

One man's dream

For our first main feature, where better than to start with the man that kicked off the micropub phenomenon, Martyn Hillier. Alex Wright travelled to The Butchers Arms in Herne for the full story.



“ To me, real ale in the 1970s and 80s was like warm piss, until I tried this. It was flipping gorgeous ”

When Martyn Hillier stood up in front of 400 Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) members to tell them how to run a micropub at its AGM in Eastbourne in April 2009, little did he know the effect it would have.

The maverick landlord of the UK's first micropub hoped it would inspire many others to set up their own micropubs across the country. But instead it incurred the wrath of CAMRA's top brass, who Hillier says have done everything to suppress the growth of the micropub industry since.

“I was applauded onto and off the stage, so I thought it had gone pretty well,” says Hillier as he sits behind the counter of his 14ft by 12ft micropub in Herne, Kent. “But not according to one lady who wrote in to CAMRA's What's Brewing newspaper.”

The letter, entitled 'Frivolous Idea', which he holds aloft to illustrate the point, described Hillier's micropub concept as a 'glorified excuse to drink with his mates and make money from it', adding: 'This is a frivolous suggestion that all you needed was an old shop and 12 mates and, hey presto, a pub you can run like your own bar at home but with real ale.'

Little did CAMRA know, though, what it had inadvertently started. “That's when the gloves came off and CAMRA and I went our separate ways,” Hillier tells *Micropub Magazine*, proudly puffing out his chest from behind his red Micropub shirt. “The big boys had obviously said to CAMRA: ‘What on earth have you done? You've just invited this bloke to go up on stage and, in effect, tell everyone exactly how to run their own free house.’”





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The irony is that, despite the fallout, two years later CAMRA members voted Hillier among the top 40 all-time campaigners and in 2015 he was crowned top campaigner.

Hillier, who co-founded the Micropub Association, first got a taste for real ale in 1985 when he was invited by a “rather attractive PR girl” to go and sample some at The Flounder and Firkin in Highbury, north London. Taking her up on her offer, he tried a 4.7% ABV ale and fell in love straight away (with the beer, not the girl). “To me, real ale in the 1970s and 80s was like warm piss, until I tried this,” says Hillier. “It was flipping gorgeous.”

A crash course from a friend in how to look after beer and Hillier bought the lease of the Canterbury Beer Shop in Northgate, an off-licence that sold real ale, for £20,000 in 1990. The shop was on its knees with the previous owner drinking more than he was selling, according to Hillier, who turned it around.

Such was his success that seven years later Victoria Wine's owners Allied Domecq came in and offered him £1,000 for his licence. Feeling insulted by their paltry offer, Hillier refused, only for Allied Domecq to go to court and get permission to open their own licence in Northgate. Within 18 months the new shop had put him out of business.

“The biggest lesson I learned is that it doesn't matter how strong your case is, whoever has the most money always wins because they can appeal any decision,” says Hillier.

Hillier then started a florist with his then wife at the site of a former butcher's shop in their home village of Herne and he acquired the licence of the off-licence which was shutting down, moving it across the road to their new premises and opening his own off-licence. “We sold flowers out the front and beer round the back,” he says. “We did quite well for a while but after we split, the business started losing money and I was on the verge of packing it all in.”

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Martyn Hillier: One man's dream

“At the time, when the Financial Times interviewed me in January 2015, I said there would be 5,000 micropubs. But that hasn't happened, mainly because CAMRA hasn't got on board – they've done absolutely nothing for micropubs.”

It wasn't until a licensing officer arrived on his doorstep and encouraged Hillier eventually, after consulting some of his loyal customers, to fill in a form that enabled him to turn his business into a pub. The Licensing Act 2003 was a game changer, allowing shops to be turned into small pubs at a time when the supermarkets were being forced to apply to the local magistrates' court for a licence every time a new store opened.

“Initially I thought: ‘I don't want to run a pub; they're just full of lager drinkers and smokers;’” he says. “It wasn't until I thought about it a bit more and realised what I could do: I would have a small room with chairs and tables around the outside so that everyone could face each other and talk among themselves while enjoying good quality beer. “None of this stuff in big pubs where people have got their back to you at the bar and you can't get a seat.”

