

The Stores, Butterton, Nr Leek, Staffordshire

Anyone harbouring fantasies of living the good life would do well to consider buying Derek and Daphne Salt's village shop on the edge of the beautiful but remote Staffordshire Peak District.



For the couple, whose family has run The Stores in Butterton near Leek for some 57 years, are about to retire and are hoping a new owner with new ideas will breathe life back into the business.

"We're in the middle of some really lovely countryside. It's a decent-sized village with a pub and an excellent butcher," said Daphne. "I've often thought the place would make a lovely tea shop, attracting walkers and cyclists. It could also become the hub of village life, like the shop used to be; but we'll leave that idea for younger folks!"

But many of the Salts' most loyal customers never see the inside of The Stores – they receive weekly home deliveries instead thanks to Derek and his trusty van, part-funded a few years ago through a grant, suggested by the Rural Shops Alliance's Kenneth Parsons, from the then Countryside Agency.

Twice a week, Derek – accompanied by his faithful Border Collie 'Red' – travels the lanes and byways of the local area in his van to deliver groceries to around 13 homes. He also delivers newspapers to 60 people, whatever the weather. "There have only been a couple of times when I couldn't get the van out."



"A lot of our customers live in the villages around Butterton, so we have always done deliveries for those who couldn't get here," said Derek. "Most are very elderly now so it's a bit of a lifeline for them. It's not just a matter of having their groceries delivered, it's also a chance to have a quick chat and a catch up on the gossip! It keeps people in touch with each other."

A few years ago Derek almost certainly save the life of a customer when he found her collapsed in her home when making his weekly delivery, and was able to call the ambulance. "I feel responsible for my customers, and I feel guilty about retiring, but we're in our 60s now and it's time to have another life," he said.

All may not be lost for Derek's regular delivery customers however – the owner of another shop over the Derbyshire border some five miles away has said he might take over the deliveries. But with some orders barely covering £5 worth of groceries, it may well not be seen as profitable enough to continue.

Derek isn't the only one delivering groceries in the area of course. "A lot of people get their deliveries from the big supermarkets – and they will happily pay a delivery charge. But we daren't charge our customers for delivery because they wouldn't wear it!" said Daphne. "It's very odd. There used to be quite a few shops in the villages which did home deliveries, but we're probably the one still going around here. People in the village say they will miss us, but they don't actually shop here very often."

Perched on the edge of the moorlands, Butterton suffered the same fate of many deeply rural communities following the closure of its school 20 years ago - although it attracts a good number of visitors to its many holiday cottages.

"Unfortunately, when the visitors pop into the shop for a newspaper or pint of milk, their first question is, 'where's the nearest supermarket?' and I tell them it's 15 minutes drive away," said Daphne. "We try to stock what they want but we have to cater for our regular customers too. Over the years our mainly elderly customers have literally been dying off, and we haven't got the energy to look at new ways of building up the business."

Not only does the shop stock the usual range of groceries, collected from the nearest Bookers cash and carry in Stoke on Trent 25 miles away, supplemented by fresh fruit and vegetables which Derek collects from Chelford market on a Wednesday, but it also supplies large gas bottles, which many of the local homes rely on for cooking and heating.

Although they will be closing the shop, the couple will be keeping the Post Office going for a while yet. "We can't imagine going from working seven days a week down to nothing, so we're planning to keep the PO open for the 18 hours a week," said Daphne. "A couple of our best PO customers are local people who sell things in Ebay. I've never dared ask what they sell, but they post a lot of packages!"

Derek's father started delivering newspapers by motorbike before taking over the shop and later passing it on to his son and daughter in law. "Derek and I met when we were at school – but we didn't like each other very much," recalled Daphne. "Now we've been married for 40 years now, working together seven days a week and we're still friends, so something worked out right!"



The couple have no plans to leave the village where they have lived all their lives, so whoever buys The Stores will always have someone on hand for advice on who's who and what's what in Butterton!