

Rendcomb Stores, near Cirencester

By Beth Whittaker



The Cotswold village of Rendcomb near Cirencester is dominated, in a completely benign fashion, by a popular boarding school, Rendcomb College.

The school occupies the whole of a very grand, rambling former stately home estate that takes up most of the village, and attracts students from all over the world. And Eric and Pam Dukes' tiny shop in the old village school is very much part of Rendcomb College's tour for prospective parents – especially those from abroad.

"The students and staff from the school make up a good two thirds of our daily business," said Eric, who worked in the motor trade before taking over Rendcomb Stores with his wife Pam – a former Somerfield manager – almost five years ago. "When they show prospective parents around the school and grounds, they bring them to the shop because we're so much part of the pupils' daily lives. I think they like to see a traditional English village shop too! If parents visit their children during term time, they bring them to the shop for tea."

Traditional the shop may be; but spacious it certainly isn't! The crowded aisles in what was the school room of the Grade 2 listed building, stock everything from exotic condiments – much in demand among the school's many Chinese students who like to cook for themselves - to the more usual 'tuck shop' fare, including 'pick'n'mix' sweets, crisps, chocolate, biscuits, cold drinks, sausage rolls, freshly-made sandwiches and hot chocolate, all sitting happily alongside a good selection of grocery items to meet the everyday needs of the rest of the village community.

The Dukes have also managed to make the most of what has had a devastating effect on other rural shops – the loss of the sub Post Office business.



"Losing the Post Office 'fortress' meant we actually gained space for a bake-off oven and hot cabinet for takeaway hot food and we received some funding to help us do that from the county council, which, with the involvement of the Rural Shops Alliance, supported rural shops which lost their PO," said Eric. "The retail space we gained has more than compensated for the loss of the PO salary. We are now a Post Office Partnered outreach which means we can offer basic PO services over the shop counter whenever we are open, so actually our customers have not really suffered because

the sub Post Office was only open for very limited hours, and we gained useful selling space!"

The shop attracts regular customers from neighbouring villages, and the addition of some outside chairs, tables and umbrellas means walkers and cyclists enjoying the Cotswold countryside during the summer months take a welcome break at Rendcomb Stores with hot drinks, freshly made sandwiches and ice cream for sale. "Although there are no students or teachers around during the school holidays, the school tends to have a lot of workmen in and they come here for their sandwiches and snacks, so we never have a completely quiet time," says Eric. "We bake off our own fresh bread and Danish pastries, sausage rolls and steak bakes – the steak bakes are particularly popular with the school students from abroad for some reason."

When the Dukes took over the lease of the shop almost five years ago, they found a business which was quite run down and which catered almost exclusively for the school. "Although we realise we are reliant on trade from Rendcomb College and we are very grateful for it, it is also important that we support the wider community," said Eric.

As well as tinned goods, the shop sells a reasonable selection of cheese, cooked meats, local milk, fresh vegetables and a choice of wines and spirits. Most stock comes from the cash and carry but the Dukes are keen to expand local produce and have signed up to the national 'Making Local Food Work' campaign and have created a display of locally-sourced foods which has attracted some attention among customers.



"We work hard to find out what people want us to stock. We do our best to source local produce although we sometimes find it difficult to get suppliers prepared to deliver. We have to be conscious of cost, although with petrol prices so high, it is cheaper to buy from us if you count the cost of driving and parking in the nearest town! We have displayed the RSA poster about petrol prices to remind our customers of this important financial benefit of shopping locally. Some local residents make a point of shopping with us, for others it's a stop-gap, which I imagine is the same for most village shops."

The shop is open from 7.30am until 5.30pm, Mondays to Saturdays – except during the school holidays when Eric and Pam close the door at 1pm on Saturdays to give themselves a bit of a break.

They employ two part-time assistants, but other than that, it is a life's work for the Dukes. "We were in retail for years before we came here from Devon. Although we weren't running a small shop, the same principles of good business and keeping your customers happy apply whether you have a village store or a massive supermarket," said Eric.

"We keep trying new things – and turnover increases every year. You have to make your customers welcome, create a space they are happy to come into, and understand the importance of the shop as a focal point for the local community. Oh, and you must serve everyone with a smile!"

The RSA View

Eric and Pam have somehow managed to shoehorn a surprising amount into their limited sales area, trying to meet the sometimes-conflicting demands of two very distinct sets of customers, the international students and the local residents. The fact that they are able to do so without the sales area seeming impossibly crowded is a testament to their retail skills. It is also good to see that by using the space released by the post office fortress, they have developed new and profitable new ranges to replace the lost income – it can be done!