The day the Licensing Act 2003 came into effect, on 24th November 2005, Hillier opened the UK's

first micropub, aptly named The Butchers Arms. Word soon got out and three years later he was visited by a CAMRA group who liked what they saw and invited him to present at its 2009 AGM.

Slowly but surely the micropub revolution followed with the second one opening in 2009 and Hillier himself appearing on the front page of What's Brewing in 2015, giving it much more traction. However, Hillier blames CAMRA's failure to get behind the new movement as the main reason why it hasn't grown as much and as quickly as it should have done.

“At the time, when the Financial Times interviewed me in January 2015, I said there would be 5,000 micropubs,” he says. “But that hasn't happened, mainly because CAMRA hasn't got on board – they've done absolutely nothing for micropubs. “If they had done this would have been front page news in 2003 when the law changed, and we would have had a very different outcome. They just want to protect their own interests and their £3-million rainy day fund which will

keep their wages going for the next four years.”

Hillier is also dismissive of the Society of Independent Brewers, which as far as he's concerned is a middleman who adds an inflated 20% fee to a beer order before selling it on to the large pub chains. “They don't even deliver the beer,” he says. “So quite what they do to justify their fee I don't know.”

Having got micropubs up and running, Hillier, however, is now happy to take a back seat and watch them grow. As home to the first micropub, Kent has naturally become the hub with over 70 to its name, but there have been other pockets springing up in places such as Middlesbrough, Nottingham, Preston, Sheffield and Stockport.

One of the other big success stories is the south coast where five years ago there were no micropubs but now there are five in both Bournemouth and Worthing alone. Their growth has been helped by the collapse of high street chains including Toys R Us, Maplin and Mothercare, as well as smaller premises, leaving behind a swathe of empty shop fronts which are prime locations for micropubs. With average start-up costs of around £30,000 and few overheads, micropubs are a no-brainer according to Hillier.

“Once the word spreads we are going to see a lot more micropubs starting up,” he says. “It's perfect for many fifty-somethings whose kids have left home and they have paid off the mortgage, have a lump sum to invest and are looking for something else to do.”

Hillier runs a tight ship based on a minimal initial outlay of £500: he already had his own cooler for the beer so only needed to buy in some furniture, including some wooden tombstone bullet heads inscribed with the names of old breweries that have closed.

Regulars have added their own furnishings to the assortment of plastic chickens, hops, tankards and other props that hang from the butcher's hooks on the ceiling, the ‘Michael Jackson’ skeleton, a Rik Mayall cardboard cutout brandishing a pint of Bombardier and the head of the last boar to be shot on Herne Common in 1824 that now sports a policeman's hat.



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Aside from that, Hillier pays £70 per year for his licence, as well as a modest amount for business rates and insurance compared to a mainstream pub. And because his takings are below the £85,000 threshold, he doesn't pay any VAT either.

Hillier maintains that almost anyone with a bit of enterprise can get into micropubs, citing the example of a friend who started out with £34.50 in the till and slept in his Ford Transit but has now bought the property and lives in a flat above it.

Open six days a week, Hillier sources all of his beer locally and listens to what his customers want rather than being told what to stock by a big brewery. At any time, he has three types of beer on offer, the most popular which is currently Gadd's No.5, a 4.4% ABV best bitter from Ramsgate Brewery.

"I don't care about foreign beers because I only sell British beer," he says. "I don't want to be going miles away, so I get most of it from round here in Kent."

Asked whether Brexit will affect micropubs, Hillier says that it won't make any difference because most suppliers source their ingredients such as hops from within the UK. "It won't have any effect on me – that's for sure," he says.

Hillier believes that there's a beer out there for everyone – ranging from a 3.7% Oakham JHB to a potent 11.2% JW Lees Harvest Ale, all conveniently stocked in his storeroom at the back. He likes to keep alternatives to a minimum, offering a couple of dusty bottles of red and white wine for anyone brave enough to ask, and lemonade for drivers.

"It's my job to convert them from wine drinkers to beer drinkers," he grins. "One lady who comes in used to be a vegetarian who drank red wine but now she eats meat and drinks Fuller's ESB." Then there's the tale about the ram testicles that Hillier entered for the pickling competition which two drunk rugby players later consumed as a dare one night.

