

Persistence rewarded

Residents of the hamlet of Crays Pond in south Oxfordshire are celebrating a notable victory in a 5½ year campaign to recover their village pub, the *White Lion*, following success in the High Court.

The *White Lion* had stood on a busy crossroads in the village for well over 100 years as the only community facility in the village, apart from a scout hut – it doesn't even have a church. A thriving and bustling establishment in the 80s and 90s, with a large garden and restaurant, the pub became neglected under a series of poor licensees until owners Greene King put the premises, by now in a poor state of repair, up for sale in mid-2013. Only those keeping a sharp eye on the trade press were aware that it was for sale, not even the licensee at the time, so that the first that local residents knew about it was after it had already been sold in October. The new owner, Mr Satwinder Sandhu, told interested local people that he was going to open the pub as an Indian restaurant. At the time, this was possible without requiring planning permission. The Indian restaurant idea was extremely short-lived and he almost immediately started to turn the pub into a private house for his family.

Alerted by the local residents, South Oxfordshire District Council forced Mr Sandhu to apply for planning permission to use it as a residence. This was refused, as was a subsequent appeal. Mr Sandhu, however, continued to live in the pub and was convicted twice in the Magistrates Court for ignoring an enforcement notice, incurring fines of £1000 plus £500 costs in December 2016 and £2500 plus £2170 costs in October 2017. Sandhu continued to live in the *White Lion* and SODC applied for an injunction to force him to comply with their enforcement notice. In response, Sandhu reopened the pub as the *Whisky Haveli*, selling whisky at £6 a shot, and claimed that this allowed him to live in the premises as an ancillary use to that as a drinking establishment.

The injunction application hearing was finally heard in the High Court in London on February 21. The judge, Mr Timothy Straker QC, granted the injunction and awarded costs to the Council of £20,000. Mr Sandhu and his family have until April 23 to move out. Failure to do so could attract a prison sentence. The judge commented that the whisky bar, which used just one room of the pub on two evenings a week, was a front and “could no more be called a pub than a fig leaf on a naked statue could be called clothing”.

The judgement is the culmination of over five years of campaigning by the Crays Pond Action Group. South Oxfordshire CAMRA Branch Chairman and Pub Protection Officer, David Cooper, said: “The residents of Crays Pond have been magnificent in not letting the issue go for such a long time. They have held several packed meetings in the village and refused to let SODC forget that they need their pub back. SODC also deserve a lot of credit for pursuing this and we are grateful for their persistence. No less than nine local residents travelled to London to attend the High Court hearing. Unfortunately, this isn't yet the end of the story and we hope that the village will be able to buy the *White Lion* and turn it back into the thriving community hub it once was.”