

# Frithelstock Parish Council

## Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2017 at 7:30pm in Frithelstock Village Hall

**Councillors Present:** Mike Stokes (Chair), Mackie Poole, Mark Goldman, Roger Hunkin, Elizabeth Hunkin, Mike Baker, Andrew Heard (part) and District Councillor Phil Pennington

**Parish Clerk:** Zena Tett

**Also in attendance:** 8 members of the public

### BUSINESS TO BE TRANSACTED

**238. Welcome:** Mike Stokes, Chairman, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**239. Apologies for Absence:** None

**240. Declarations of Interest:** None

**241. Public Participation:**

Cllr Stokes proposed that Standing Orders be suspended to allow sufficient speaking time for everyone present, this was seconded by Cllr Goldman and all in favour.

Cllr Stokes read out the following statement by the Landlord:

Our reasons for closing the Clinton Arms are well documented in our planning application and I do not intend to add to them here. However, my attention has been drawn to an anonymous document, circulated under the name of Save The Clinton Arms, by two of my customers who were angered by its content and to which I now refer.

It commences with a statement that the pub was closed without general notification. A notice was put out on our website and additionally, circulated in our newsletter. I know this notice was circulated successfully as one of our customers, who has a holiday home on Bideford but lives in Kent, drove down from Kent, especially to attend our last night. Richard Joseph ran our website and he can confirm this. A notice was also put out on "Facebook", which has a much higher circulation, and its success was confirmed by the high attendance of musicians on our last Sunday jam session and the many kind and supportive messages we received from those who couldn't make it. We also, of course, had a notice in the bar.

The reduction in hours was a reaction to the declining trade not the cause of it. You will recall there was a recession during which in excess of fifty pubs a week were closing. We were only taking 14% of our turnover from Tuesday to Thursday although this period accounted for 33% of the variable overheads. We therefore closed on these days and focused the business on the weekends. The result of this was that

our turnover recovered by between 10 and 15% from month to month and this, along with the reduced overheads and the fact that I was in a position to increase my outside earnings, saved us from joining the other closures. This is a matter of accounting fact which could be confirmed by our accountant. Carlsberg published the results of a drinking habits survey the following year during which they found that people were visiting pubs less during the week but spent more at the weekend. We were a year ahead of them and I have been told by several visitors from the home counties that rural pubs in their areas are doing the same as us. The paragraph ends with the statement that visitors drifted away although this appears to be contradicted by the penultimate paragraph which states that "there remains a large following" I accept that the pub is in need of decoration but, unless we were to have the support, there would simply be no money available for this. The comments about the food and service are at odds with those that we have received literally from all over the world and I take these as a personal insult to ourselves and to our staff and the fact that these are made from a position of anonymity make it harder to stomach.

Adrian Green read out the following statement from the Village Hall Management Committee:

As Chairman of the Frithelstock Village Hall Management Committee I am commenting on the statement contained in the supporting document headed "CAMRA Public House Viability Test" submitted with the application for converting the licensed premises into a dwelling house. The statement includes the paragraph:

*"Our main competition, for local trade, has become the Village Hall in Frithelstockstone. Prior to the refurbishment there, we had a significant level of trade from that hamlet. Now it is minimal."*

This is somewhat of a distortion of the facts. The Bar at the Village Hall only opened on 18 occasions during the financial year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017. That is just 2.5% of the available opening periods in a year (if you include lunch-times and evenings). In fact, that Bar at the Village Hall is very rarely opened at lunch-time.

The Bar is mostly opened in connection with specific events and functions which occur at the Village Hall and could not, or would not, take place at the Clinton Arms. As a registered charity the Village Hall cannot and does not, trade in competition with the local pubs.

The Bar takings, excluding events away from the Hall, for example on the playing field under a Temporary Events Licence, were only £3,000 in the last financial year. It is highly unlikely, that what the Clinton Arms describes as "a significant level of trade", was reduced to "minimal" due to competition from a refurbished Village Hall.

