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SMALL BUT MIGHTY

No TV's. No jukeboxes. No restaurant food. Just tables, chairs, beers and community conversation. As the number of micropubs approaches 600 in the UK, Microbrew investigates this growing sector and the people who run these outlets

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In just a few short years, micropubs have become a national phenomenon. The number has grown to more than 500 and some of them have their own in-house breweries as well ”

Roger Protz, editor of CAMRA's Good Beer Guide

More than 20 pubs are closing every week, according to the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA), fuelled by high beer taxes and supermarkets selling cheap alcohol. Since their heyday the number of pubs in England and Wales has fallen from 73,421 in 1951 to fewer than 39,000 in 2017.

By contrast the number of micropubs has almost doubled in the last year, with more than 300 micropubs opening across the country over the last decade, according to the Micropub Association. Some in the industry, however, estimate that number to be closer to 500. And with real ale's market share at 55% and forecast to reach 70% by 2020, that number is set to increase.

Behind the rise of these no frills drinking establishments has been the pub closures and other pubs diversifying into new areas such as food and entertainment. According to the Micropub Association's definition a micropub is a “small freehouse which listens to its customers, mainly serves cask ales, promotes conversation, shuns all forms of electronic entertainment and dabbles in traditional pub snacks”.

The start-up costs are minimal compared to a lot of small businesses, typically ranging from £5,000 to £30,000. And many are set up by husband and wife teams, community groups or individual entrepreneurs.

Relaxed licensing laws

The 2003 Licensing Act has been the biggest single enabler for the growth in micropubs, making it easier to open a pub

in a previously unlicensed premise.

While a large number have opened in empty high street shops, others have sprung up in more unlikely venues such as train stations, post offices, disused industrial buildings, former butchers' shops, pet grooming parlours and even undertakers to name a few.

Progressive Beer Duty, introduced in 2002, and the increase in the number of microbreweries and real ales available, have also helped their cause. There's also generally no VAT because most micropubs are below the £85,000 threshold. The benefits of owning a micropub are obvious – low overheads and shortened opening hours, essentially a stripped-down version of a pub – without the loud music, games machines and TV.

Another advantage is that they can serve the beer they want without having to be tied to a particular brewery. For the customer, they are a place where you can go for a chat with friends or a quiet drink.

“It's tragic that pubs that have been the heart of their communities for decades and even centuries continue to close – though the closure rate is declining to around 21 a week,” said Roger Protz, editor of CAMRA's Good Beer Guide.

“But they are being replaced by new pubs, often in the most unlikely places. In just a few short years, micropubs have become a national phenomenon. The number has grown to more than 500 and some of them have their own in-house breweries as well.”



Well stocked: Hillier tends to his beer



Stop off: Gregg and Julie Beaman in the Snug micropub at Carnforth Train Station

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The big pub chains with their loud jukeboxes and TVs have been sucking the money out of villages and towns for far too long. You don't get that in a micropub where the owners are often local and have a vested interest in the community ”

Martyn Hillier

Kent - heart of the micropub revolution

The largest concentration of micropubs is in Kent, where Martyn Hillier, co-founder of the UK Micropub Association opened the first micropub, Butcher's Arms, at a former butcher's shop in Herne in 2005 after the change in licensing laws.

Like his own micropub, since delivering his presentation at CAMRA's annual general meeting in Southport in 2009, the industry has taken off exponentially.

Hillier said that the idea of owning a micropub would appeal to an older generation of beer enthusiast who is often retired and can choose their own hours.

"I have been trying to push the concept of the micropub as much as I can," he said. "It's ideal for a middle-aged gentleman or lady who has just taken early retirement and their local pub in the village has closed and they have got £5,000 to £10,000 in the bank. What's more, you aren't restricted by the old licensing laws, so you can open and close when you like, within reason."

Hillier said that there was no secret to setting up a micropub - finding a small premises and adding a cooler and a cold room for the beer and a few tables and chairs is all that's required.

"Start off with the basics," he said. "The key is not to try and be all things and to all people. Here we are a village pub for the village people. At the end of the day, it's about bringing the community back together."

Hillier added that micropubs can also help boost the local economy as well as providing a place for local people to meet.

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Unique location

Gregg and Julie Beaman set up The Snug Micro Pub at Carnforth Train Station, Lancashire in August 2012. Despite having no previous experience, they decided to take the plunge after learning about the micropub concept.

"We thought it was a great idea and an opportunity to open the kind of pub that we as a customer would want to visit," said Gregg. "Then it was a case of obtaining a premises licence and getting planning permission to convert the former retail unit".

He added: "The beauty of micropubs is that because they are small by nature they are very sociable places to go. Because of our location, we get all sorts of people in here from our core local customer base to passengers who are waiting for a train or are just passing through. But at the end of the day they are all just looking for a place where they can sit and enjoy a quiet drink and a chat."



Community hub: David and Nicola Holland

Social need

Relative veterans in the trade, David and Nicola Holland have opened no fewer than two micropubs in the last five years.

Following the success of the first one, The Wight Bear in Southbourne, Dorset, which was set up in June 2015, they launched a second, The Saxon Bear Ale House in nearby Christchurch in April 2016, which they later sold in January last year.

