

# TIDESWELL VILLAGE, Derbyshire SOS—THE VILLAGE BEHIND THE TV PROGRAMME

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Tideswell is a picturesque village in the Derbyshire Peak District, about six miles from the supermarkets of Buxton. Its wealth originally came from lead mining and wool. With a population of just under 2,000 people, it is one of those “in-between” sized villages that are hard to evaluate. We know of some places this size that have lost all their shops, with only houses called “the old bakery” or “the old post office” to remind residents of their past. Tideswell is different. It has served a wide rural catchment population and has a long history as a tourist destination, drawn by its magnificent 14<sup>th</sup> century church, “the Cathedral of the Peaks”. As a result, Tideswell has managed to retain a wider range of shops than most villages of its size.

In times past Tideswell miners who were recruited as soldiers were known for their strength and tenacity. Seemingly those traits remain. Determined not to see any more of their shops close, the community applied – in a well-researched 180-page document – for Big Lottery funding for their food-based Taste Tideswell project. The RSA was pleased to provide its support to this application.

The world can be a very strange place when seen through a television screen; there can be as much going on just beyond the camera lens as is seen through it. The recent BBC “Village SOS” series is a case in point. Each of the six programmes screened followed a local community-led project, each funded with £400,000 plus of Big Lottery cash. The “script” for each of these projects as screened was rather predictable. They each seemed to follow similar steps: village visionary dreams up project, woops of delight when Big Lottery awards the funds, project starts but hits problems, falls behind schedule. Local doubters interviewed. Local eccentric character interviewed. Project overcomes adversity but will they open on time – the tension builds? Project opens to success. Yippee, the local people (and a few hundred thousand pounds of Lottery money) succeed again.



The Taste of Tideswell project is interesting in that its vision pulled together a series of disparate food projects under one banner. At its heart, and absorbing the lion’s share of the funding, was the conversion of a disused building into the Tideswell School of Food. This is a cookery school and the centre for the project. In addition to the training facilities, there is a commercial kitchen for the use of local small food producers, part of plans to create a “Tideswell Made” brand that would launch local foods to a national market. In addition, of most interest to the RSA, the project included

support for the local food shops in the village. Add in encouragement for local people to produce more of their own food, and you have a range of different food-linked strands all under the one Taste of Tideswell banner.

But when it comes to the food retailers in the village, we have a problem. The main food outlet in the village is actually a well-presented Co-op convenience store, the sort of convenience store that thousands of villages up and down the country would love to have. It is the elephant in the room, the thing the programme just does not discuss, the bright green fascia that does not fit the script. In the hour-long programme, it (probably accidentally) appeared in long shot for about a second despite its prominent location on the main street. It was certainly never mentioned, despite no doubt being one of the major employers in the village and an important factor in any discussion of food retailing. Not being part of the script for either the Big Lottery project or the BBC programme, the Co-op was not even granted the status of being the bad guy, although it would be hard to vilify it when this shop is a key factor, keeping residents’ spend in Tideswell rather than allowing more to leak out to the supermarkets of Buxton. It was just ignored.

As part of their support, the Big Lottery funded a village champion, a professional manager to move into the village and help the project for a year. Tim Nichol is an experienced marketing man and has done good work in trying to bring the disparate independent retailers of Tideswell together as part of the overall brand. The overall concept – that the individual specialists could be seen as together forming a “virtual supermarket” offer from their different premises - is interesting. However, the overlapping ranges and the presence of a real supermarket in the village limit the scope to develop this idea. At the time of the RSA’s visit, the Taste of Tideswell stickers and show material were not in great evidence in the individual shops, although we understand that the TV programme has since galvanised activity in this area. Opinions prior to the programme amongst the retailers we talked to were mixed. On the one hand, David and Barbara at The Cherry Tree delicatessen started their business in Tideswell specifically to take advantage of the scheme. Conversely, Carol the baker, cast as the “doubting Thomas” in the TV programme, was not alone in voicing doubts on the impact the project had had on their businesses. Having seen elsewhere the dramatic impact a TV programme can have, our money was on David and Barbara calling the shot right. You really cannot argue with an hour-long advert for your village.

As Tim Nichol explains, “Even before the programme finished, Tideswell felt its impact. Both our websites- were under severe server strain- even though we'd moved the hosting to



special high capacity hosts we had spikes in demand that knocked us out momentarily. We got things back in track quickly and were seeing around 900 visits an hour over the next day. We were tweeting, texting, and Face booking well into the night after we had celebrated our public showing of the programme at the George Hotel. Next day the village was buzzing and the phones and email went wild. We got lots of bookings, warm wishes, and enquiries all day and they have continued to flood in. All the shops have been very busy- Tindalls have been flat out since

Wednesday and baked for 15 hours today. Peaches the Greengrocers, Gibbs the Butchers, and The Cherry Tree have of course been very busy too, and a new shop has opened where our florists used to be until recently. A very smart gift and interiors shop, Parlour Blue, managed to open just in time to get the benefit of the upsurge in visitors. Our cafes, Vanilla Kitchen, and Peak District Dairy Farm shop, have done a roaring trade”.



We remain slightly uneasy at the use of Big Lottery funds to enable Tideswell to compete with other commercial cookery schools up and down the country or for Tideswell-branded products to compete against other small food producers. No doubt, the Co-op store, invisible to the TV cameras, will be visible to surprised visitors and gain sales alongside other retailers.

The shopkeepers of Tideswell are a lovely group of disparate individuals and we really wish them well. Thanks to the TV programme, their prospects have been significantly improved, and we hope that this will mean no more shop closures in the village for a good while. If the

series is shown overseas, then even a few years hence, there will be a real mix of nationalities turning up to this beautiful corner of the Peak District to experience a Taste of Tideswell.

It is important not to draw the wrong lesson from the Tideswell experience. Its future is assured because of the TV coverage. There are hundreds of villages like Tideswell, all facing broadly the same dilemmas. The harsh reality is that however many shops a village of 2,000 people could support thirty years ago, today most places are better served by having, fewer more viable outlets. They can then generate the funds to provide a decent living to their owners and for crucial on-going investment, providing a more sustainable model. We would caution other parishes against attempting to emulate Tideswell too closely without the television coverage!

For more information, see:

[www.tastetideswell.co.uk](http://www.tastetideswell.co.uk)

[www.tideswellschooloffood.co.uk](http://www.tideswellschooloffood.co.uk)

[www.biglotteryfund.org.uk](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk)