

## Dedham Vale Society

# Article: Can The Traditional Village Pub Survive?

*With the last minute halt to the demolition of the newly-closed Anchor Inn, Dedham, Membership Secretary John Osborn asks; Can The Traditional Village Pub Survive?*



*The now boarded up Anchor, Dedham*

The reference to pubs closing down in the Suffolk part of the AONB (Planning Notes – Suffolk page six) prompts a look at what is happening in Dedham itself. A recent grass roots campaign to halt the demolition of the once popular Dedham public house 'The Anchor' was deservedly heralded as a triumph following the ruling from the office of the Deputy Prime Minister in December 2004 that the building should be afforded the protection of Grade Two Listed status. Records show it was licensed as an alehouse in 1769 and there is some evidence that timbers from Weeley Barracks, when they were pulled down after the Napoleonic Wars, were used for renovation work at the Anchor. Armed with documentation that there existed historical reasons why the building should not be demolished a neighbourhood group of former patrons of the Anchor together with concerned individuals and councillors was hastily formed. Alarmed at the ease with which this 250-year old alehouse had apparently been run down, closed down and was about to be knocked down, secured a stay of execution even as the roof tiles were being dismantled. The new owners had earlier submitted an application to build three up-market detached houses on the Anchor's substantial garden area.

It is one thing however to prevent the destruction of a newly listed building quite another to foresee an outcome that will satisfy all of those that have campaigned to bring this about. The building must surely now be vulnerable to serious deterioration from the weather following the earlier removal of some of the roof tiles. Were it to be considered unsafe then the listed building protection would have to be weighed against the public danger posed by this threat and the owners might decide to pull it down anyway. Of course there are alternative outcomes that could find favour. The garden might have development potential without knocking down the building in an arrangement that could see it re-opened as a public house and restaurant. Another is that the present building could be converted to a single housing unit, as has happened in other parts of the village, and elsewhere. A more popular decision with the former patrons, of course, would be for it to be sold and reopened as a public house and restaurant but is this a realistic possibility? The village pub, it seems, is no longer as popular as it once was. Drinking habits are changing and to survive today in most, but by no means all, cases they have to offer tempting restaurant facilities sufficient to attract diners from beyond the village. Up to the last few years the Anchor had made great efforts to establish itself as a middle range restaurant with separate bars for non-diners but this ended with changes in management and policy.

Offering food as well as drink is certainly not new. Two and a half centuries ago village inns would supply food and overnight accommodation for travellers and would often provide popular pastimes such as cock fighting. Indeed the building still stands on Gun Hill, Dedham that was once an 18<sup>th</sup> Century venue for the blood sport. The Gun, which is now a private residence, still operated as a public house up to 1961 although by then cock fighting had long ceased. In 1754 however this was not the case, as was noted by Glyn Morgan in his 1963 book about Essex. It also had the distinction, he states, of being the first (or last) pub in the county and a popular overnight alternative to the Colchester inns.



*Now a private residence The Gun was once a local centre for cock fighting*

During the early decades of the twentieth century there is evidence of as many as twelve inns within the four square miles of the Dedham parish boundary. In many cases the buildings still stand and although there is unlikely to be anybody now alive who can remember the 'Live and Let Live' inn on Ardleigh Road – it is listed as having closed in 1920 – the building, as with the Gun, still stands as a private residence although now known as 'The Old Ale House'. It was in the well of the garden of the cobblers shop two doors away that the murdered body of Police Sgt John Harvey was discovered in 1894.

Records show that 'The Compasses' in Dedham High Street, the site of the present Compasses Book Shop, was an alehouse between 1769 and 1911. Other inns that have been licensed over the years are the 'Beehive' in 1911, The White Hart as far back as 1769, The 'Crown' 1769-1859 and far more recently 'The Lamb' which was licensed in 1788 and was only converted to a private residence in the last decade. Many residents will remember the building that was once the Prince of Wales Ale House at the corner of Coopers Lane almost opposite Castle House. Records show it was licensed between 1911 and 1920 although it may have continued as an ale house up to the pre-war period. The building was demolished to make way for the five houses that now stand on the site.

At the beginning of 2005 there remain just three establishments in Dedham that would normally classify as Inns or Public Houses although the definition of a place that serves food and/or drink could be extended to Milsoms and The Boathouse, both of which have been successfully opened during the past few years. Perhaps the very popularity and success of these two restaurants gives a pointer to what needs to be accomplished if the village pub is to remain viable. The remaining three include the Rose and Crown (just Crown to the patrons!), which was closed in June of 2004 and perhaps surprisingly re-opened under new management at the end of that year. Unlike the Anchor or the two village centre public houses, the Sun and the Marlborough, this building is far less old and dates back only to the 1920s. An earlier inn bearing the same name was knocked down, much to the disgust of Alfred Munnings who described in his 1952 autobiography: "My one joy, thirty years ago, was in knowing that my home was near a perfect river and village in an unspoilt country. The road curved from the village to Castle House



*The Old Ale House a private residence which was once the 'Live and Let Live'. The inn featured in the unsolved murder of a local policeman in 1894.*

in slow and gradual ascent between clipped fences grown with oaks. On the left stood an old thatched inn like a George Morland picture, but it has been long superseded by a building which is an insult to its predecessor. All has altered." Hardly surprising perhaps that the artist resented the intrusion of what he described as "Tudorish fabrications" on land mid way between his own Castle House and the village centre.

In the case of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century timber framed coaching inn, The Sun, which itself was closed for major refurbishment work in early 2003 and reopened in July of that year, there are signs that the gamble is beginning to pay off. A strong emphasis on Mediterranean food and a large selection of accompanying mid-ranged wine and locally brewed beers is finding favour with customers. High business rates and the cost of maintaining good quality staff, however, means that the chances of long-term success depend very much upon regular turn-over mid-week as well as at more popular times. Accomplishing this is the real breakthrough that will perhaps determine the survival of the fittest. Certainly the Sun, and its close neighbour the Marlborough, both of which seem to epitomise the stereo-typical English village pub, should be given the support and encouragement that could make that possible.



*Referred to by Sir Alfred Munnings in his autobiography the recently reopened Rose and Crown Public House, Dedham*



*Now a private residence but until a few years ago the Lamb Public House*

But does a village pub have to be first and foremost a restaurant in order to survive? Well the answer is a guarded 'no' if the example of one establishment located very close to the most northerly part of the Dedham Vale is anything to go by. The White Horse is the only pub in the small village of Edwardstone and is not even located on the main through road and yet it flourishes. There are a number of reasons why this is so not least being the consistently high quality of management. The landlord is popular, understands his business and is committed. Of course it helps that the pub is not rented and as a "free house" the licensee has immensely more buying power as the brewers compete against each other to sell to him. Factors that have caused other pubs to decline seem not to apply in this case. Traditional pub pastimes such as dominoes, darts and cribbage are available to local people and they are popular. There is an additional factor and that is that by being the only pub in the village the local authority, in this case Babergh, waive the normal business rates. This alone is often the difference between success and failure between survival and closure. Whilst this enlightened policy is to be applauded it is not going to help the three remaining Dedham pubs unless that very unwelcome prospect became a reality and two of the three go the way of all those earlier establishments in Dedham. A few might say that prospect is inevitable although surely the majority still incline towards a less gloomy scenario?