

Secret Drinker reviews The Harrow pub in Stockbury, near Sittingbourne

I need to start with an apology. Usually I visit a boozer, write it up and get my review straight over to the KM editor.

Well, this was an extra, spur of the moment, trip I made to a pub several weeks back, just ahead of Her Maj's big weekend celebration, and I wasn't planning to write it up.



If I'd taken this picture before going into The Harrow in Stockbury I'd have known it was owned by the community as it's splashed across the front of the pub

However, out of pure habit, I took a couple of pictures and, in hindsight, The Harrow at Stockbury, at the top of Detling Hill between Maidstone and Sittingbourne, deserves some column inches – so sorry this one's a tad tardy.

I wasn't sure it was open, right up to the point I tried the door handle, but once inside I was welcomed to the bar and asked what I fancied.

My immediate impression was a feeling that I'd walked into something of a cross-breed, half pub, half community hall and, as I started chatting, I discovered why.

This place is owned by the community, well 172 shareholders to be exact, who all stumped up different amounts of cash at £200 per share.

I'm sure many are villagers living just round the corner desperate to keep their local alive, but others are from much further afield and live in a multitude of countries – so, the goodwill towards The Harrow spreads near and wide.

Landlady Sarah has been at the helm officially since last November but often worked here before that and is now clearly in her element.



The small, but beautifully formed, pub garden is lovingly cared for by community volunteers and Sarah is delighted everyone is so keen to muck in

She was at the Rose & Crown in nearby Hartlip for 19 years so she's got plenty of experience of both the area and the pub game.

Fortunately they don't need a shareholders' meeting to select the beer and Sarah is left to decide what to serve – when I was in there was a 4.2% bitter called Draco on tap.

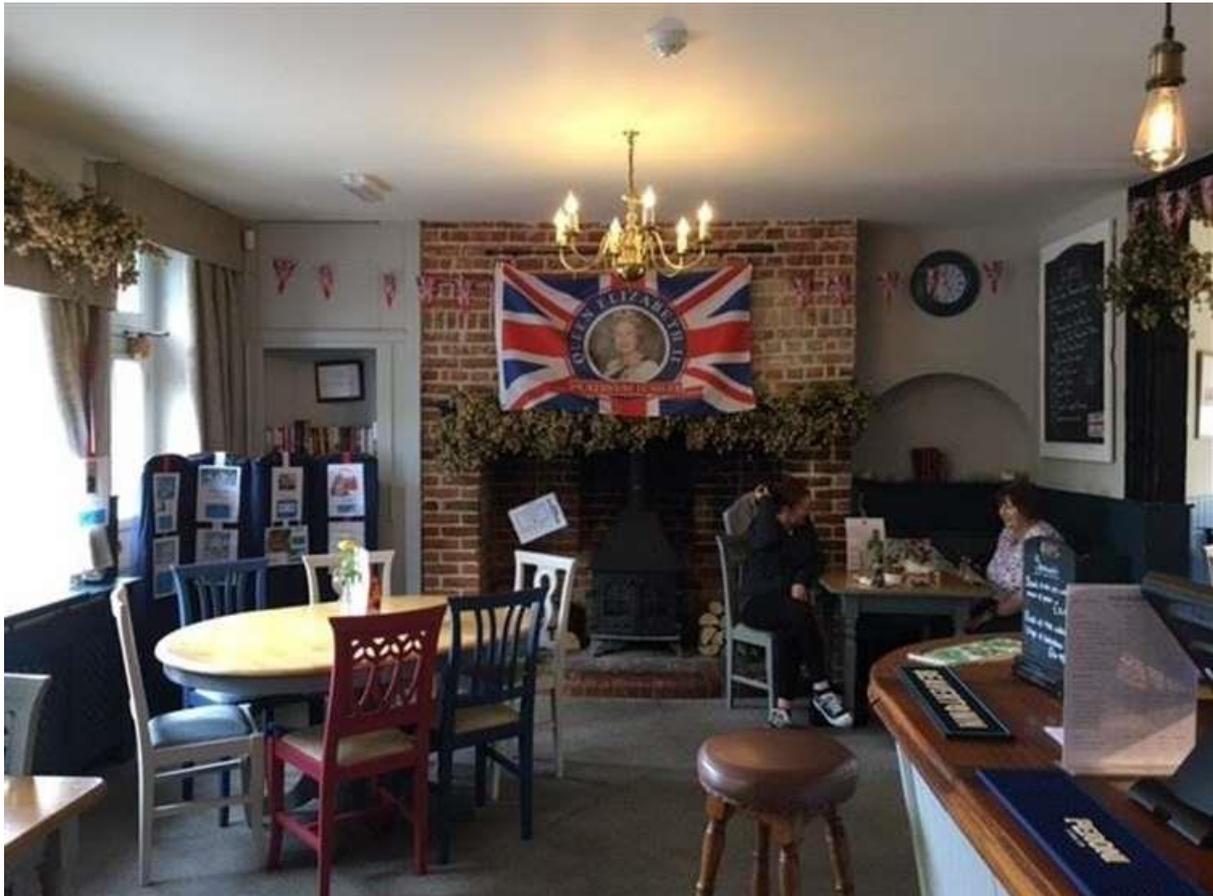
From the Constellation Brewery in Tonbridge, it's a slightly sweet, but otherwise traditional, bitter with a creamy head that's easy drinking.

