

Chair's Report 2021

'Unprecedented' is a word which has been worn to death in the last twelve months, but I'm going to jump on the bandwagon anyway and apply it to the year experienced by shareholders, lenders, the management committee, customers, residents and volunteers – not to mention the tenants – of The Bell at Yarpole.

Nick and Dom (Hereford Hospitality) have had to weather Total Lockdown, Partial Lockdown, Curfew, Takeaways, Table Separation, Deep Cleaning, Rule of Six, Tiers Two and One, loss of earnings and uncertainty.

We, their customers, have had to endure the intermittent loss of village pub availability, and the Society itself has sustained a series of moderate losses by making rent reductions during the worst of the restricted trading periods.

After trading restrictions were finally removed, the staff crisis in the sector became an insurmountable obstacle to a full-service offering on more than four days per week. Your management committee have striven to agree with the tenants models whereby service provision on more days of the week could be managed with fewer staff but we have not been successful and there has been loss of support for the pub as a result.

And so we come to the here-and-now, and I wish desperately that I had better news for you all. But I have to inform you that, on 18th September, the committee received an email from Hereford Hospitality stating that they wished to end their tenancy.

And so we enter another difficult phase. The 'Break Date' enshrined in the contract has passed, so your management committee have negotiated and agreed terms for releasing Hereford Hospitality from their contract obligations and their tenancy has now come to an end. We are mindful of the costs of maintaining (insuring, heating, lighting etc.) an empty premises, and we are aware of the challenges in finding another tenant.

Regarding the original tenant selection, I would like to draw your attention to the ¹'Vision' document that was given to Hereford Hospitality in early 2020, illustrating the style of pub that the MCBS wanted to achieve. This had been developed from all the comments and opinions expressed by shareholders, and we believe it remains a valid expression of everyone's wishes and I urge you to have another look at it before the Annual Members' Meeting.

The sad fact is that, notwithstanding the Business Proposal that Hereford Hospitality submitted which reflected an excellent match for this Vision, the tenants have ultimately failed to deliver what was promised. The pandemic bears much of the blame, while staff shortages and spiralling wage costs are putting many pubs into crisis. As with any sector, only the businesses that are able to flex with changing circumstances will prosper and the committee feels that an inability to adapt their offering to suit the circumstances, in particular staff shortages, compromised their ability to be profitable or to generate sufficient local support to carry them through hard times.

I must however highlight the good aspects of this tenant: the pub has been kept in sparkling clean condition. Fresh flowers and nicely arranged furnishings made a welcome atmosphere. Nick's food was of a standard many pub chefs could never achieve and consistently attracted

¹ [thebellatypole_vision.pdf \(themortimercbs.org\)](#)

customers from far and wide and a significant social media following. It is to all our loss that a lack of business experience and a marked reluctance to adapt their style combined with the dreadful impact of Covid and the loss of staff in the industry created a perfect storm that our tenants were unable to ride out.

In these circumstances, the Five Year Plan for repair and upgrade of the pub (as set out in the Second Business Plan), has had to be deferred. One important improvement that has been made however, is to the Hot Water system. An antiquated arrangement, involving ballcocks and header tanks in the loft, with pathetically low pressure at the taps, has been replaced with an efficient and modern mains-pressure solution installed by Grange Heating.

On the plus side, our pub is still overall inching forwards in its condition: it was better when Caz and Sal took over than it was when Enterprise sold it. It is now better again than when the latest tenancy began: gutters have been replaced, the front exterior has been re-painted, the catering areas have been re-tiled, a kitchenette has been installed in the tenant's flat, a new walk-in cold store has been fitted, a new commercial ware-washer is in place and the above-mentioned hot water system has been renewed.

All we need now is a tenant who can cook like a dream, is knowledgeable about beer, cider, gins and wines, understands business accounting, can lead a team of staff and is the soul of friendly hospitality. Simple. If any of you know where unicorns live, now would be a good time to come forward.

Talking of coming forward, the Society depends on a membership that evolves and grows – and Yarpole has gained a number of new households recently, with more to come in the near future. We would love to know that every homeowner has bought shares and become invested in the pub's welfare and if some of you, whether new to the village or long term residents, would like to volunteer your services on the management committee, your assistance would be greatly appreciated. In particular we would like to talk to someone with good IT skills who can run our website, manage a social media presence and control document security. We are also still looking for a new Secretary, who of course could also be the individual with those skills, as well as a new Treasurer

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues on the management committee for their efforts in supporting this project. My gratitude is also immense to David Cheshire for stepping in to temporarily fill the role of Treasurer when Sam left us at the end of June. Last and by no means least I wish to record our thanks for the efforts of the volunteer gardening group who have done so much to contribute to a pleasant outside eating and drinking space and to improve the overall appearance of the pub.

After having to hold last year's meeting on Zoom, I look forward to seeing many of you again in person on 8th December.

With very best wishes
Marianne Taylor
Chair