

To:

General Management  
Sam Smith Old Brewery  
High St,  
Tadcaster,  
LS24 9SB.

17<sup>th</sup> February 2021

From:

Friends of the Anchor  
(Belmangate, Guisborough)  
Correspondence Address:  
[Personal Details Redacted]  
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Email:  
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## “Friends of the Anchor”

Dear Sirs,

This is an open letter written on behalf of “Friends of the Anchor” (that is The Anchor Inn, Belmangate, Guisborough). Our interest is the long-term viability and traditional character of the Anchor as the hub of the community at the Belmangate end of Guisborough.

We formed last year in response to the sudden closure of the pub and departure of the management on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2020. (You can find us here at [www.friendsoftheanchor.org](http://www.friendsoftheanchor.org) and on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/friendsoftheanchor/> )

Whilst these are particularly difficult times for pub trading, compounded by Covid19, the closure involved the *second* departure of Anchor management in 2020 and *was not* directly related to Covid19 measures. We saw that you were publicly advertising for a new management couple (application closure 8<sup>th</sup> December) but understand the vacancy remains unfilled as the Covid lockdown continues in 2021.

Concerned by recent events, we wanted to share our thoughts on the future (post-Covid) operation and management of The Anchor Inn. Our thoughts and suggestions for the future are **attached** below. We know that with the right management arrangements, there would be no shortage of volunteers to run the pub with support from Friends of the Anchor.

We look forward to hearing your longer-term intentions for The Anchor Inn.

Yours faithfully,

[Personal Details Redacted]  
on behalf of ***Friends of the Anchor***

Attached – Suggestions for future management (5 pages)

## ***Friends of the Anchor***

### **Thoughts and suggestions for ongoing operations and management.**

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#### **1 Preamble / Background:**

Although the pub is not as old as the Guisborough pre-industrial heritage of Westgate and Belmangate, it has existed for over 150 years on the current early-Victorian stone-cottage site at 16 Belmangate.

Sam Smith have owned and operated the pub for 40 years. Typically, throughout this time the pub has been managed by a live-in couple employed by Sam Smith.

Despite this management arrangement, Sam Smith pub management policy and practice appears to be increasingly personified by Humphrey Smith.

At the time of writing, February 2021, we are still in the middle of the Covid pandemic trading limitations, and Sam Smith had chosen to close entirely having terminated the current management in October 2020, *ostensibly* for poor trading figures. It was only February 2020 that the previous management team was replaced, and now in February 2021 it remains closed and without management. However:

***Our interest is long-term sustainable viability of the Anchor Inn.***

#### **2 General “Pub” culture as a business in 21<sup>st</sup> C**

General pub trading has been difficult and in decline in recent decades, with many pub businesses closing. Successful operations are those with specific combinations of location, character, accommodation, food and entertainment, with reinvention of specific branding and price-point either individually or at scale as part of larger operation or franchising group.

The arrival of Wetherspoons has had an enormous impact on pub business in Guisborough generally, with many existing pubs changing radically (or closing) and new ventures with specific entertainment / sport-TV / craft / micro / gastro / cocktail pricing models. How many succeed as long-term businesses is yet to be seen (with or without Covid).

***Even traditional pub culture will need to evolve to be sustainable.***

### 3 Sam Smith general strategy

Overall, Sam Smith's strategy is **traditional** on several levels:

Firstly, in their choice of properties, of which the Anchor is a small but typical example, of traditional character. In fact, property investment has clearly been a major part of Sam Smith's strategy, having acquired many landmark properties in other towns and cities and either continuing or reverting to their traditional pub style. Property alone represents an enormous part of the business, dwarfing the pub trading figures.

Secondly, the traditional character is emphasised by rejection of modern technology either in trading / payments and in any form of electronic "entertainment" media, personal or ambient. As a general policy to preserve the traditional character, and as a visible message to signal this policy, this is welcome. *However*, the specific policy rules and their application have been problematic, to say the least (*see management policy & practice below*).

Thirdly, their traditional "no bells or whistles" strategy is also embodied in their supply chain. All products being supplied from their own (or partner) traditional "real ale" brewery and manufacturing operations. No concept of guest ales and no acknowledgment of the craft movement. Generally, this policy has also supported lower-than average pricing – traditional **and** good value for money is explicit policy. *However*, see pricing and value below.

### 4 Unique Selling Points of the Anchor Inn

The Anchor fits within the general Sam Smith's "traditional" policy.

Location is a key characteristic at the bottom of Belmangate. Off the main street, but on the route between the town centre and the residential areas at the south-east end of town.

Beyond that its own character is traditional, small two-room "butt and ben" layout, low ceilings, open fires, traditional décor & furnishing, etc. It has also had long-standing / multi-generational family & neighbours regulars which have contributed to maintaining the traditional character.

The live-in couple management team arrangement has also generally been successful in maintaining the family, friends and neighbours welcoming environment. Again, this is explicit Sam Smith policy.

## 5 Management Policy & Practice

Whilst the traditional strategy is entirely appropriate for the Anchor and its customer base, actual policy, rules and management practice in changing and applying these, have been problematic, *for management, staff and customers alike*.

