



THE GEORGE
ALSTONEFIELD

**HELP SAVE OUR
VILLAGE PUB**

www.thegeorgealstonefield.co.uk

THE GEORGE - ALSTONEFIELD - PURCHASE

WHY and HOW?

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The George in the parish of Alstonefield, Staffordshire (c. 156 households) (pop 304) has been a licensed Inn, Hotel and pub going back at least to the 1700s. Early records show that the village had 4 licensed premises. The George Inn, The Red Lion (now Fynderne House), The Black Sheep (possibly now The Hermitage) and the Harpur Crewe Arms (now a holiday let). By the second half of the twentieth century only the George remained as a public house.

From the early 1960s the George was run by the Grandjean family, initially by Pat Grandjean and then from the 1970s by her son Richard and eventually also his wife Sue. They were tenant landlords as property was owned by Burtonwood Breweries. In 2005 Wolverhampton & Dudley bought out Burtonwood. At this point the George became a Marston Pub which it remains today.

Richard & Sue Grandjean ran a very popular establishment with a very wide clientele base ranging from walkers, lunch, evening and weekend diners, visitors staying locally, and locals. Richard ran the kitchen and they employed at times a large number of staff to cope with demand.

Richard and Sue retired in 2007. Subsequently the pub began to be taken in a different direction by the new landlord and as a result, a gradual but noticeable drop off in custom began to occur.

The landlord changed again in 2017 and the decrease in custom accelerated very noticeably. The pub was becoming more restaurant than public house. Opening hours reduced and many traditional customers no longer felt welcome. In fact, one of the main customer groups, i.e., walkers were made to feel unwelcome. Having become a very upmarket style establishment the customer base shrank, the number of beer pumps reduced and it became the norm to see the pub shut early.

During the pandemic many other local establishments including many brewery owned pubs, worked hard and prepared for an initial outside reopening. No such action was seen at the George.

After briefly reopening post pandemic the landlord declared that they would be closing the bar and that in future the George would be solely run as a restaurant. This change was explained using various excuses for why they had to do this. None of which stood up to close scrutiny. This change did not go down well with any of the local population. Further to this, in spring 2023 we became aware that the landlord was in negotiations with Marston Brewery to purchase the property. Then the landlord was witnessed making a statement that if they were successful in purchasing the property that they would seek to partially or fully delicense the premises.

At that point the community really felt that we had to take action by applying for the George to be registered as an ACV. We required the support of a minimum of 21 locals on the electoral register in the parish. The action received the support of more than 70 locals.

By summer 2023 it was becoming obvious that the restaurant only business was not successful and shortly after the ACV action was started the landlord declared that they were going to close. They subsequently left in early November 2023. Until that time, as leaseholders they had security of tenure at least until 2027 and under the terms of the leasehold they were only bound by the brewery to source wet products via Marstons. Other than that the brewery had no control over the premises and the business that operated there.

When the last landlord left in November the lease became null and void and Marston Brewery, having regained control of the property prepared to reopen it as a simple country pub under a temporary landlord, whilst at the same time placing the property on the open market for sale.

CURRENT SITUATION

The current temporary landlord arrived in the second week of February and after considerable effort it reopened on the 23 February. Marstons supplied him with what they thought would be suffice for 2 weeks, probably based on the past 10 years of consumption records. In less than 48 hours the pub ran out of beer.

Since reopening the trade is gradually returning. The landlord has started serving food weekday evenings and at weekends. However, under the current arrangement with the brewery he is limited in what he can do. Requests to the brewery to expand the drinks selection have been refused and without some security of tenure he is understandably reluctant to invest more in the food side of the business.

The current landlord has extensive experience in the hospitality trade having run a large establishment in Ironbridge for 20 plus years followed by several years in a pub in Stafford. He can quite clearly see the potential that the George has and as we moved into the educational holidays he has been able to employ some youngsters which has allowed him to expand the service that he is offering.

THE FUTURE.

Marstons, as required by the Asset of Community Value Regulations, informed the County Council on the 21 May, of their intension to sell The George. This triggered a 6 week period for the community to decide whether or not to make a community bid to purchase the property. At a meeting on the 24 June the community decided to make a bid which triggered a moratorium on any sale of the George until 20 November 2024 to permit the community time to raise funding to make a bid.

WHY COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP?

The George is currently for sale but is open for trade albeit on a limited basis as the brewery will not invest and will only provide a limited choice of drinks etc.

One option would be to let it just continue as it is for now and await a purchaser.