I thought it looked reasonably decorated but Sarah is planning to do the place up as she believes blue makes it feel cold in the winter. Mind you, when I say she'll

be doing it up, by her own admission she gets an abundance of help as the community jumps in without even needing to be asked.

While I was drinking, two lovely souls were in preparing a corner of the pub for the Jubilee and two others were busy filling a pot with an olive tree for the garden.

There is a big screen on the wall and a well-used dartboard but there are also plenty of tables and chairs for those who might just want to pop in for a cup of coffee and a chat.



Where I sat at the bar (that's my stool in the picture) it felt every inch a local village pub, but just a few feet away by the fireplace it was much more community hub

For me this blend of pub/community hub worked really well and there were a couple of ladies sat against the far wall perfectly happy with their own company.

I was certainly very comfortable on my stool at the bar chatting to Sarah and new friend Damo, who'd taken a 'slightly' early cut on the basis 'the electric was off for new telegraph poles and the roads were in chaos'.

The pub does food at lunchtimes and evenings but I was in smack bang in the middle and anyway Mrs SD had already messaged to say she'd started creating in the kitchen.

I spotted a collection of interesting sherry glasses behind the bar so borrowed a couple to teach Sarah and Damo a new trick – hopefully they won themselves a couple of free pints that evening.

The grassed pub garden, with a large selection of picnic tables, had a wonderful surprise, a carefully maintained petanque track.

I asked the olive tree planters if the pub has a team and was assured it did. They then questioned my proficiency for the game and when I informed them I was very good they said I'd be signed up immediately. To be fair they said they're always on the lookout for fresh meat so even if I'd been very average I'd probably still have made the cut.

Pity I don't live in the village as I've always fancied joining a league.

I didn't really need to go, but old habits die hard so I paid a visit to the gents and took a few photos for my collection. I can report they are traditional with white tiles, well looked after, clean and fresh.



I know a decent petanque track when I see one and, if I say so myself, I sling a boule as well as anyone. Apparently they're looking for players and if I lived in the village I'd sign up immediately.

My visit to The Harrow was all too brief, but given the unusual organisation making this pub possible I'm delighted I got the opportunity to pop in and report on this success story.

For the record, The Harrow is officially a 'society' with a full constitution but in simple terms it is a wonderful village asset that locals realised was far too valuable to lose.

Sadly, it's obviously not possible for every community to step in and save their pub from closing, it takes a special set of circumstances and a group of incredibly determined locals – but, it is inspiring to see, at first hand, a working example which will hopefully go from success to success.



Just one example of how the community gets involved – this display for the Jubilee was all pulled together and assembled for locals without the pub (Sarah) needing to do anything

The Harrow, The Street, Stockbury, Sittingbourne ME9 7UH

Decor: *I thought it was fine and blended pub with community hub perfectly fine but Sarah says the blue walls have got to go. ****

Drink: *The Draco, a 4.2% bitter from the Constellation Brewery, is a traditional brew, copper in colour with a creamy head – it's understated and easy drinking. Guest beers are changed regularly. ****

Price: *The bitter was £4.40 a pint, the other price I spotted was £4.60 for a pint of Moretti, which isn't too bad. ****

Staff: *By her own admission, taking this role wasn't just a case of taking a job, it was a lifestyle decision for Sarah and she absolutely loves it. Long may it stay in her capable hands. ******

