

# A Shop at the heart

Hook Norton is a large village in Oxfordshire with a population of approximately 2,000. Our shop is in the centre of the High Street, the building is over 400 years old and was originally 3 houses. We are fortunate in that we are 5 miles away from the nearest town and 8 miles away from any of the big multiples.

We took over the business in 1989. We were all set to open a farm shop when our village shop was put up for sale, so we bought it. We thought we had the right skills between us to make a reasonable success. Tom's horticultural and business background was a good start, together with my employment experience and recent college course in business and finance.

The best part of running the shop is the variety of work and a different challenge each day. I enjoy wearing different hats and using a mix of skills rather than doing the same job all day. Contact with many different people is also enjoyable, and can make a big difference to my day. The worst part of the job is the spam phone calls trying to sell us something, from a new phone deal, insurance, to timeshares.

We have 1 full time member of staff, and 3 regular part-timers, together with an army of

students who work evenings and weekends. This works very well, but my staff plan sometimes resembles a jigsaw with bits missing. We all have a really good working relationship and very few problems, thank goodness, because I see employment law as very one-sided in favour of the employee. We pay for employment insurance so that we have help with making sure we get it right.

We support the local community in many ways. We provide goods and services for people who are less able to travel outside the village, such as dry-cleaning collection and a home delivery service. We donate to local charities and fund-raising events for the church, school and playgroup. The village also has an annual music festival and beer festival, to which we contribute in various ways.

We have thriving football and cricket clubs, which are our favourite sponsorships, being football fans particularly. When we were approached by the football club to provide, on a limited budget, food for the travelling players to eat on the coach, we put together a packed lunch etc., and they were so impressed that they asked us to take on the post-match catering. I had the idea that we could donate the food instead of the usual raffle prizes, programme advertising and sponsorships, as it was something we could help with practically as well as financially. Word soon spread, and we now do this for the cricket club too, and our cricket teas are famous throughout Oxfordshire.

Our son Joe, who runs the business with us, is also active in the community, having run the Youth Club when younger, served time on the Parish council including 2 years as chairman,



By Gloria Williams, joint shop owner

# of the Community



and is now chair of the school governors. He is also a retained fire fighter in the village.

We like to sell as many local products as we can; homemade cakes are a speciality, cheeses, local cream, etc. This is becoming increasingly important as a part of everyday shopping. Shoppers are gradually becoming more health-conscious, looking at ingredients on packets; I can see an ongoing gradual move toward fresh produce rather than ready meals. One of our recent investments was a new freezer just for fish. This area is a mixed marketplace, and we try to have something for everyone to keep them shopping in the village, but with many more up-market facilities in the area such as farm shops, we have to keep our budget-conscious shoppers in mind. The cost of transport has been an issue for some time now and I think will continue to be so.

Our most recent development has been a floristry department. Tom has recently completed 4 years at college doing advanced floristry and we now employ a part-time florist as well. We now have orders for weddings and funerals, and the business is gradually growing. When the economy slows down (I refuse to use the R-word) we have to be conscious of this, but continue to do what we do best, some good promotions, value for money together with the

odd treat. We trade with Nisa through Select and Save. We have a good three weekly promotion cycle, with competitive deals. I think in the future these are going to have to be even keener and we need to be kept up to date with new products and new developments, as I think the marketplace will be increasingly competitive. We have changed our stocking policy over the last year or so, with the advent of much higher food prices. We have to be more waste-conscious and keep our ordering under control, especially with fresh produce. It is very difficult balancing act.

Most of all, we deliver good old-fashioned service with a smile, which costs nothing. Most visitors to our store comment on the friendly and welcoming atmosphere that I feel is important. I think you have to want to be there for a start and I believe that is also true of staff. Staff training is important, but it is more important to employ the right people in the first place. We recently expanded our range of wines and beers after buying more refrigeration. In the future I would like to offer glass hire, special offers by the case for parties, sale or return etc., along with a delivery service, and possibly expand the catering we do, leading on from our involvement with the sports clubs.