Terry Warrington read out the following statement from the Bell Ringers:

The Frithelstock Bell Ringers have strongly supported the Clinton Arms for many years and are grateful for the efforts that the landlord went to in providing collection jars etc to help raise money for the new bell ropes.

The ringing band have traditionally used the pub after practice to re-hydrate and discuss the bell practice. In the last couple of years we have had slightly fewer numbers and practices have not always occurred every Tuesday.

Pubs and bell ringing seem to go hand in hand and it would be a great loss to the Bell Ringers if this pub changes into housing as it would remove the only pub in the village and we would have no post-practice location. We would like to see the pub

return to regular opening hours as closing it three nights a week and lunch times has done nothing to encourage us to attend or indeed many other people.

With the right management and cooperative working with the local residents and beyond, we believe that this would once again be a successful public house. If it is allowed to become housing this asset would be forever removed from the village.

Cllr Goldman made the following comments:

- Previous owner managed a healthy trade, opened regular hours and provided food at lunchtimes and in the evening. Sold due to retirement.
- The Clinton Arms was bought by Ian Robertson's company – Property Renovations Ltd – as a business for his son Peter and his partner, Debbie, an experienced retail and catering trade couple, to run. This they very successfully did for about six months and then due to reasons that were not made public Peter and Debbie left the day to day business. This left Ian Robertson and his wife Francis neither of whom had any pub, catering or retail trade experience running the pub. Trade started to decline at this point.
- No visible investment in the 10 years of trading resulting in badly maintained, dirty and unattractive premises.
- Ian Robertson's current trade is as a builder, so progressive withdrawal of opening hours, food services drove down customer interest even more. This could be construed as an orchestrated run down.
- Compare the Clinton Arms with the Bell Inn at Monkleigh. Bell Inn had been shut for 2 years, had a bad name locally for undesirable customers before closure. Now it is a thriving pub with trade drawn from a wide area – why? It is run by an experienced team who put in efforts to provide a warm, welcoming pub that is clean and sells good, well priced food and is open six days a week.
- Evening groups stopped visiting the Clinton especially in the winter months because it was cold, no welcoming fire and the landlord frequently fell asleep.
- Landlord did not delegate responsibilities, at busier times he would be serving food, settling diners bills and ignoring customers waiting for drinks whilst not letting the staff he employed do the work they were supposed to do.
- The introduction of music on Friday evenings killed off the local trade who visited at the end of the week as they could no longer chat about the weeks experiences as the music stopped this.
- Attempts to sell the Clinton Arms as a going concern have been stymied by unrealistic sales price. It appears that this price matches the fixed asset price on the Company accounts which is by Mr Robertson's own comparisons of local trade sales as non-competitive.
- Car park expansion could have been achieved by demolition of two redundant sheds as outlined in the 2000 planning permission granted.

List of Comments made by Residents:

- The landlord has failed, on a regular basis, to communicate notices of events to the majority of parish residents either by circulated e-mails or in print (The Prior - the parish's printed newsletter). The editor, Judith Seaman, has confirmed that no notices of events have ever been provided, or adverts requested. Therefore residents did not have the opportunity to enjoy the

pub's hospitality. How could they support the pub if they were unaware of events? Notices of any forthcoming event were painted onto roadside signboards – too short notice and amateur.

- Residents were not notified of the closure either by e-mail or by informing the editor of the Prior.
- Previous owner managed a healthy trade, opened regular ours and provided food at lunchtimes and in the evening. Sold due to retirement.
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- Evening groups stopped visiting the Clinton especially in the winter months because it was cold, no welcoming fire and the landlord frequently fell asleep.
- Landlord did not delegate responsibilities, at busier times he would be serving food, settling diners bills and ignoring customers waiting for drinks whilst not letting the staff he employed do the work they were supposed to do.
- The introduction of music on Friday evenings killed off the locals who visited at the end of the week as they could no longer chat about the weeks experiences as the music stopped this.
- Competition from the Puffing Billy (a pub / tourist site on the Tarka Trail a mile away) is very limited and as it does not open in the evenings, poses a lesser threat to the Clinton's trade.
- The Village Hall is not a threat to the Clinton's trade (as claimed). Events held there cannot be held at the Clinton as the space required is not sufficient. (Circuit training; yoga, indoor rowing, pilates, and skittles.) Limited car parking at the Clinton precludes village events. Likewise quiz nights as over 100 take part.
- A quiz created by a resident who organised all the trophies and paperwork for an agreed date had to be abandoned as there had been no promotion by the landlord and had to be abandoned.