Recent experience leading to the current situation has been a perfect storm of 3 recent issues:

- The change of management team in February 2020 from the much-loved, long-standing, successful partnership of Mark & Rachel meant a hard act to follow.
- The arrival of Covid, the initial closure and ongoing / changing trading restrictions since March 2020, *immediately* after the change of management.
- The sudden decision to raise prices by ~30% at a single stroke in May / June (?) 2020 on re-opening after the initial lock-down.

A perfect storm because these coincident events were on top of the fact that business and customer ambience had already been affected negatively by policy changes in recent years. The rules on language and electronic devices for example. (*See more on Tradition meets Future Sustainability below.*)

A large part of the problem with the rules and changes above has been their application.

Sam Smith's management has become synonymous with Humphrey Smith and, given the fact that all these rules and changes have affected the entire Sam Smith's portfolio, Humphrey's general eccentricity and idiosyncratic management style is legendary through national press as well as individual local experience and hear-say. (*Too many examples to list, but here a recent relevant example <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7874799/Sam-Smiths-boss-spotted-staring-mobile-Wetherspoons-despite-BANNING-phones-pubs.html> )*

The fact that Humphrey takes a personal interest in visiting "his" pubs on a regular basis is a *healthy practice*, but with all the rules and changes identified so strongly with him personally, it has *serious negative downsides*.

Rules to limit swearing and to limit electronic devices and media (and all the additional Covid arrangements) are obviously welcome in a traditional, welcoming pub. However, **how** the specific rules are framed (simple and in your face) and **how** they are enforced (summary closures and dismissals) matter greatly. Simple rules that are difficult to enforce invariably lead to hypocrisy (see example above). Rules are for guidance of the wise and the enslavement of fools. Draconian, centralised, authoritarian enforcement is positively unhealthy to the customer (and staff & management) experience and to the business itself.

The policies and rules, and their enforcement, require more thoughtful consideration and careful application. Some positive suggestions are made below:

## **6 Additional Suggestions**

As Friends of the Anchor we would like to see some changes in Sam Smith's management of its pubs, specifically The Anchor Inn in our case.

### **6.1 Enlightened Management**

If nothing else there needs to be evidence of Sam Smith's management caring about its staff and traditional customers, existing and future. Traditional implies conservatism – even a little eccentricity – but cannot equal archaic business and people management style.

Whilst it is good to have a management figurehead taking a direct interest, there needs to be a more visible management *team* when it comes to making rules, monitoring compliance and enforcing sanctions.

Given difficult trading conditions for the traditional pub and, whilst Sam Smith's management have full rights to manage the business as they see fit, we suggest they also consult their traditional customer base, current and future.

### **6.2 Traditional – Family Welcome & Language**

We support the live-in couple as the local management arrangement. It is important that these people come to be seen as part of the local community and "Friends" in their own right.

We support general rule(s) to eliminate swearing. We would support local management discretion in enforcing these and other rules, as and when appropriate, and would hope Sam Smith's management would show similar discretion in supporting / assisting local management in their enforcement.

We suggest that selection of local management take into consideration the people skills necessary to achieve this.

### **6.3 Traditional – Pricing & Value for Money**

We support the no-frills / no-extra costs of the traditional value-for-money operation as part of keeping costs & prices down. We appreciate in recent years the particularly low prices were maintained as a competitive response to difficult trading generally.

We believe the recent price hike (in July) has nevertheless been a big factor amongst all the other 2020 difficulties in driving many regular customers away. (There is much objective evidence to support this, conditions are difficult for customers as well as the business.) Once the situation stabilises – Covid and management – we would hope this could be addressed directly.

In addition to value for money drinks, we would support a limited selection cheap and cheerful pub food, *without* changing the environment into a restaurant or gastro-pub.

#### 6.4 Traditional – Modern Technology & Sustainability

For any “traditional pub” sustainability and evolving into the future is ***the key consideration***. The erstwhile crowd of regulars is obviously aging, and whilst there is a tradition of family regulars, pub culture does not *automatically* hold any attraction for younger generations.

We should make every effort therefore to encourage ***the next generation*** of customers within the spirit of maintaining the traditional pub aesthetic. So for example:

- We should accept electronic / cashless payments (*ironically, smart devices would have been useful during Covid for contactless check-in as well as contactless payment.*)
- We should continue not to have TV or gaming machines (*they are intrusive on traditional pub culture and conversation*).

Use of ***personal electronic devices*** shall be limited (example rules as follows):

- We should forbid use of personal electronic devices for audio or visual media (*we have no entertainment license*).
- We should forbid making or accepting phone calls (*or any other audio-visual comms*) within earshot of other customers (*basic courtesy*)
- Personal media devices should not be used for personal or group entertainment or interpersonal communication. Conversation is encouraged and personal media devices should only be used as part of that in order to share content relevant to the conversation (*eg. how many times might we want to check a sporting score or check the name of a politician dead or alive, etc during **an actual conversation**.*)
- Personal computing devices may be used for work or business-related content only in designated areas at designated times (*eg. some of us have worked from the back-room during day-time opening hours in the past*).
- Traditional pub games should be supported / provided as an alternative, (*subject to gaming limitations*).

***In any event, personal electronic device and media rules should be flexible, subject to changing technologies consistent with maintaining the environment for personal interaction.***

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