However, with that comes some risks. The biggest risk is that the George is purchased by an individual/s who ultimately wish to take the business in a direction that repeats recent experiences or potentially wish to purchase the freehold with ulterior motives for its future development.

However, there is always the possibility of someone who wants to run the George in the manner we would all wish putting in an offer. At present there has been only one interested party. They had to withdraw their offer due to encountering issues with Marston's not wanting to enter a chain of exchanging contracts.

The George, like many pubs in the UK, has been owned by a succession of various brewery companies resulting in it being a tied pub. This model brings challenges to landlords who have to source their wet sales from the brewery, often at unfavourable prices and often they often face very high rents. It is not unusual for a very successful landlord, who, having significantly increased the turnover of an establishment, to be rewarded by the brewery significantly increasing the rent. Ultimately breweries are businesses with shareholders etc. For them it's really not about the beer.

The action taken in 2023 to list The George as an Asset of Community Value resulted in us having an opportunity to become the owners of the freehold. The future of The George would then be in the hands of the Community Benefit Society (CBS) who would have the power to decide what type of establishment we wish it to be. In simple terms the CBS would replace the brewery but instead of being motivated by maximising share price and

dividends, our number one priority would be to see The George trading as a successful and popular village pub accessible to all for generations to come.

GROWTH

Successive governments and economists have long bemoaned the lack of growth in our national economy. The brewery model that the George operated on for many years have not exactly promoted any possibility of the business growing. Marston's and their predecessors have not invested in the property in any noticeable manner and they had little interest in doing so. Any development of the Coach House and the Croft was always going to be up to the landlord. It is not an encouraging proposition to invest heavily in a property that ultimately the brewery would benefit from, probably by hiking the rent up.

As the freehold owner the CBS would be able to seek to grow the business by both reinvesting some of the rent and from commercial loans. The whole idea of a CBS is it should benefit the Society and we can do this by ensuring the future success of The George. It has the potential to be so much more than it is right now.

Community-owned pubs: The number of community-owned pubs in the UK has increased steadily from 1 in 1982 to OVER 140 by 2023 (*Plunkett's Community Pubs – A Better Form of Business*) There has only ever been one recorded closure - a pub leased by the community from a private owner that closed in August 2021. In essence, the local community would replace the brewery as the owner. The advantage of this model is that the community directly controls who comes into run the pub. In most cases the community recruit a professional landlord. Additionally, the operating profits would be re invested into the business to develop it further and improve its long term viability and also to pay off any loans, whether they be commercial or from local sources.

VISION

Plan

Our aim would be to acquire the freehold of the pub and, by engaging an experienced tenant on a favourable lease, establish a thriving viable community pub that has a reputation for the value and quality of its service, food, drink and other offerings supporting the local rural community.

It will enable all sections of our rural community to relax, take refreshment and enjoy the company of others thereby strengthening community cohesion, improving physical and mental well-being and reducing social isolation. Our pub will be at our rural heart and 'More than a Pub'.

As well as supporting the local economy, a key ambition would be to provide local employment and volunteering opportunities, particularly for those with limited transport options such as younger, disabled, and older members of the community and those with caring responsibilities.

Empowerment:

To bring about this vision, The George at Alstonefield Community Benefit Society Ltd has been formed and is run by a Management Committee from Society Members.

Investment: An initial steering group have developed this business proposal and are seeking investors who wish to become Members of the Society plus individuals who will make repayable loans to help raise the funding required to purchase The George. The figure they are working towards is based on the purchase price for the freehold, fixtures and fittings, and additional costs which will allow our pub to develop and provide sufficient working capital and contingency fund.

LOCAL MARKET

Community-owned pubs: The number of community-owned pubs in the UK has increased steadily from 1 in 1982 to 133 by 2020 (*Plunkett's 2021 Community Pubs – A Better Form of Business*) and 147 by the end of 2021 (*Plunkett*). There has only ever been one recorded closure - a pub leased by the community from a private owner that closed in August 2021.

The George will not be the first, or the last, to go along this ownership route and each community-owned pub has been set up in a manner that best suits its community and situation. To see where they are located go to <https://plunkett.co.uk/community-business-map/> . Examples of community-owned pubs are the Air Hostess, Tollerton, Nottinghamshire, owned by the community since 2020 <https://www.theairhostesstollerton.co.uk/> and The Thorold, Marston, Lincolnshire owned by the community since 2019 <https://thethorold.co.uk/>

Local Demographics: Alstonefield Parish pop is approx 304, Wetton, the closest village has a pop of 107. The nearest large town is Ashbourne pop around 9000.

