

# Oakridge Lynch, Gloucestershire

## A COMMUNITY GETS THE SHOP THEY DESERVE



After Kim Gorny had been running the village Post Office and General stores in the Cotswold village of Oakridge Lynch near Stroud for almost 14 years, she realised that an influx of younger, affluent families meant her business would have to change to meet their needs. The old Post Office had steps with no access for mums with pushchairs or disabled people and the space inside was extremely limited.

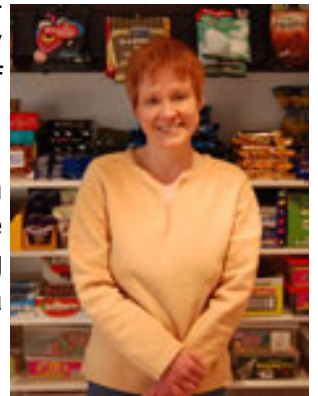
So, three years ago, Kim and her husband Mike started thinking about how they could expand the shop to build the business and to help save the Post Office from closure, which at the time seemed on the cards under the national review programme. When friends living across the road from the old Post Office decided to sell their large house, they suggested in passing that the Gornys could fit their shop nicely into its ground floor.

"It all started from there," recalls Mike. "There would be plenty of room to create a new, much bigger shop and Post Office. So, we stretched ourselves to the hilt and bought the house. Then we organised a meeting for the village. We put: "Future of your Village Shop" on the posters and that certainly drew the crowds, as I think they were expecting bad news. People were delighted when we told them of our plans, and were very forthcoming with all sorts of ideas of what we could sell and what services we could offer."

The cost of converting the ground floor of the house, and part of the garden into parking, seemed prohibitive. However, a grant from the county's Rural Renaissance programme came to their rescue. Despite problems caused by delays at regional level in releasing almost £65,000 from the programme - which the Gornys matched - this money meant they could turn their vision into reality. The new Post Office and Village Stores opened in August 2007. It offers a wide range of grocery items as well as fresh, locally sourced meat and poultry, specialist breads and Duchy Farm organic vegetable boxes. The new coffee shop is also popular.

"We have free WiFi in the coffee shop and local people - and weekend visitors - pop in to work on their laptops here," said Mike. The space also displays works by local artists, including bookbinding and jewellery. A recent visitor was the Bishop of Gloucester, who based himself in the shop to meet local residents.

A key to the shop's success has been to extend opening hours until 7pm on weekdays. "More and more people are realising they can do their shopping here after work," added Mike. "We are quite an isolated community with no passing traffic as such. It's taken people a while to get used to it, but it is making a significant difference."



"There is also a balance to be drawn between offering 'cheap and cheerful' and premium items", says Mike. "It's really important to work out what your customers want - some may need value baked beans, but there are others prepared to pay for free range chicken. You have to make sure you get the balance right, appeal to all the potential shoppers."

Having the active support of local people is also vital. "People have a choice about where they shop - our job is to encourage them to shop here. At the same time, we appreciate the fact that without the support of the residents, we would not be able to continue with the business. But we all understand that, and we feel we are very much part of the community."

#### **RSA COMMENT**

This is a case, only too rare, of a rural shop being able to expand into larger premises to meet modern needs. Oakridge Lynch has only about 300 households, with some additional tourist business. As a conversion of an existing house, the premises are not ideal. But the new shop at Oakridge Lynch shows what can happen with the availability of proper grant funding, strong community support and a lot of hard work from enthusiastic owners.

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