whose support for this venture has been invaluable. Despite having never done this before, they bravely pooled their many and various skills to form the Start-up Committee which would tackle the daunting task of creating 'Benenden's', a shop for the community!

Many months of convoluted discussions followed; often seeming like a roller coaster ride, as the School team, with great support from Jonathan Strong (Chairman of the Property Committee) negotiated the purchase of the building. At the same time, the new Start-up Committee, on a steep learning curve, struggled with a venture which was awe-inspiring in its complexity. One thing was clear; the new shop would need investment to create the envisioned environment. Various grants were applied for but it was soon apparent that they would not be enough to cover the significant costs. A share issue was the way forward and on 29th April 2015 (two months before opening!) the well-attended meeting to offer shares in the shop was held in Benenden Village Hall. The response was very positive with circa £70,000 being raised from the sale of £10 shares. Everyone became an equal shareholder regardless of how many shares they bought. The meeting was a huge success due to the careful planning and diligent preparation by the committee, despite having had to previously practise their presentations in competition with the lamenting sound of 'Angie' emanating from the small hall!

By June 2015, Benenden School had become the new owners of the premises and the old shop closed. A new temporary retail site needed to be found while the fit out

process took place. Consideration was given to siting a container from which basic supplies could be sold. However propitious good fortune presented itself in the guise of a very generous offer of the use of 'The Kitty Fisher' from Mark and Lucy Barron-Reid. Benenden's first community shop, albeit in temporary premises, was launched with a generous helping of promotion including an ITV news item which saw several helpers on the silver screen!

It soon became apparent that the 'temporary' accommodation of the store at The Kitty Fisher was to be rather longer than anticipated. Works to the building turned out to be far more complicated and expensive than originally thought. Benenden's remained at 'The Kitty Fisher' site for seven months, incurring a loss which was greater than envisaged, because the café which would help the profit margin could not be run from there. A second share issue raised £15,000 and more grant money was sought. Finally, in mid-January 2016 building works were completed in the newly refurbished building. With enthusiastic help from many volunteers from the village, the stock was carted back along the road from The Kitty Fisher and arranged on the newly painted shelves in the welcoming new premises, beautifully fitted out by Steve Simmonds. Finance raised from shares, grants and loans allowed not only the fit out but also the acquisition of infrastructure such as the Electronic Point of Sale System, Telephony & Broadband etc. It provided the working capital which allowed maintenance of the stock, payment of the salaries of the managers and so on.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history; but it is present and future too! The monthly average turnover in the shop is about £32,000 and daily sales almost always exceed £1,000, except for Sundays. The shop and café account for 80% and 20% of the sales respectively, but the margin of profit made in the café is higher than in the shop, making the café vitally important in making the store work as a business, which of course it needs to do to survive. Complacency is not an option in maintaining what has become so very valued by so many people. The Committee will continue to look at ways to develop what the shop can offer in order to increase the number of customers and transactions. Ways of managing costs, including unforeseen ones, need to be developed without compromising quality. In order to achieve this, links are forged with other successful village shops, community or otherwise (such as Horsmonden, Barham and Ide Hill) to find out how they do it and learn from their experience.

This year, Benenden's, under the very capable management of Mel Harris with her team and supported by the indispensable army of enthusiastic volunteers, has been highly commended in the Kent Rural Retailers awards. A pretty good start one might say and there is more to come. The shop and café have provided a welcoming, friendly environment for people to meet and the Post Office facility invaluable to the community. It is up to us all to support it and of course to enjoy it!