

## Anxious times in the pub trade

The Government's proposed legislation to ban smoking in work places and buildings open to public from the Summer of 2007 has received a mixed reaction from the pub landlords in Flackwell Heath. Unfortunately this radical change comes as landlords face a drop in the number of people drinking in our pubs. Three of our six village pubs are up for sale with a fourth due to come on the market in October.

The Green Man and the Green Dragon expect to be hardest hit by the smoking ban because they do not currently have any income from serving food. The Green Man's landlord Terry Britnell told me that 95% of their customers smoke.

In London and elsewhere pubs tend to protect their staff from passive smoking by banning smoking by customers at the bar but in Flackwell the competition is so tough that no one dares to be first to take this step for fear of driving their best customers to the competition who are not so particular. Some of the landlords think that if the European ban on smoking near the bar had been introduced into the UK for this summer it would have been a way of easing in the general smoking ban and perhaps lessening the expected initial drop in sales.

All the landlords are aware that if this country follows the example of Ireland there will be a 15% reduction in drinks consumption which would return to normal or near normal after three months. Few of our pubs are so profitable that they can comfortably cope with a 15% reduction in income even for a month or two.

Vaughan Passey at The Magpie is more sceptical. He thinks that a lot of pubs are closing in Ireland and he is sure that one of the pubs in Flackwell will have to close as there will not be enough business to go round all six.

Customers who have Sky at home now go to the pub to watch football and smoke without upsetting their wives. In future they may give up smoking, buy some cans at the supermarket, watch the match at home and count the money they have saved. If the customers are not there some pubs may decide to cancel their contract with Sky.

The next 18 months will be particularly anxious for pubs in the village because three out of our six pubs are up for sale Green Dragon £50 000, The Stag £90 000 and The Three Horseshoes £120 000 (the price quoted on the website of Enterprise Inns PLC is for the business not the pub building). In addition Terry Britnell and Sally Stevens of The Green Man (also an Enterprise Inns pub) tell me they are putting their business on the market in October.

Sally Stevens dresses as if she runs a dress shop, which she did before being beguiled in to the pub trade. On a busy day she can change her clothes three times and put them in the washing machine to get rid of the smell of smoke. A smoking ban would perhaps encourage more people to work behind the bar.

The food pubs have already introduced no smoking in their eating areas. Eddie Atkins of The Stag told me food sales had increased significantly since he banned smoking in his restaurant area. The ban may attract people back to their local and it may encourage them to come back to eat. The pub that can offer good and interesting food in clean, fresh surroundings will become attractive to a whole new group of customers.

Tim Kendall