

SQU!SITO

COMMUNITY

Our disappearing pubs and Post Offices - the glue that holds a community together

"I received a letter from DVLA reminding me to get a new tax disk in December. With Christmas coming along I resolved to sort it out in the New Year. Everything was fine until it came to finding a local Post Office at which point I discovered yet another nearby village Post Office had closed and, with an expired tax disc, I faced a clamp and a fine by driving into town to get a replacement. It's an experience that is being repeated nationwide and across Warwickshire.

From getting some change to a prescription, a gallon of fuel or a battery for your car key living in the country is becoming a hazardous business.

Our local volunteer run village fire station closed recently. Unfortunately there is no Warwickshire Air Fire Brigade to help the farmer with hand trapped in a combine or a metal shard in the eye as one young neighbour. Even if there were such a thing, no doubt a full-time fireman from the town would not have the knowledge of farm machinery to release a trapped arm or limb quickly assuming they could find the right field. There is no substitute for local knowledge and a volunteer service run by the community.



Monks Kirby Village Store c. 1965

As you may gather, I live in a village in rural Warwickshire. It could be yours because the story is the same and now the problem is spreading to towns.

Where once my village had 8 or 9 independent shops from butcher to baker and Post Office to undertaker now there are none. Older village residents and families are being forced out by mobile incomers who find it difficult to integrate or appreciate rural life since there is nowhere to meet and share experiences. Be you an Earl or unemployed we all need a pint of milk or a loaf of bread or someone to look in if you are ill or missing at 'the village end' of your local.

So why are our pubs and Post Offices disappearing when human needs have not? Some people say the internet is the cause of rural Post Office closures but that belies the big rise in parcel deliveries and shopping online. Others say that pubs are no longer needed but ignore the massive price differential between pub and supermarket and the change in drink and drive habits plus the no smoking ban.

The truth is much simpler. We all have to work harder and longer because of the rise in taxes on basic items like fuel, debts levels because of inflationary mortgage lending, increased rents and rates for pubs or shops relative to turnover and the fact that most villages are becoming dormitories because there are few village jobs and nowhere to meet.

In context of this financial gearing the death knell to village pubs and shops for the non-working half of the population comes from KVI's and Borough Councils favouring out of town shopping whilst granting

change of use for rural shops to residential use without granting balancing permissions for replacement shops and small businesses.

Out of town shopping means out of reach

What is a KVI you ask? A Known Value Item is a pint of milk, a loaf of sliced bread, a pint of beer or a gallon of fuel. Each are examples of products the ordinary person knows the price.

It is KVI's which the big supermarkets take advantage of by running 'loss leaders' which independent shops and pubs cannot compete with.

Even the UK's biggest baker objects to supermarkets selling the product they make with the supermarkets brand on at less than the cost of their own label. In short, anticompetitive activity is helping to wipe out the nation's independent shops (the UK lost 20% last year)

and rural shops and pubs in short order.

The final nail in the coffin of the rural pub, shop and Post Office are planning regulations which make no distinction between shopping centre and village life. Most village shops face directly onto the pavement and do not have off-road parking as insisted upon by planners as a requirement for any new shop. Little wonder our village scene no longer resembles postcards of the 1950's or 1850's.

The consequence is that once a village shop or pub is lost it is practically impossible for a community to replace it or for sustainable and local businesses to startup as in the past. Village pubs invariably face residential redevelopment or the wrecking ball as breweries demolish rather than pay business rates on empty buildings.

What is needed is a requirement to provide planning permission for equal business space within the same street if Councils permit the loss of a shop or independent business. This should be backed up by rates holidays and rent assistance for new businesses and local jobs with grants and support to promote Community Shops, food production and services.

To prevent demolition of community significant buildings a right to buy for the community is a necessity to stop demolition and unsustainable property development. Many a closed rural pub is a sustainable proposition for community use if breweries were compelled to release the property without abusive ties. Existing tenancies should be subject to fair rent reviews whilst ties should be abolished for tenant landlords.

You don't miss what you've got until it's gone

"Every £1 spent with a local supplier is worth £1.76 to the local economy, and only 36 pence if it is spent out of the area. That makes £1 spent locally worth almost 400 per cent more."

With fuel prices and the tax take rising at 20% per year now is the time for sustainability grants and regulation of supermarket fuel prices and KVI's to prevent the loss of rural garages and shops. The trouble is that Government is part of the problem and uses environmental arguments as a justification for tax increases whilst doing nothing about reducing the need to travel from rural areas by protecting rural shops and businesses.

With an aging population that is living longer the loss of rural shops, pubs and Post Offices is a time bomb for social care as children are forced to live elsewhere. We may be able to live longer but can we keep a car until the day we die assuming we can afford to run a car?

Cheap and accessible places to meet like the village shop or Post Office is the glue that holds the community together in most villages. If Granny Smith does not collect her pension or pint of milk then the postmaster knows to put the word out for a visit on 'village broadband.'

For all the benefits that digital communications bring most villages, Facebook is no substitute for a cup of tea and a chat or a beer and a game of skittles."

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To read the Squisito plan for the sustainable use of a redundant community significant building [click here](#).

Squisito's is the all too familiar story of a village with no possibility of any shops. If you know of a suitable location for a community based shop where food can be produced and sold onsite for Squisito to move to email Sara by clicking [here](#).