The local demographics between 25 years ago and today have changed significantly and many of the current residents moved here within the past 15 years. There has been a recent influx of younger families and the number of residents who work from home is now quite significant.

The previous landlord of the George claimed that today, unlike in the past, there is no longer a local population of pub goers. However, when a close study is made of which households in the village currently contain pub goers compared to a period 25 years ago reveals an interesting picture.

25 years ago. Total 17

2024.....Total 40

That is almost a 130% increase in properties with pub goers compared to the time when the George was being run very successfully by the Grandjean family. So if anything has changed, it is that there is now more opportunity for business from the local population. This is an important factor when considering the potential trade during the quieter months.

Many of those who have recently moved into Alstonefield have stated that having a village pub figured highly in their decision to move here.

What the study also underlines though is that most of the trade that was essential to the success of The George in the past came from visitors and holiday makers and those customers are still around in abundance.

Visitors

Alstonefield is situated in the Southern White Peaks, within the Peak District National Park. The village enjoys an enviable position on a plateau just above the Dovedale Valley halfway between the bottom of the dale at Thorpe and the top of the dale near the village of Hartington.

Dovedale attracts a great many visitors throughout the year and is one of the most popular attractions in the Peak District National Park. According to the Park Authorities it attracts over a million visitors each year.

The village itself has for many years been a popular starting point for walking in the area as witnessed by the many cars that are parked here on summer and bank holiday weekends. The George features in many guide books on walking in the Peak District and regularly in magazine articles relating to best Boxing Day and New Years day walks with a pub.

The parish contains a number of holiday lets plus a youth hostel and the Smithy Caravan Site. These businesses saw a reduction in repeat customers and overall, an adverse effect on business when The George became a restaurant only establishment followed by a subsequent period of closure. Since reopening under a temporary

landlord all these businesses have seen an increase in customers, especially since the George has started to serve food.

Moving out a short distance from the village there are a significant number of holiday lets, campsites, B&Bs and camping barns, many of which did not exist 25 years ago. Overall the number of holiday businesses in the Southern White Peak area has increased compared to 25 years ago and all of these businesses benefit from having a selection of vibrant pubs nearby. The George, being situated in the epicentre of the many walking trails is ideally placed to pick up both passing trade and also from the many holiday makers staying locally.

Competition: There is one other pub in the parish, The Watts Russel in Hope, which no longer longer offers food. The next nearest is the Royal Oak in nearby village of Wetton followed by the Manifold Inn at Hulme End. Next is the Devonshire Arms in Hartington, the Greyhound in Warsaw. The Old Dog in Thorpe, now under new management is proving particularly popular.

One of the most successful pubs locally is the Black Lion in Butterton which has become very popular with residents from a wide area, including many from Alstonefield who started going there when the George closed as a pub. It is however a 15 minute drive away.

To the North in Longnor, the recently reopened Cheddar Cheese and to the East the Sycamore in Parwich are increasingly proving very popular. Both of these are Brewery owned. (Robinsons)

What is evident is that since the country has recovered from the pandemic other establishments in the area have seen a strong recovery and are going from strength to strength.

This area is extremely popular with walkers and visitors and having a network of pubs within walking distance between each of them benefits all. It simply means the area offers lots of choice, with each pub offering something different.

OBJECTIVES AND KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Objectives: The aim would be to acquire The George pub and, by engaging an experienced tenant, establish a thriving viable rural community pub that has a reputation for the value and quality of its service, food, drink and other offerings supporting our local rural community. It will enable all sections of the community to relax, take refreshment and enjoy the company of others.

The primary focus of The George would be the creation of a modest entity that will flourish and invest in the well-being of our rural community providing 'More than a Pub'. Strengthening community cohesion, improving physical and mental well-being and reducing social isolation.

As well as supporting the local economy, a key ambition is to provide local employment and volunteering opportunities, particularly for those with limited transport options such as younger, disabled, and older members of the community and those with caring responsibilities.

Key Success Factors: Success will have its foundations based on a friendly, welcoming environment and excellent service providing reasonably priced food of good quality, using locally sourced ingredients as far as possible. Drinks will include real ales sourced, where possible, from local breweries, with an ambition of The George to be listed in the Good Beer Guide.

Previous experience has shown that to prosper a significant proportion of revenue will come from customers living outside the parish. We will need to actively support the tenant by marketing our pub to ensure it becomes well-known both locally and across the wider community, but especially amongst the many visitors to the area.

