

# DIGGING OUT 650 TONNES OF PRIME HEREFORDSHIRE HILLSIDE.....

## Orleton Post Office and Stores by Beth Whittaker

Timing, they say, is everything. So when Andrew and Gerry Summers finally decided to go for broke and invest their hard-earned money to double the size of their tiny village shop and Post Office in the heart of Herefordshire, the announcement of the national PO closure plans came like a bolt from the blue.

The couple moved to the pretty village of Orleton (population 840) 11 years ago, living in a cottage next to the tiny shop premises which boasted just 400 ft<sup>2</sup> of floorspace, low ceilings and narrow aisles. Despite refitting the shop in 2002, four years ago they finally faced up to the fact that, like many small rural businesses where the owners live 'above the shop', the business was worth less than the premises including their cottage.

"It was make or break time," recalls Andrew, who turned to retailing after years of frustration working for other people. "We just had to find a way of making the business more profitable – and that meant creating more space."

Employing a local architect with experience in the retail sector, the couple drew up their ambitious plans – involving digging out 650 tonnes of prime Herefordshire hillside - to expand the shop and create a smart new apartment on the site as their home. It was a huge leap of faith; plans were to double the size of the shop featuring light, bright spacious aisles instead of the old cramped and pokey interior layout, as well as providing a purpose-built stockroom.

Re-mortgaging their cottage would bring in the necessary cash to make their dreams a reality. They were also offered a £10,000 loan from the Post Office and a £5,000 village shops grant from Herefordshire County Council.

The Summers were all set with plans drawn and planning permission granted. "The planners could not have been more helpful," says Andrew. "Despite being in a Conservation Area, the local council has a policy of supporting rural village shops."

And then the national Post Office closure plans were announced.

"We just couldn't believe it," recalls Andrew. "Everything had to be put on hold. But when eventually we heard we'd escaped the first 'cull', it brought it home how important it was to make the shop viable in its own right because our Post Office might not escape next time."

"Re-mortgaging in the new financial climate last year was a nightmare, but we pressed on. With a great contractor and the architect as project manager, work started last November. It was chaos: our living room became the stock room and our kitchen was the prep area. But, apart from just three days, we stayed open throughout. The work ran on schedule and pretty much on budget and because our customers were so supportive, our turnover was only hit by 20 per cent."

The shape of the new space dictated the revised layout. "But the decision to go for an open-plan Post Office as an extension to the main counter was a no-brainer," comments Andrew, wryly: "I've wasted hours every week for 11 years running backwards and forwards unlocking and re-locking the previous fortress! Post Office custom has always been good here; people appreciate the shorter queues and easy parking."

And all the hard work and investment is already paying off. In Andrew's view, "Turnover is increasing steadily in real terms and at a hugely better margin. Overheads are not going up, so it's all bottom line. We are now stocking higher margin lines and selling more local meat products - we can keep a much wider range with our lovely new multidecks, so gross profit is far higher even than turnover. We are still having

folk coming in whose dropped jaws we pick up as they get over the shock, but I still reckon we have 15 - 20% of the catchment area who just don't ever come in. Plenty to work at! We will have a grand opening as soon as we have finished the floor and got the somewhat Tracy Eminesque electrical switchboard display sorted (the electricity company are not exactly rapid) and we are planning tastings, local brewers, cider makers etc. Also, we are going to have a good go at getting the next village (Richard's Castle) along as well - we know a good few of them already".

One of the biggest benefits to the business is the new stockroom. "It is a joy to be able to roll a Bookers order in to the stockroom in its cages rather than handballing it in to block already narrow aisles," says Andrew. "Every order day left a substantial part of the old shop full of cases and with no room for shoppers. At last we will be able to have the office in the stockroom and the house will be free of VAT returns and bookkeeping!"

The new shop has delighted customers with its size and spaciousness - and its lighting, even though most new lines are still to come. To promote the business, the Summers leaflet-drop the whole village each time the Bookers 'Club' promotions change, and this range will be extended.

"Like everyone else, we try to find saleable lines we can have a decent margin on which are not in the supermarkets, and then Tesco's find them a year later and the profitability goes! I'm sure Tesco must employ local shop observers," muses Andrew.

"Unlike some boutique-style shops, we're conscious we need to cater for everyone, so we stock an everyday range alongside premium locally-produced bacon, sausages and hams, cheeses, cakes and bread. Wherever we can, we use local suppliers and visit local food festivals for ideas."

"We offer all the household basics as well as Fairtrade and eco-friendly items. We're proud that some customers rely on us completely for their groceries. I think that is the mark of a successful small shop."

When Andrew and Gerry were looking for a village shop as a business, they recognised the Orleton community had all the right ingredients. "It's thriving," says Andrew. "There's a really good mix of ages because there's a fantastic primary school which attracts young families and it's also a great place to retire to. There are two pubs, a busy village hall and a doctor's surgery."

Orleton Post Office and Stores supports three full time staff as well as a part-timer, Saturday and Sunday part-timers and three newspaper delivery boys. It is also a local Tourist Information Point, stocking information leaflets and local postcards.

Says Andrew: "It's been an exciting time; it's not often you get the chance to help design both your home and your workplace!"

### **The RSA view**

This is a brilliant example of how even the most unlikely site can sometimes be turned into a great village shop. In this particular case, the development of the site as a whole ensured that the project worked financially despite its high total cost, but there must be many more village shops that could follow this inspiring example. We really congratulate Andrew and Gerry on their hard work and determination that should ensure that this very rural part of Herefordshire has a lovely village shop for many years to come