

Somersham and District Community Shop May 2022 – May 2023

2022-23 has been a busy and successful year for the community shop in Somersham.

We were very happy to celebrate our 10th birthday celebrations throughout the month of July, with several different offers and competitions and a celebratory gathering to say thank you to all our volunteers, customers, suppliers and friends. This celebration was however also tinged with sadness, as it came at the same time that we had to unexpectedly say goodbye to one of the shop's strongest supporters, Janet Hodge, who passed away in early summer. Janet was an integral part of the development of a community shop in Somersham, and she stayed closely involved throughout its ten years of operation, as a volunteer, committee member, and a director, and we will be forever grateful to her.

In 2022, the shop found itself in need of new Directors, to ensure fair decision making and management. After a push to find new volunteers, Tom Robinson, Richard Toone and David Mayes all agreed to take on this role. The shop management committee feel strongly that it would be appropriate for a Parish Councillor to also be part of this team, to ensure a stronger connection and understanding between the two organisations, which are intrinsically linked.

We are proud of the fact that the shop in Somersham has been open for more than 10 years and are very happy that the last twelve months have seen the financial situation improve significantly. We now regularly cover our overheads each month and are in a much more secure and viable position, which is a great relief to all involved.

We believe this is, in part, thanks to a number of improvements that we have been able to make this year, including changing the position of some of the display units, purchasing new furniture (thanks to the East of England Co-op Lunch Club/Warm Hub fund, administered by Suffolk Community Foundation), and extending our opening hours to 9am – 4pm every week day, with the addition of two early morning 8am openings (Monday and Thursday), and a 6pm close on a Thursday.

We have been pleased to boost our reliable volunteer base with several new faces throughout the year, which has helped with extending our hours. We regularly approach potential new volunteers and will continue to do so, as even with these new additions, we still struggle to confidently cover the hours we are open, particularly in 'holiday season'.

We have continued to expand our product ranges, which has also contributed to higher and more frequent footfall. In addition to developing existing ranges such as our specialist cheeses, during 2022-23 we have welcomed a number of new suppliers including Suffolk Fresh strawberries, Pinney's of Orford and Lane Farm cooked meats (via our cheese supplier), Chalky Bottom Orchard cider and vinegar, Oak House Farm butchers, Tosier chocolate, Helen Maxfield prints and cards, and frozen ready meals from The Walnut Tree at Thwaite.

We have introduced a 'gift corner', featuring Fleece to Feet's handmade slipper socks, beeswax candles, melts and other items from uMeltz (made using the wax from the same bees whose honey we sell), novels by Coddensham-based author Tom Boles and books by other local writers, and prints and greetings cards from several local artists and craftspeople. We have also developed a relationship with local florist, Pollen and Petals, who provided a selection of bouquets for Mother's Day and who are happy to take orders via the shop for bouquets and other arrangements.

With the agreement of the Somersham & District Community Association we have arranged for Paul Biggs, a Lowestoft fishmonger, to add Somersham to his weekly Friday afternoon round. This has proved popular so far and is seeing the added benefit of bringing more customers into the shop.

The shop is very much a community hub, and we are pleased to support local events and activities, such as the church's Christmas Tree festival, and to advertise through our events diary, our noticeboards, and our social media presence, as well as being a ticket sales point for local events.

We have a good relationship with Somersham School and during 2022 we were pleased to have the opportunity to display artwork produced by the children – first their jubilee bunting, and then Christmas drawings. We were also pleased to welcome 30 pupils from Key Stage 1 for a school outing recently, as part of their learning about fruit and vegetables in their Green Fingers topic.

We are very pleased to work alongside the Rural Coffee Caravan (RCC) and to have been part of their warm spaces campaign, offering a warm and friendly welcome whenever we are open, to anyone who needs us. Our Meet up Monday and Petrol Heads sessions have restarted after the break due to Covid and are well supported. We now participate in four of the RCC's activities and campaigns – Meet up Mondays, c-a-f-e (coffee and friends' events), More Than A Shop, and Warm Spaces, as well as promoting the regular visits to Somersham by the Rural Coffee Caravan itself. In addition to these events, the Suffolk Libraries van also visits monthly.

Each year, we are a collection point for Christian Aid Week and the Poppy Appeal, we join in with the annual Macmillan coffee morning, and we are pleased to support our own volunteers fundraising efforts for example displaying plants, jams and chutneys to raise money for a variety of charities. We have also introduced a Food Bank Collection Point for Ipswich based charity, FIND (products do not have to be purchased in the shop to be donated), and a Battery Recycling Point.

We have more ideas and plans for further improvements and developments to the shop for the future, including introducing more new products, redecorating the interior, installing solar panels (dependent on funding), resurfacing the car park (dependent on funding), sourcing new signage, and making further display improvements.

We hope that the members of the Parish Council will continue to support the shop, with financial support from the CIL fund, but also with their custom and time. We would love you to come in and see for yourselves how things have changed, and for you to encourage your friends, family and neighbours to do the same!