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(l-r) Steve Longthorp and Dave Eustice, co-owners enjoying a well-deserved pint!

Five start a micropub

A group of five friends have pooled all their skills together to set up a new micropub in Oxford. *Alex Wright* reports

Fancy bar seats at The Tile Shop Ale House

Ian Langford, Stephen Longthorp, Dan Lordan, Stephen Hoar and David Eustice – all of whom had no previous experience of running a pub - decided to launch The Tile Shop Ale House in Headington after becoming fed up with not being able to find anywhere that served a decent pint.

Four of the quintet have full-time jobs, ranging from an electrician and laboratory worker to an airline pilot.

And they have each been using their specialism to convert the former tile shop into a micropub. What started as a retirement fund project, though, has quickly become a labour of love.

"We have known each other for years and one day we found this shop and thought it would be the perfect place to set up a micropub," Lordan told *Micropub Magazine*. "As a destination, it is in the centre of the local community and on the main line between Oxford and London.

"What we really like about Headington is the whole community vibe and café culture in an up-and-coming area. In fact, I liken the micropub more to a beer café, with its outdoor seating and people dropping by to say hello and come in for a pint.

"The other advantage of having a Headington base is being close enough to Oxford city centre, yet without the sky-high rents."

Renovation work

Taking on the 100-year-old premises in July 2020, the group undertook most of the renovation work themselves. Keeping the tile floor, built 30 years ago, and some other period features, they set about completely changing the rest of the set-up.

"Everyone really likes the floor," said Lordan. "It's unique, so we decided to build everything around it."

Doing most of the work themselves to save on labour costs, dedicating their evenings and weekends, and using a friend's van to move materials, they rebuilt the front, bathroom, and chimney stack, widened the doors for wheelchair access, and installed a seating area and new outward opening windows at the front.

The entrance is modern and becomes more olde world as you walk through to the bar area, which is surrounded with exposed brickwork and beer racks made from steel pipes with each barrel having a cooling jacket to keep it at a constant temperature.

"That was an engineering feat in itself," said Lordan, who constructed the beer racks himself from scratch. "We have also been trying to use sustainable material such as recycled wood wherever we can."

Outside, the two parking spaces have been converted into a seating area, complete with a canopy and infrared heat lamps, with room for 15 people. Inside, there is capacity for more than 30.

Getting the word out

The whole project cost about £50,000 to £60,000, Lordan estimates. A large amount of that went on obtaining a licence to sell alcohol and other legal requirements such as taking out a notice in the local paper, he said.

Keen to rejuvenate the area, Oxford City Council was fully supportive of the idea of establishing a micropub. However, there were still several hoops they had to jump through from a planning permission perspective. →

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>
> Dan Lordan, The Tile Shop Ale House

The tiled floor at the micropub has proved a talking point

> Many people in Oxford didn't really understand how micropubs work at first. We have had some people that came in and thought we were a tile shop that sells beer, so were a bit confused at first!

Dan Lordan, The Tile Shop Ale House

Another big hurdle that had to be overcome was getting the word out about what micropubs are. That, and getting past the idea it is based in a former tile shop.

"Many people in Oxford didn't really understand how micropubs work at first," said Lordan. "We have had some people that came in and thought we were a tile shop that sells beer, so were a bit confused at first!"

Those that did get the concept or were already familiar with it, however, love it. So much so that they have brought in a collection of curios which now adorn the walls, including everything from a yard of ale to a boomerang, a piece of the original Great Western Railway track and even an airplane propeller (donated by a pilot).

"It has helped to give the place a real sense of identity, which reflects the local community and its residents," said Lordan. "It also makes it feel like a home from home they can come anytime to sit an enjoy a quiet pint or with meet with friends."

Locally sourced ales

Like most micropubs, the group applied for and benefitted from a government restart grant.

But, despite being closed during lockdown, they continued to pay the rent.

Both of the ales the micropub sells – Sidepocket for a Toad (a 3.6% ABV IPA) and Ridgeway (a 4% ABV traditional English ale) – are locally-sourced from Tring Brewery. That's because they wanted to keep their offering consistent so that customers know what to expect, without the menu changing every week.

Using the gravity dispense method by tapping every barrel at the same angle rather than the conventional draught systems now used, allows the beer to be served instantly with minimal wastage, with the barrel being changed every three days to keep it fresh. The micropub also stocks Hitchcox Cider from the local Orchard Cottage Cider Company and gin from the Oxford Artisan Distillery as well as an array of wines and bar snacks.

Alongside the five owners, there are three part-time staff, who work the eight-hour a day, seven-day a week rota.

"A big frustration among customers was with all the big pubs continuing to keep irregular opening times, even after lockdown," said Lordan.

"We wanted to be consistent, so we decided to open every day at the same time, between 12pm and 8pm."

After starting with table service due to Covid-19 restrictions when the pub opened on April 12, they found that it worked well for customers who wanted to sit outside and so have continued it. They also offer a takeaway service.

"The pub has been a great way to bring the local community together, particularly during these challenging times," added Lordan.

"We get everyone in here from estate agents and academics to council workers and NHS staff: it has helped neighbours and people who you would pass on the street every day but would never to talk to get to know each other."

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