

The Hunworth Bell - Statement to Parish Council from Stody Estate 14-05-24

This is a very very sad moment, not least for Sarah Handley and I who have worked so hard and so closely together to try to make this pub a success.

Sarah is closing for financial reasons and for financial reasons alone. She adores the pub, is a proven operator and has put everything into it however the harsh reality is that the pub, as it is, continues to lose money.

Let me say at the outset, that we, Stody Estate, have been heavily subsidising the Hunny Bell for years. They have never paid market rate and every one of the last 3 operators have had long periods of paying no rent at all.

I think it's worth taking a step back through its recent history

- In 2008 the Estate spent a very considerable sum renovating the Conservatory, Barn and enlarging the kitchen.
- We then granted a 20-year, full repairing & insuring lease to Henry Watt, a proven operator with other pubs near Norwich.
- After only 3 years trading, he couldn't make the HB work and passed the lease to Penny & Sean Chapman
- They went bust in 2016, throwing the keys and an empty pub back to me in January.
- I then put a lot of work in cold calling/approaching the best operators in Norfolk and I found Sarah & Ben Handley. They were running the highly successful, award-winning Duck at Stanhoe.
- Both they and the Estate again spent more money on doing the HB up and they opened in late summer 2017, with another 20-year lease to give them maximum security of tenure.
- Within a year they were already in financial difficulty, but we gave them further rent holidays.
- Then Covid, then horrendous energy and wage inflation, led Sarah to make her decision to leave, 2 years ago.

Sarah has since been publicly marketing the pub for 2 years, she has tried different agents but sadly no-one credible has come forward.

Over the past few months, I have personally and directly approached c.10 of the best operators / groups in the area but again no-one credible has materialised.

And so, having explored all options, this is what we're going to do.

We are putting in for planning to shrink the HB to just the original bar at front. A smaller, less risky operation focused primarily on serving locals. We hope to offer food but a much-reduced food offer. The planning includes significant work inside the HB and the re-development of the barn at the back, the pub car park and next-door sugar beet pad/farmyard into a sensitive housing scheme. The scheme would not be huge, delivering much needed c.12 houses (a mix of 2,3 & 4 beds) of which some would be affordable.

The design would follow a farmstead type look, closely following the local vernacular. If you would like to see examples pls go and see the 11 houses we have recently built at Mount Farm & Old Hall, Edgefield.

The proposal would have the additional benefit of finally sorting out the pub drains, once and for all, we're looking at installing an environmentally friendly Klargestar.

And permanently end agricultural use of the sugar beet / yard next door...no more sugarbeet, mud and HGV lorries using centre of the village all winter.

We are at the early stages of design and, as part of the planning, we will be consulting fully with the parish council and village.

In answer to the question, when will we re-open, the answer is as soon as we get the planning. It was good to have Councillor Andrew Brown confirm that the more support this proposal can garner the quicker the planning will be and we can develop a more sustainable pub.