

# FAR FOREST STORES

## PUNCHING WELL ABOVE ITS WEIGHT by Beth Whitaker



Far Forest is too small a place to feature on most road atlases. Located in the heart of rural Worcestershire, on the edge of the Wyre Forest, you can drive through it without blinking. And so a casual observer could really wonder where all the customers for the local Far Forest Stores are coming from. On the outside, the shop does not look any different from hundreds of other village stores, yet people travel along country roads from as far as Stourport – nine miles away – to use it. This is clearly a business that punches well above its weight. So what makes this Londis store such a magnet for its loyal customers and such an important part of its local community?

The shop's owner, Carmine Burrillo, is now ready to retire – but not until he has found someone to continue his legacy. He is so determined to find the right person to take over the business he has been running for 23 years, that he's already turned down an offer from one of the largest independent retail chains.

"Running a village shop is all about getting the price right, listening to your customers and looking after your staff so they do the best job," explained Carmine.

The business is so successful, with the recession barely making any impact on trade, and there is so much potential for the future that Carmine is confident he will find a new owner – but it might take a while.

"We have such a good reputation that people drive out of their way to shop here. It will take time to find the right buyer," he said. "I had an offer from a big company last year, but I did not like their ideas and their attitude to the staff, so I said no. It is very important to me to leave the shop in safe hands."



Carmine and his family have built up the business over the years, continually investing in it and expanding it to 1,500 sq ft with a high quality of fit-out, determined to always stay one step ahead in terms of service and standards.

He bought the business after working in supermarkets, leaving Fine Fare to strike out on his own, and brought a keen sense of pricing with him. "You cannot compete with the big supermarkets, but at the same time, you have to be realistic about what people will pay," he said.

"Get your price right, and keep the customers happy. We have a notebook by the till to write down anything a customer asks for and we'll do our best to stock it. Last week, a customer wanted Pepcid because they couldn't find it anywhere else, so even if I have to buy it from a chemist's to stock it, I will do that. Although we are in a very small rural village, our reputation brings in customers from far and wide. You have to always be looking to make it a better experience for the customer and they will reward you with their loyalty."



He is full of praise for suppliers Londis. "We stock a very good range, including frozen food, hot food to go, we bake some of the bread, we have fresh local meat, including the favourite local Freeman sausages, we sell local eggs and honey and pre-packed fruit and vegetables. We also have a post office and off licence – so we have everything anyone could want, including plenty of parking."

Although Far Forest itself is a small community, there are quite a few houses and farms hidden in the neighbouring Wyre Forest, and it's on a fairly busy B road.

"We really haven't been affected by the Recession at all – and there is huge potential to modernise still further and expand the business. It will take a while to find the right person, but it's important to keep the traditions going, for the benefit of the community, which has been such a big part of our lives. We have an excellent full time manager and assistant, along with 18 part-time staff to make sure we're open from 6am to 9pm, seven days a week."

Carmine and his wife recently moved from the village to try out a more urban lifestyle in Worcester. "We're getting older and we are trying to be sensible – there is virtually no public transport in Far Forest, so we think we should be somewhere where we don't need to rely on a car. But we both miss the village and pop back here all the time!"

#### **THE RSA VIEW**

Carmine and the shop he has built up over the years really are exceptional. It has been a long-term endeavour, with single-minded commitment to reinvesting in the business and always looking to improve. There has been no magic formula but an on-going attention to giving customers what they want. The Londis brand provides customer confidence. The shop is open full convenience store hours, from 6am to 9pm. This means that Carmine had to ensure that his staff maintained his own commitment level to customer service even when he himself was not there. The friendly service customers receive is an important part of the shop's attraction. The sales area has a high standard of fit-out, providing a pleasant, clean and well-lit environment, developed over the years. The very wide range of products at fair prices ensures that customers travelling some distance to the store can be confident of getting what they need, whilst good use of the EpoS system keeps stocks well controlled. Add the convenience of having a Post Office branch and a good car park, then the store's attraction for customers becomes clear.

None of these factors are revolutionary. Put together they make Far Forest an exceptional success story, but one with lessons for other shopkeepers. It isn't easy, but if you get it right, then customers will find you in even the most unlikely places.