

Duke of Marlborough, Somersham

Update for the Parish Council, May 2022

Introduction

The Duke of Marlborough reopened in April 2017, having been bought by the local Community; we have therefore now been trading for 5 years. We celebrated our 5th Anniversary with a programme of special events, including a Thank You event for our band of loyal volunteers.

Financial Situation

The original Business Plan predicted that we would lose money for the first 3 years due to start-up costs and the need to rebuild the trade, and this indeed proved to be the case. However rather than then running into profit, we ran into Covid, and the last 2 years have been all about survival.

A brief summary of the impact this had on the business during the 2020/21 fy can be seen in the following Table

2020/21 Trading Figures

Month	Status	Takings
April	CLOSED	£0
May	Window sales	£1,959
June	Window sales	£2,262
July	Partly open	£9,250
August	Open - EOHO	£21,927
September	Open	£11,106
October	Open	£14,905
November	CLOSED	£2,788
December	Partly open	£10,697
January	CLOSED	£0
February	CLOSED	£0
March	CLOSED	£0

We were only fully open for 3 of the 12 months during 2020/21, with a total turnover of ~£75k compared to £250k+ the previous year. We only survived due to Local Authority Grants and the Furlough scheme.

We reopened in April 2021, and the turnover was building steadily, the fy turnover was £209k, so a great improvement on the previous year, if not back to pre-Covid levels. However the pre-Xmas Covid scare really hit us hard and our banker months of

November and December were disastrous; we had so many cancellations we lost a lot of money, whereas we normally rely on the profits from these 2 months to see us through the winter.

We therefore decided to take drastic action in January of this year to get us through to Easter. Our major cost is Staffing, so in order to reduce this we had to cut back on our offer.

We wanted to stay open for 5 days, but at the moment we are offering a drinks-only service on Wednesdays and Thursdays, staffed by volunteers, except when there is a Thursday quiz or other event, when there is food and paid Staff.

Wednesday is now Darts night – our newly formed darts team is proving very popular, and indeed we now have a second team. Thursday is Games night, which is building slowly. There are no lunches Friday or Saturday. The Friday Happy Hour stays and we have introduced a Friday TakeAway service which has proved quite popular, and brought us new customers.

We now do breakfast every Saturday – having it every other week was confusing, and this is now producing a very steady trade.

On Friday and Saturday evenings, we offer food from a small Blackboard menu – old favourites and some specials. We cater for both vegetarians and vegans.

Sunday lunch has been extended and is now 12-4pm, and we stay open until 8pm.

We are still doing special Events, e.g. Burns Night, Valentine’s Night, music events. The current offer is summarised in the below Table.

Day	Lunchtime	Evening	Food	Staffing
Darts Wednesday	Closed	7-11	No	Volunteers
Games Thursday	Closed	7-11	No	Volunteers
Events Thursday	Closed	7-11	Quiz menu	Staff + volunteers
Friday	Closed	6-11	Blackboard menu Take Away Service	Staff + volunteers
Saturday	Breakfast 9-12	6-11	Blackboard menu	Staff + volunteers
Sunday	12-4	4-8	Sunday lunch	Staff + volunteers

This has enabled us to cut our staff costs to ~£5k month and we have indeed got through to Easter. We had hoped to break even in the first Calendar quarter but in fact made a small loss, ~ £1k per month, which is sustainable in the short term. The final April figures are not yet in, but the turnover has increased, not least due to the 5th Birthday celebration.

Staffing

We employ 7 regular staff:

- Head Chef
- Manager
- Sous chef
- 2 other FOH staff, who also deputise for the manager
- Cleaner
- Book-keeper

We have some other casual staff and a number of Volunteers who mainly work behind the bar; we could do with a few more.

The staff have been very understanding about the need to cut back their hours. We hope to be able to increase these again as trade picks up.

Increasing Footfall

We are not quite breaking even and we urgently need to start making a profit; we will shortly have to start paying back our Bounceback loan (which was much cheaper than our previous Co-op loan).

In order to do this, we are undertaking the following

- Targeting the 42 new households right on our doorstep (Lark Grove). We have already had an initial Welcome event.
- Trying to understand customer needs better – we have just carried out a SurveyMonkey exercise.
- More big Events (Platinum Jubilee Weekend, Beer Festival)
- Introducing a Loyalty scheme (25% off your next meal when you visit the pub at least 5 times in 3 months - a minimum per head spend applies).
- Darts night and joining a local Darts league.
- Thursday Games night/quiz
- Targeting local businesses
- Targeting Holiday Accommodation (AirBnB etc.)
- Marketing more as a wedding venue

Events

Past events include:

- Wine tasting
- Art Courses
- Book Club
- Beer Festivals
- Oktober Fest
- Wide variety of music

- 70's Disco
- Burn's Night
- Quizzes
- Film/Music quizzes
- Cocktail evenings (in the Birch Bar)

We welcome suggestions for new events.

We are playing a major role in the forthcoming Platinum Jubilee weekend (quiz, village BBQ, music, mini beer fest) and will rerun our hugely successful Beer festival over the August Bank Holiday weekend.

Summary and Conclusions

We think we have done well just to still be here, unlike several other local pubs, but the survival of the pub over the coming months will depend on our shareholders, and the wider local community, patronising the pub on a more regular basis. We have to be profitable by September 2022.

There is a virtuous circle here; the greater the footfall, the wider and more varied the offer we can make on both food and drink and the more staff we can afford to employ.

Any suggestions as to what we can do to make our customers feel even more welcome are always gratefully received.

We feel that the pub is truly the centre of the local community, and Somersham would be a lesser place without it. We are also providing significant training opportunities for local young people, which we see as part of our role.

We have worked hard over 8 years to get to this position; it would be tragic if the pub succumbed just as Covid is receding. It has been estimated that 35% of pubs will not make it through the pandemic, together we can ensure that the Duke of Marlborough is not part of that unfortunate statistic.

It has been a struggle, but we believe a thoroughly worthwhile one.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people:

- The Chef and Manager, April and Aaron Douglas
- The rest of the loyal staff
- Our Volunteers
- Our Customers
- Our Shareholders
- The Management Committee

We are very grateful for financial support from the following:

- The HMRC Furlough Scheme

- Power to Change
- The Plunkett Foundation
- Mid Suffolk District Council
- Suffolk County Council
- Somersham Parish Council
- Hopkins Homes

David Thorne

MC Chairman, Somersham Community Pub Ltd.

May 2022