

Tillington, Herefordshire

Tillington, Tillington Common and Burghill are straggly villages, a couple of miles north of Hereford. They are off the main road network, and their limited populations, even taken together, would not suggest the type of place where you would expect to find a shop. But a couple of years ago, a very unusual event occurred – there was the grand opening of a brand new village shop.

This event was entirely due to the determination of Heather Holmes. For many years a dairy farmer, she was one of the many small farmers forced out of the industry by low milk prices. However, unlike most of the others, she was determined to do something to help other farmers. It took years rather than months to achieve this ambition, but after spells working in other jobs, she found the sort of premises she wanted. Coincidentally, she was moving from Tillington in Sussex to set up a brand new village shop in Tillington, Herefordshire.



The building that she found is not the usual idea of a quaint village shop. It is situated on a small commercial estate, next to a used car business. Nobody would ever claim that the building is particularly attractive, but it does the job of keeping the weather outside and stock inside. It does have the important advantages of offering a large well-shaped sales area, the luxury of a decent office and good stockroom space, at affordable cost. The space has enabled Heather to realise her ambition of setting up a shop to serve the local villages

but also, crucially, to provide an outlet for small local producers.

A key investment was a long wall of open deck refrigeration, enabling Heather to stock and display properly a wide range of local fresh food, including meat, fruit and vegetables and dairy products. Elsewhere in the shop you will find locally produced cakes, crisps, flour, smoked fish, sauces, preserves, wine, beer and especially, this being Hereford, a good range of local ciders. Of particular note is the wide range of locally produced beef, lamb and free-range chicken. In total, about 30 local suppliers make up a significant proportion of the sales.

During the two years the shop has been open, Heather has received considerable support from the local community and sales have built up well. She is the first to admit that her lack of retail experience has made it a steep learning curve. The shop provides a very unusual mix of everyday items and the specialist ranges more usually associated with a farm shop offer, making it a tricky balance to manage it effectively. It needs constant attention to keep the shelves well stocked whilst keeping wastage within acceptable limits. Although most customers are local, Heather's stand at Hereford Food Festival, where she cooked up some of her locally produced sausages, has led to an increasing number of customers coming from further afield, eager to buy more of them, as well as other locally sourced items.

Heather is still developing her shop's offer, with each week seeing more lines added to the range. Profitability to date has been held back by the high cost of financing the fitting out of the shop, including all that refrigeration, but the P&L will start to look decidedly healthier once these loans have been paid back. As you might expect, Heather has been working very working very long hours, although she claims that this is no particular hardship for somebody used to dairy farming – another industry where holidays are a decided luxury. However, Herefordshire is one of the farsighted county councils who have supported the RSA in providing regular evening training events for our retail members; despite her punishing hours, Heather has found time to attend and found them very helpful. The local RSA co-ordinator has provided her with some useful advice, as has the local Bookers merchandising team.





Tillington Village Stores highlights the fact that village shops can be successful with a much higher proportion of locally produced and fresh produce than is typical and that, given the opportunity, local residents are prepared to shop locally for them. In creating a hybrid between a traditional village shop and a farm shop, Heather, a relative newcomer to retailing, has shown a possible way forward to some more experienced retailers.