Use it or lose it

20/05/2023 by Laura Hadland

Opinion



The news of pub and brewery closures continues apace this year. Independents and freeholds that were battered by lockdown and then a wave of price increases are losing their grip. This week I heard of the first pub closure that brought bitter tears to my eyes. The Geese and Fountain in Croxton Kerrial, Leicestershire has everything I love about a pub. A wonderful space with a beautiful beer garden. Delicious homecooked food with many ingredients sourced from right there in the village. Dog-friendly, family-friendly – the team is welcoming to all. Publicans Nick Holden and Kate Ahrens have become true friends to my family, even though as non-drivers we were only occasional visitors to the countryside idyll. I feel tangible grief at the loss they are experiencing. They have been fighting their landlord, the Wellington Pub Company, for years. Following the government’s arbitration process, they submitted evidence to show they needed a significant reduction in rent for the time their business was severely restricted by the Covid lockdowns. Their landlord argued that their business wasn’t viable and therefore didn’t deserve a crumb of support. Although the arbitrator specifically rejected this, it ruled in Wellington’s favour. The Geese & Fountain team was ordered to pay their rent arrears in full for the entire period that they were legally obliged to cease trading during the pandemic. The couple suddenly owed more than £70,000. They have two options – pay lawyers to fight the case in the High Court or vacate the premises. Not much choice for a family that has already ploughed thousands into the business since the landlord refused to help maintain the property. The Wellington Pub Co is owned by the Reuben brothers and managed by Criterion Asset Management, as reported by the Morning Advertiser when covering the ongoing tenants’ rent dispute in January 2021. It reported that in 2019 the Reuben family had an estimated net worth of £18.66bn. In the 2022 Sunday Times Rich List, this estimate had increased to £22.265bn. As Nick wrote on the Geese & Fountain’s closure announcement: “The billionaires have won.” The day before news outlets reported JD Wetherspoon is on course for a record year, despite slow sales during the Coronation weekend and restructuring its business with a number of pub closures. The millionaires have the option to regroup and come up smelling of roses. Our fragile family-run businesses don’t have that safety net. Once any carefully scrimped savings are gone, they have nowhere left to turn. So, one of my favourite pubs announced their closure on the Thursday, and the following Saturday my nearest (and dearest) micropub, the Boot in Telford announced its own temporary closure. Open for only 10 months, things aren’t quite working. The family who owns the freehold is closing to mitigate further losses while it attempts to find a way forward. The clock is ticking, and I can only hope those involved can find a solution. These announcements have been bitter pills for me to swallow. I’m sure up and down the country you all have similar stories. We are all seeing dear friends lose their businesses, staff lose their jobs and local suppliers lose clients. Pubs don’t sit isolated. They are part of a vast network of breweries and other producers that all feed into the economy. “Use it or lose it” is the mantra we all endlessly chant. I’m sure everyone reading this does what they can already. After all, the cost-of-living crisis affects us all. I’m not going to criticise anyone for choosing a Wetherspoon, you enjoy your pint. As we have already seen, the money isn’t in our pockets anyway. It’s being further accumulated by the wealthy. Amassing more than could possibly be spent in one lifetime while other people suffer. I haven’t got the energy to go any further down that road. We need solutions, not more gnashing of teeth. I’m sure we’re all staying for an extra half where we can or adding a bag of Scampi Fries to our order to do our bit. But the industry needs support from the top to get them through. Chef Patron of Copper & Ink in Blackheath, Tony Rodd has called for a cut in VAT from 20 per cent to 10 per cent to help hospitality survive. CAMRA continues to campaign, and sees some success, around parity in business rates and reductions in beer duty to support our pubs. It also continues to push for Pub Code reform to support tied tenants, an area currently under governmental review. You can support any of these campaigns without spending a penny. Write to your MP, drop them an email or visit their surgeries. Tell them what your local pub means to you, and why it is important. Explain why you want them to take action to support our hospitality industry. Drive home the point that British pub culture is significant, special and unique and that vast swathes of voters don’t want them to be asleep at the wheel while it disappears. The UK Parliament website has all the information about how to find your representative. After all, there’s a General Election coming.