**From forms (17 direct to TDC and 7 where residents wish to object via the Parish Council)**

- It is sad that the present landlord has been unable to make a success of running this pub. But in my opinion, given an injection of investment, and perhaps under a new owner, it would become one of the best pubs in North Devon. It has one of the best locations in the area - how many pubs have a Village Green at its front door and countryside views that typify the North Devon. I want it to remain as a focal point for the residents of Frithelstock. We badly need this community asset to be proud of and show visitors how good Devon hospitality can be.
- I don't want to upset the owners but this is a community pub which would be a great loss to our village if changed. I believe the pub has a great future if a fresh start was given to it. (plus 2 more similar objections)
- Even when the bar not busy, I would have to wait far too long for a drink.
- We – two of us – always visited the pub on a regular basis and travelled there by car. The bar seats were uncomfortable, even painful if seated for any length of time. The atmosphere was never really as good as other pubs but it is a centre to which my friends could meet us. (plus 2 similar)
- The pub hasn't sold because the asking price is too high for the business. Pubs do change hands but not at high prices when the trade is poor.
- A meeting room is mentioned as being available at all times. What room is that?
- Many residents were disappointed at the decision made by the Landlord to close the Clinton Arms and apply for a change of use. The general feeling was that he hadn't tried hard enough to make customers feel at home, the premises were never heated sufficiently and the Landlord himself was not welcoming. This discouraged customers' from using the Clinton Arms which ultimately led to its decline. Residents explained that the Landlord had refused all offers of help and when he decided to put the Pub up for sale, it was priced too high.

Residents felt the most important aspect of this change of use was the loss of the public licence. They believe once lost, it would be impossible to re-new. There was some discussion about running a Community Pub but everyone present realised the impossibility due to the price being asked for the premises.

Some residents suggested Torrington District Council should be asked for an extension to allow the Villagers to come up with a workable solution but it was decided that this may not be granted and any extension allowed probably wouldn't give enough time for a working group to be put together to come up with ideas. It was agreed that whatever the outcome, the Villagers did not want to see the premises boarded up as this would do more damage to the community. Cllr Goldman agreed to act as a conduit on behalf of the Parish Council and any committee that may be formed.

Another resident asked what the TDC parameters were in considering applications of this type. Cllr Pennington explained that the property had to be marketed properly and that TDC have certain viability tests which will help them make a decision.

Residents statements have been forwarded to the Clerk and will be passed to TDC with the Parish Councils response. Given the strength of the feeling of everyone at the Parish Council meeting, Cllr Pennington encouraged residents to write directly to the planning department at TDC as this would have more impact.

**242. Planning:**

242.1 1/0240/2017/FUL

The Clinton Arms, Frithelstock

Change of use of public house and owners' annexe into 1 dwelling and a holiday let.

Decision: Object proposed by Cllr Stokes, seconded by Cllr Goldman, all in favour.

Comment: The application has not included a sensible/viable price for selling and there is strong village feeling that the pub closure would be a loss of a valuable community asset.

**With no further business, the meeting concluded at 20:45pm**

**SIGNED AS A TRUE RECORD: .....** (Chair)

**NAME: ..... DATE: .....**

<p><b>Next meeting will be the Annual Parish Meeting to be held in Frithelstock Village Hall on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017 at 8:00pm</b></p>
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