

A passion for brewing... and micropubs!

Running a microbrewery and micropub. A dream scenario for most people but a lot of hard work along the way. **Alex Wright** chats with **Richard Muir** of **The Weighbridge Inn**

Real ale has been in Richard Muir's blood from an early age.

Muir, who runs The Weighbridge Inn in Burton upon Trent with his wife Mandy, was introduced to the concept by his father when he was just 18.

From there, he developed a keen interest in brewing and a few years later started experimenting with his own 100-litre kit in his garage at home. He even called it the Muirhouse Brewery.

But it wasn't until Muir decided to quit his job producing flexible dies for the printing trade in 2011 at the age of 40 that he realised the dream of running his own microbrewery.

After securing the former Blue Monkey Brewery site on Manners Industrial Estate in Ilkeston and buying his brewing equipment from 3 B's Brewery in Blackburn, he was ready to start.

"I packed in my job and the next day walked into my 'new office' in the industrial unit," Muir told *Micropub Magazine*. "It was only then that it dawned on me that I'm on my own here now, so I have to make it work or else."



↑ The Weighbridge Inn, Burton upon Trent

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Richard Muir, The Weighbridge Inn

All that was left inside the building were the blue stairs and the drainage system. So, effectively, Muir had to start from scratch, setting up all the equipment himself and buying in casks to store the beer produced.

Over time, to meet demand, he bought a bigger plant with three fermentation vessels to replace the original one. Currently the brewery brews three beer barrel lengths (BBLs) but has capacity to go up to 5BBL.

The brewery now produces a host of different styles of beer, all branded in the traditional Muir tartan colours of black, red, and yellow, from IPAs and pale ales to session beers, premium bitters, milds, porters, and stouts. And Muir is always keen to try out new flavours including mango, passion fruit and coffee.

The most popular beer is Tick Tock Boom, a traditional best bitter with 4.5% ABV, selling four sets of nine casks every week. Among the quirkier beers he produces are Back in the Building, a strong pale ale brewed in tribute to Elvis Presley, Magnum Mild, a strong mild that pays homage to the Dirty Harry film, and even Erewash FC, a pale ale made for a local football club. →

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Getting the micropub bug

Four years after launching the brewery, the Muirs, from Long Eaton, decided to open their own micropub, The Brewery Tap, in Ilkeston, where they could sell the beer. Mandy already had extensive experience in the pub trade, having worked at Five Lamps and Little Chester Ale House in Derby, and The Gate Inn in Aysworth, so between them they were able to run the two operations seamlessly, brewing in the morning and serving customers in the afternoon and evening.

Business was going well, so a year later the Muirs decided to open another pub, The Last Post in Derby. But they soon found it was too much trying to run two pubs and a microbrewery, so they shut The Brewery Tap to focus on the other two businesses.

However, things didn't go according to plan with the friends the Muirs had gone into business with at The Last Post, so they ended up exiting that as well in September 2017.

Looking around for new premises, they came across a prime site which had previously been a coal yard office dating back to the 19th century and, most recently, a pub, the Lord of the Rings-themed Middle Earth Tavern, in the Grain Warehouse Yard, Derby Street, close to the train station and Burton Albion FC's Pirelli Stadium.

By chance, they had come across the pub before when helping a friend complete an application to convert it into a pub 10 years ago. Since then, it has had five different owners, who have had varying degrees of success.

Opportunity knocks

So, when the opportunity arose to buy it in July 2019, the Muirs jumped at the chance. Because the pub had been closed for four months when they took over, they had to start over again, ripping out and putting in new keg lines, installing a new cooling system and getting the cellar up to the required standard to store beer.

But after opening the doors and taking on two new members of staff, the Muirs soon established the pub as a regular fixture again in the community. One of its biggest appeals is the long bar at the front of the building and a cosy room off on the side, with capacity for 30



↑ Angela, Amy and Mandy (l-r) working the bar!

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Richard Muir, The Weighbridge Inn

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↑ The Weighbridge Inn has capacity for 30 people

people inside, as well as five tables in the outside seating area.

Having its own brewery has made the process of running a pub even easier. The synergies between the two are obvious.

“For a brewery to have its own pub is fantastic because you have a guaranteed outlet for your beer,” said Muir. “Once you have reached the critical mass of one or two pubs, you don't need to supply anyone else.”

Asides from stocking beer from the Muirhouse Brewery, the Muirs do swaps with other breweries across the UK, from Inverness to Penzance, typically having two of their own ales and two guest beers on offer at any one time. Locally, they exchange beer with Magpie Brewery in Nottingham, Derby Brewing Company and Brunswick Brewery in Derby, but because they are part of The Pallet Network, it is just as easy to ship produce to and from all corners of the country.

Admitting that they have made a few mistakes along the way, Muir said the biggest one was not stocking lager when they opened their first micropub. It was an error they quickly rectified, though.

“We soon realised that by not serving lager we were excluding about 50% of the Ilkeston population,” Muir said.

“So, we decided to start serving a premium quality German lager – Bitburger, and there's also cider and spirits available.”

A heavy night

Like most micropub owners, lockdown hit the Muirs hard. When the first one was announced by the Government in March 2020, they took the decision to lock the doors after closing time and consume as much of the remaining stock as they could to avoid it going to waste.

Worried they wouldn't be able to get home afterwards, they booked a room in the hotel across the road to sleep in. Muir admits that he can't even remember getting to the room that night.

“Suddenly, we had got a pub that we weren't allowed to open and a brewery with no customers,” Muir said. “But we decided to diversify and start a home delivery service, which has exploded since, to the point where we are now selling 50 to 60 nine-pint boxes every Friday.”

Receiving Government grants, the Muirs were able to keep the pub running, reopening whenever they could between lockdowns and then, finally in April, and they have been open ever since. Such was its popularity that sometimes they had to turn customers away because they were so busy, despite the restrictions.

“We just had to roll our sleeves up and get on with,” said Muir. “We installed a screen on the bar, put down tape on the floor and signage around the place to adhere with social distancing rules, as well as only allowing people in with masks and making everyone clean their hands with hand sanitiser.”

The Muirs have also reintroduced their famous Sunday lunch, ably assisted by their teenage son, Matthew, who cooks a mean Yorkshire pudding. They also plan to offer kegs and cans for their beer in the future.

As we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis, the Muirs have plans to put on a range of events. The Weighbridge Inn even featured as one of the 14 pubs in the Burton Ale Trail in September, which came about after the Burton & South Derbyshire CAMRA Beer Festival was cancelled last year.

Having run three different pubs and a brewery, would Muir consider opening another venture? Don't bet against it.

“I would never say never,” said Muir. “If the right place came up at the right time and the right price, I would certainly be interested.”

*The Weighbridge Inn
Grain Warehouse Yard,
Derby Street, Burton upon Trent,
Staffordshire DE14 2JJ
Tel: 07758 546922*