Other services and offerings will be continually explored, driven by the consensus of the local community. Our pub will be a 'More than a Pub' community hub for everyone. We will welcome back walkers, horse riders and cyclists as well as local rural workers and sporting teams. The rental income will provide investment

opportunities to improve the pub and provide additional facilities for the benefit of our local rural community and, in due course, repay the loans and interest to all shareholders.

Critical roles: One critical role will be that of the tenant and it is vital that we would engage the right person to run The George. These are unique circumstances and each agreement in this arrangement is dependent on the other, but legally separate.

We would ensure that a profitable and attractive business opportunity is available for a tenant to run our pub as a free house and a successful enterprise. Continuing community involvement in the Society will be needed to maintain and improve the property and to ensure local support for, and input into, the future success of our pub.

LOCAL SURVEY

A recent survey within the parish has shown overwhelming (100%) support for there to be a pub within the village.

The vast majority of respondents wish to see the George being returned to the type of establishment that made it so successful in the past. i.e. , a country pub serving simple but good pub food that is open, welcoming and accessible to everyone both in our community and to visitors alike.

The provision of locally sourced real ales and food figured highly in respondents desires.

The provision of wi-fi and occasional televised sporting events were also notably desired.

In a YouGov poll in 2017 at least half of respondents identified the following five key characteristics as features of an ideal public house:

- It serves meals* - 67%
- It has a beer garden* - 63%
- It has a fireplace – 52%

Bar staff know regular customers by name and take an interest in everyone* - 51%
It sells snacks* - 50%
At 37%, 'it serves real ale' came sixth.

- Four of these (*) were also identified as characteristics of the ideal public house by George Orwell in his 1946 essay "Moon Under Water", so characteristics for an ideal pub have not changed over the years.

SOCIAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Pubs are a distinct and important part of our English culture and tradition. In the future, local facilities and local pubs in particular will become even more important to rural communities. As Thomas Burke wrote in *The English Inn*, 1930 'To write of the English inn is to write of England itself...as familiar in the national consciousness as the oak and the ash and the village green and the church spire'.

CAMRA commissioned research from Oxford University and found that people who have a local pub are happier, have more friends and feel more engaged with their local communities. The community, our community facilities and ensuring our community's needs are continually provided for in an appropriate, timely way gives a sense of belonging and leads to people contributing to their community. We want to ensure that our parish and wider community has pride in our place and an open pub that is accessible and welcoming is central to achieving that.

Within the population of Alstonefield there are a number of widow and widowers plus workers who are often, due to the nature of their work, isolated from regular social contact. The changes to working practices throughout the country has resulted in many now working extensively from home which although has some advantages also can have the detrimental effect of a lack of social contact during the working day.

Social wellbeing within farming communities is of national concern and anything The George can do would be welcomed. As a

minimum, The George will provide a meeting place for local rural workers to meet, to discuss and exchange views, opinions and experience - thus reducing their social isolation and improve their mental health. It can provide a venue for interaction with the Farming Community Network and our pub will once again be used by local farmer shoots, hunt meets and dinners.

A pub at the centre of our community can provide a very important social gathering point for everyone and once well established can be where people go to find that social connection.

In the past The George had several groups who would gather on certain evenings and when it became a restaurant only business, the loss of the pub to these particular groups was keenly felt. Within the groups were some individuals who were full time carers for their partners. The pub provided much needed convenient social contact for these individuals.

A pub is not just about beer.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Living in a small village 7 miles from the nearest town limits opportunities for some, especially youngsters. A very large number of the teenagers who grew up in Alstonefield, did at one time or another, work in the George. In addition to this a number of residents within the parish have also worked in The George providing some with either full or part time work.

A thriving business, unlike a residential property in the centre of the community needs a lot of maintenance etc and as such, brings in all manner of extra work and business to the local community.

FINANCIAL SUMMARY

Funding requirements: We need to raise in excess of £500,000 from:

1. A community share offer of £50 share holdings.
2. Repayable loans,
3. Donations.
4. Crowd funding.
5. If it becomes available, a match-funding Community Ownership Fund (COF) grant.
6. Grants from Local Government and local businesses.
7. Grants for building improvements that would be eligible to apply for once the CBS has purchased the property.

The more that can be raised from the community the less our dependence on grants – **it is absolutely vital to raise as much as possible from the community share scheme and repayable loans.**

THE FUTURE

Under the right management and operating as a free house, the George has the potential to be as successful as any of the other pubs in our local area.

With the right vision the business can be expanded by developing both the Coach House and the Croft. By investing in this scheme both our and the wider community can make this happen.



THE GEORGE

ALSTONEFIELD

HELP SAVE OUR
VILLAGE PUB

www.thegeorgealstonefield.co.uk