



↑ The Stag & Lantern took over the premises of a former sports nutrition store

Living the I

Lockdown may have put Rob Woodland's plans to open his micropub, the Stag & Lantern, on hold, but after reopening he has got ambitious plans for the future.
Alex Wright reports

Rob Woodland always had a dream. That dream was to own a micropub. So, when the opportunity arose to set up one in his home town of Highams Park, North London, he jumped at the chance

Then, just when he was getting ready to open, the Covid-19 pandemic struck and his plans were thrown out of the window

After a year of lockdown and restrictions, during which time the pub briefly opened in the summer before closing, it is only now that he has truly been able to realise his dream.

As a beer enthusiast and CAMRA (the Campaign for Real Ale) member, 35-year-old Woodland has always had the itch to get into the brewing business. But it wasn't until he stepped foot inside the Two Halves micropub whilst on holiday in Margate, Kent, in 2015, that he fell in love with the idea of running his own micropub.

"I have done office jobs all my life, so I was keen to take a break from the 9 to 5," said Woodland. "I reached my 30s and thought it's either now or never."

After reading several books on the subject and putting a business proposal together, Woodland started looking at other micropubs

Golden opportunity

After posting a request on the local community group on Facebook looking for commercial property on the high street to rent, Woodland received a response from the owner of a sports nutrition store who was moving out.

"He asked me if I would like to come down and have a look, so I swung by that day for a peep," said Woodland. "Straight away, I thought 'This could work', so I started the ball rolling.

"I thought, rather naively at the time, that it wouldn't take that long to get some papers signed and I could get started right away. How wrong was I?"

After applying to the local authority, Waltham Forest Council's planning department, for change of use for the property in August 2019, the application went to public consultation, where Woodland said that it received overwhelming support. At the same time, he applied for an off-licence – a smart move he realised only later during lockdown.



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to see what they were doing and if there were any ideas he could use for his venture. The concept for the Stag & Lantern was born.

"If I'm being honest, it gave me a convenient excuse to visit some more micropubs," said Woodland. "I went to the Little Green Dragon in Enfield, where I had a good chat with the owner Richard, who really helped me, as well as visiting the Hovelling Boat in Ramsgate and the Dodo in Hanwell."

Around the same time, Woodland moved to Highams Park, drawn by the village feel and atmosphere. Having sought feedback from local residents and businesses about the notion of setting up a micropub and, getting a favourable response, he started looking for a site.



↑ Rob Woodland (standing) is happy to have the micropub busy after lockdown



↑ The Stag & Lantern is ideally situated in Highams Park high street

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“The planning department received hundreds of letters of approval,” said Woodland. “In fact, they said it was the most they had ever received for one application, so that felt like I was doing the right thing.”

However, because there was a residential property above the shop, as a condition for approval, Woodland also had to install soundproof insulation, setting the process back another couple of months. He finally got the keys in November and sent the final paperwork off to the council for approval by email in December.

After waiting a month and not hearing anything, Woodland received an email from the council informing him that he needed to submit the documents via their portal. Everything was finally approved in February 2020 before building work began in earnest. “After filling in all the necessary forms and getting approvals, the building work was well under way and we were getting ready to open and start serving,” said Woodland.

“Then, at the end of March, Covid struck.”

Opening delays

Because lockdown meant the pub could not open as intended in April and there was a lack of required building materials, renovation work slowed right down. But as restrictions began to be lifted, it was finally ready in time to open at the end of July.

After a successful two months trading during August and September, further restrictions were introduced by the Government, making it increasingly difficult to operate as a pub.

Then the pub was forced to shut in November with the second lockdown and did not reopen until April this year.

Throughout the period when it was allowed to, however, it has provided a home delivery and take away service to bring in some additional income. →

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Living the Dream



↑ Patrons enjoy a pint outside the pub

“We did incredibly well in those summer months and that has given us the determination to carry on and reopen again,” said Woodland. “But, at the same time, it’s strange to think that we haven’t been properly open yet as a pub.”

He added: “The second lockdown was definitely the toughest period, certainly mentally. There was no end in sight, but we just had to keep plugging away and do our best to try and come out the other end.”

Woodland estimates that the whole project cost him £35,000, most of which went on legal fees, planning and licensing applications. Once the additional pandemic-related costs are factored in, including the non-relaxation of rent and utilities, it was certainly more than he bargained for. But that has been tempered by access to Government grants and the furlough scheme.

Family affair

Although it is Woodland’s baby, the pub is very much a family affair. His father, John, is the bar manager and his girlfriend Melanie did the interior design and helps out regularly.

“They have both been an enormous help, without which I would never have got the pub started,” said

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Woodland. “My father is a real ale drinker and used to run the bar at our local cricket club.

“Having initially been a bit apprehensive about the concept at first, he’s now completely hands-on and is a great sounding board to bounce ideas off. Melanie has also been a great emotional support throughout, particularly during these tough times with lockdown, and her interior design skills have made all the difference.”
By its very nature, the pub’s bar

area is small at 5x5 metres with a Lindr system for draft beer, and it stocks 50 different beers in cans and bottles at any one time.

Its range of beers are largely from the UK, including local breweries such as Redemption, New River, and Gravity Well, as well as German lagers and wheat beers.

Woodland has also built a cellar at the back which holds three to four casks of beer and three to four bag-in-boxes of cider: later he plans to install beer engines and pumps too. There’s a 3x4m outside area at the front with seating for 15-16 customers.

Throughout the set-up process, Woodland is glad that he decided to keep his day job at Universal Music, where he worked in service project management, particularly given the UK’s current jobs situation.

“I didn’t want to quit until there was absolute certainty the business would work,” said Woodland. “In hindsight, given everything that has happened with the pandemic, it was one of the better ideas I’ve had.”

For now, though, his mind is fully focused on the future.

“Now I have been bitten by the micropub bug there’s so much more I want to do with the business,” said Woodland. “When we open up again fully, I want to do more of the fun stuff like meet the brewer sessions, brewery tap takeovers, beer and food pairings and tastings and even live music events.”

When everything is back to normal, Woodland is keen to have an official launch party. And he is upbeat about what the future holds, not just for his own business but the wider industry.

“I’m optimistic for the future of the sector,” said Woodland. “Provided there are no more lockdowns.”

*Stag & Lantern,
11-12 The Broadway,
Highams Park,
London E4 9LQ
Tel: 020 7998 8930
www.thestagandlantern.co.uk*