"We had no prior experience," said Nicola. "We just liked real ale and quirky old pubs and we had heard about micropubs, so we did our research by making a trip to visit

some in Kent. The rest is history."

David added: "We felt that with all the shops closing in the high street there was a social need for a place where people can meet and share stories and drink good quality beer in a friendly environment."

The Wight Bear was formerly a greetings card shop that had closed and had been empty for 18 months, while The Saxon Bear was a vacant former lettings agency.

The Wight Bear, which is run by a team of three full-time and three part-time staff, serves predominantly cask ale straight from the firkins, as well as four keg lines,

some bottled and canned beer and local wine and spirits, accompanied with scotch eggs, pork pies and cheese boards.

"Micropubs are becoming more popular because they represent the values of the original pub - a quiet place you can go and have a drink and talk with your friends and not have to put up with loud music and TV screens everywhere," said Nicola. "The number of micropubs has doubled over the last year, but this is only the beginning - with so many exciting new beers being made by the microbreweries, pretty soon we are going to see them springing up everywhere."

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Phil Ayling

New opportunity

Former draughtsman Phil Ayling opened the UK's third micropub, Just Beer, in Newark, Nottinghamshire in August 2010.

Out of work for three years, he was inspired by Hillier's CAMRA speech and borrowed some money from his wife and set up the micropub with his three business partners Duncan Neil, Paul Murphy and Stuart Young.

"I was gobsmacked at how simple the concept was and couldn't believe that nobody had thought of it before," said Ayling. The partners found a site dating back 450 years that had previously been used as a print works, art studio and gallery, and a blacksmith's, and opened it 18 months later.

"Anyone can go into WHSmith and get a book on beer making," said Ayling. "But you have got to have the knowledge, enthusiasm and passion for the beer - that's the most important thing and then everything follows from there. It's easy to

set up and there are few overheads, so you can also make a decent living."

Ayling puts the micropub's success down to providing the customer with the personal touch and making them feel at home.

"With our micropub there is a real sense of belonging, unlike many pubs which are very impersonal and corporate in their approach," he said. "I would describe us as an old-fashioned pub with old fashioned values but with a modern outlook."

Since Just Beer's launch Ayling has opened five BeerHeadZ micropubs in nearby Retford, Grantham, Nottingham Station, Lincoln, and most recently, Melton Mowbray. However, Ayling warns about the rise of so-called "fake" micropubs.

"Contrary to calling themselves a micropub they are anything but," he said. "A lot of people are setting up establishments and calling themselves micropubs, but they are no more than a small pub with a TV and a slot machine or a pool table."



Rapid growth: Phil Ayling has opened no fewer than six micropubs in the last decade



Charlie Rawlings and Nathan Marshall at their Prior's Oven micropub in Spalding

A piece of history

Charlie Rawlings and Nathan Marshall launched the Prior's Oven in Spalding in December 2013. Having been to see some of the micropubs in Whitby in action, they decided to start their own and found a premises in the town's old priory.

One of the biggest attractions was the building's history, said Marshall. "It's an 850-year-old building which was formerly used as a priory and prison cells, so it's steeped in history," he said.

The business partners already owned a microbrewery, Austendyke Ales, so this was the next logical step, said Marshall.

"We didn't do it to make a profit, otherwise we would have been out of business a year ago," he said.

The micropub serves six real ales, local farmhouse cider and spirits. Marshall said that the rise of the micropubs had been helped by the fact that real ale has become the vogue. "It has coincided with real ale becoming fashionable again and because a lot of the beers now are so light and hoppy there's a real ale out there for everybody."

Hand in hand

Robin Smallbone and Michelle Gordon decided to set up a micropub to complement their microbrewery, the Rockin Robin Brewery in Maidstone, in November 2016.

"We used to entertain groups of people at our microbrewery and it proved quite successful, so we decided to open a micropub," said Gordon. "We have been open a few months now, but it has done really well - we have had lots of interest and we're building on that."

The Beer Barn is located in the middle of an orchard in a Scandinavian shed and all the drinks are locally sourced from the brewery or the Double Vision cider maker next door.

"The beauty of the micropub is that you can come in not knowing anybody and leave having had a good evening and made lots of new friends," said Gordon, who has worked in bars previously.

Moving forward, she believes that the future of the micropub is bright.

"When you look at the big pub chains, the tenancy costs are so high," she said. "The advantage of the micropub is that the rents and the overheads are relatively cheap so it's quite affordable."



Yard of Ale in Broadstairs

Future of micropubs

Another micropub that has set up in an unlikely space is the Yard of Ale in Broadstairs, Kent, housed in the former stable block of the adjacent funeral directors.

The pub has kept much of the building's character, including the original flagstone floor, and is still used for wakes. Martyn Hillier quipped: "I think they missed a trick there - it could have been called 'Last Orders'."

Overall, however, the micropub market remains small compared to the traditional pub industry, which brought in £21 billion in 2017, according to the British Beer and Pub Association. But with the rate at which micropubs are opening, there's bound to be one springing up close to you in the near future.