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It Takes A Village To Save A British Pub

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The Packhorse is a pub in the village of South Stoke, in the west of England. Villagers came together to buy back the pub after it had been sold for development into residential and office space.

Frank Langfitt/NPR

The Packhorse pub sits in the tiny village of South Stoke in the west of England amid rolling hills dotted with sheep. For more than a century and a half, it played a crucial role in the village and marked milestones in the lives of local families.

Gerard Coles, who was born half a mile from the pub and now brews cider nearby, started coming to the Packhorse when he was 15 and underage, sometimes with his school teacher for lunch.

"The chap who came to put in our new gas main said he was conceived in the back garden," recalled Trevor John, a retired accountant, who has lived here for almost 30 years.

But in 2012, Punch Taverns, a corporation that owns about 1,300 pubs across the United Kingdom, sold the Packhorse so it could be converted to housing and office space.

It's a familiar story. Pubs close all the time in the United Kingdom, victims of changing lifestyles and the rising value of real estate. In fact, locals say the Packhorse would be worth twice as much as housing and office space as it was operating as a pub.



(Left to right) Dom Moorhouse, an entrepreneur, Gerard Coles, who makes cider, and Trevor John, a retired accountant, are part of "Save the Packhorse," a team of villagers who raised more than \$1.3 million to buy and overhaul their local pub, after it was set to be converted into residential and office space.

Frank Langfitt/NPR

But villagers feared without the Packhorse, there would be no place in town for people to gather. So in 2012, John, Coles and others in the village created a grass-roots campaign called "Save the Packhorse." They set out to preserve the pub and eventually raised funds to buy it.

"You deplete a small community of a place like this, which is the only communal hub, and you just take its heart away," said Dom Moorhouse, an entrepreneur who helped lead the effort.

Since 2012, nearly 80 community groups across the U.K. have bought their local pubs, according to the [Plunkett Foundation](#), a charity that, among other things, provides grants and advises communities on how to purchase and run pubs.

"There is huge demand," said James Alcock, Plunkett's executive director. "We are currently working with just shy of 250 communities that are somewhere along the process of setting up a community-owned pub."

Alcock said all the pubs community groups have purchased in the past seven years are still in operation. But as Save the Packhorse discovered, it takes a lot of planning, work and money.



The Packhorse was neglected for decades and the back garden became a jungle. Village volunteers spent hundreds of hours clearing and regrading it in advance of the pub's reopening last year.

Frank Langfitt/NPR

Volunteers spent the first several years fighting a planning application by the new owner to convert the building to residential and office use. They found a local policy that said the new owner could only convert the pub to other uses if he could prove the property was no longer financially viable as a pub.

Next, the villagers had the Packhorse listed as a community asset, which forced the owner to give them six months to organize a competitive bid to buy the building after he decided to put it back on the market. Moorhouse said volunteers canvased South Stoke, which is just outside the city of Bath, and beyond, looking for investors, selling shares for \$650 each.

"Lots of banging on doors, lots of emails, lots of coffee meetings," Moorhouse recalled. "A couple of weeks before the deadline date, we had to raise 525,000 pounds [nearly \$690,000]. We were, I think, circa 50,000 pounds short and sweating it, really, really sweating it."

In the final 24 hours, Save the Packhorse surpassed its target. The group now had enough money to buy the pub, but needed even more to overhaul it. After decades of neglect, the Packhorse was a wreck. Inside the stone building, which dates to the 17th century, paint was peeling, there were holes in the walls and some windows were boarded up.

"The property owners had stripped everything out," John recalled. "All the radiators were gone, the plumbing gone, the electrics gone and the floors were falling through."

Volunteers spent hundreds of hours clearing the brush and moving 15 tons of soil to grade the back garden, which was so overgrown you could barely see the pub's ground floor. They then stripped the building's interior where they discovered a damaged, 17th-century fireplace, hidden behind plasterboard. A master stonemason restored it for free.

One snowy day last year, scores of villagers and supporters turned out to the Packhorse. Brian Perkins, whose family had once run the pub and who had been born there in 1930, snipped a ribbon and reopened the Packhorse.

If running an English pub sounds romantic, it's not. You're competing against everything from cheaper supermarket beer to Netflix. But Moorhouse says a key reason people here patronize the Packhorse is because the community owns it.

"We now have got 430 people who want it to work," said Moorhouse, referring to the pub's many shareholders. "They are our marketers."



South Stoke is a tiny village just outside the city of Bath in the west of England.

Frank Langfitt/NPR

About a year later, the Packhorse seems to be doing well. The pub features live music weekly, including folk musicians and pub choir singalongs. The business plan called for the Packhorse to turn a profit after two years and the organizers say performance is ahead of schedule.

During a visit in warmer weather, the back garden was nearly full. Adge Secker, a retired cop, was having fish and chips at a picnic table with his wife.

"We love it!" said Secker. "It's a great country pub. You can have ... lunch together and a pint of cider, a glass of wine in the glorious Somerset countryside. What's better than that!"

NPR producer Samuel Alwyine-Mosely contributed to this story.