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Martyn Hillier: One man's dream

“Brexit is a real conversation killer,” says Hillier. “There’s a rule in here that we don’t talk about it until after 10pm.” Beyond no talk of Brexit, the only other rules are no music, no phones and NFL (no fizzy lager) ”



Turning over about £65,000 a year, having made a profit every year since opening, Hillier claims to have a secret way of making the beer last longer and in better condition. “I’d have to kill you if I told you what it was,” Hillier jokes, saying it’s the small adjustments that make a big difference. “I ask anyone who I tell my secret to that all I want in return is £1 from every firkin they sell; after all, they will be making £24 more from the extra pints they can sell, which they would otherwise have lost.”

Readily admitting that he’s pathetic at marketing himself, Hillier, who drives around in a distinctive red Asquith Motor Carriage which has been specially adapted for him because of a paralysed left arm sustained in a 110mph motorcycle crash 40 years ago, relies mainly on word of mouth. But it’s obviously working as he gets punters from

all corners because of the status of being the UK’s first micropub. “I was run off my feet in the first four years,” he says. “One night we had 37 people and one dog in here – that was too much.”

Hillier claims that such is the pull of his micropub that 18 people have moved into the area to be closer to it and estate agents even include it as a key selling point in their literature.

Among his clientele are builders, plumbers, roofers, mechanics, policemen, multi-millionaires and even a retired nuclear submariner who they call Popeye. “Everyone is treated exactly the same when they walk in here, regardless of where they are from,” says Hillier. “People have made some firm friends and got a lot of business through the micropub; if you’ve got something that needs doing someone’s bound

to know a person who can help out.

In the past, we have set up a classic car club and a cycling club and have raised about £4,500 to £5,000 for various charities. Micropubs are a great way of bringing the community back together.”

Nothing is off limits when it comes to conversation topics either, says Hillier, except Brexit. “We put the world to rights most nights,” he says. “It’s far better than watching telly.”

But the Chatham House Rule applies, as a sign outside points out. “Brexit is a real conversation killer,” says Hillier. “There’s a rule in here that we don’t talk about it until after 10pm.” Beyond no talk of Brexit, the only other rules are no music, no phones and NFL (no fizzy lager).





Micropubs, meanwhile, continue to flourish across the country, with now over 700 according to recent industry estimates, opening in some unlikely places such as disused banks, post offices, hairdressers, tattoo parlours, art galleries, railway signal boxes, garages and even front rooms. "There's one pub called the Yard of Ale in Broadstairs," says Hillier. "It was a former funeral directors but I feel they missed a trick: they should have called it the Last Drop."

The only stumbling block for micropubs it appears, says Hillier, is the reticence of local councils and surrounding businesses because of their misperception as a large pub where troublemakers will congregate. But nothing could be further from the truth, he says.

Rather they can turn a deprived area into a destination, says Hillier. "I was talking to a local policeman the other day and I asked him if there was ever any trouble from people who have been drinking

in micropubs," he says. "He said absolutely none; you're more likely to have problems with people who have been out drinking lager or necking shots in large pubs or clubs."

With pubs shutting at an alarming rate of almost 1,000 every year, hit by the double whammy of high duty and cheap supermarket booze, Hillier believes the writing is on the wall for traditional pubs. In November 2019, Marston's alone sold 137 of its pubs for £44.9m, most of which were wet-led leased, tenanted and franchised pubs which had been struggling to turn a profit.

But the demise of the pub has been to the advantage of the micropub, believes Hillier. In contrast to the decline of the pub, the number of micropubs has almost doubled in the past year, with more than 600 opening across the country over the past decade.

And, with real ale's market share at 55% of on-trade ale sales – forecast to reach 70% by 2020, that number seems destined to only increase.

"Micropubs have replaced the former 18th century ale houses which were closed by the big brewers after World War I," says Hillier. "So, in effect, we have gone full circle."

And, finally, what of Hillier's own plans for the future? "People sometimes ask me why don't I open another one," he says. "But I can't be in two places at once. I'm quite happy with my lot."

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