

Crook Inn under Threat

The Crook Inn is the oldest licensed pub in Scotland. Robert Burns wrote his famous poem "Willie Wastle's Wife" in the bar and was known to be a frequent visitor. So was local boy John Buchan, later Lord Tweedsmuir, who wrote "The Thirty Nine Steps". But a new owner is determined to close the inn and transform it into luxury flats. Opponents say this would mean the locals will not only lose a vital community and tourist resource but it will also miss out on next year's Year of Homecoming celebrations, as Scotland celebrates the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, an initiative endorsed personally by Alex Salmond. (<http://www.homecomingscotland.com/>)

The local community has been pursuing the option of buying the Crook. It has set up the Tweedsmuir Community Company with the aim of purchase to run it as a viable business and a community asset (www.savethecrook.org.uk). However it looks as though the local planning department are determined to ignore the community who are due to hear about their right-to-buy status next month.

On January 28th, the Upper Tweeddale Planning Committee will meet to consider a recommendation to approve from the Planning department of Scottish Borders Council. However the planners have stated that they must not delay planning decisions to wait for any community involvement, despite the time frame for the community being perhaps only a matter of weeks.

For generations travellers on the main scenic route A701 between the M74 and Edinburgh have stopped at the Crook. It started life in 1604 as a simple halt for drovers taking cattle from the Borders to markets in England. The 17th-century Willie Wastle's Bar is based in the original kitchen of the inn and has a vast open fire shaped like a wagon wheel.

It became a Presbyterian meeting house in the 17th century when Covenanters were hunted down mercilessly in a period know as the Killing Time. At one point the landlady of the inn hid a Covenanter in a peak stack to save him from armed dragoons.

In the 1930s the inn was extended in strict Art Deco style and the inn today is a fascinating blend of the 17th and 20th centuries. As a result of its historic architectural importance, the inn is a listed building. It is particularly famed for its bold Art Deco toilets which have also been a popular feature for travellers on the A701. These and other Art Deco feature interiors will be demolished if the planning application succeeds.

One local Christine Parker said "The planning report does not even mention the central hub of Burn's old haunt, the flag-stoned bar – the planners do not seem to think it worth mentioning that this will not be incorporated into the luxury flat design. Somebody seems to have forgotten to consult Historic Scotland in my opinion, as this pub is a national treasure. It's sad that this Friday is Burns Night and by Monday a piece of Burns history may have disappeared forever."

The current owner, Jim Doonan, purchased the Crook in May 2006 and applied for planning permission for change of use in November 2006. He has attempted to make a case that the Crook Inn has reached the end of its economic life. He has failed to make a profit himself from the Crook as it seems that he may purposefully have run the business down. For example, he closed the building during part of the peak summer season, closed down the bar facilities early in the evenings, is alleged to have kept the heating switched off to discourage visitors and made conditions for the staff untenable. The pub which was always renowned

for its fine cooking suddenly moved into low-grade fast food. Previous proprietors have been able to run the Crook very successfully and several, such as current Trust Director Stuart Reid, are apparently willing to discuss their business management with the Council.

The Crook Inn with all its various outbuilding buildings, campsite and land running down to the River Tweed was purchased by Mr Doonan off market for £350,000. When the Council asked Mr Doonan to prove that the pub was not economic he was forced to put the pub on the open market to see if anyone would buy it as a going concern. However, he subdivided the property and excluded valuable land running down to the river Tweed and campsite which supported the bar trade, but asked for a price of over £450,000 for just part of what he originally bought.

It was also very difficult to track down the sales details for the property as the only advertisement appeared to be a small board on the road by the pub. No internet searches or trade magazines would seemingly lead buyers to the Inn. Indeed, one Edinburgh potential purchaser said:

“I tried phoning the number on the board several times. It was the answer machine for a firm in Glasgow. I left my details but nobody ever got back to me so I assumed the pub had been sold. It is outrageous that I didn't have a chance to own such a wonderful piece of Scotland's history. I smell a rat – it seems that the Donald Trump debacle may be repeated in microcosm down in the Borders.”

The District Valuer, at the request of the Planning Department, has recently estimated the current value of the Crook at between £250,000 and £300,000 as a going concern as an inn. Nevertheless, the Planning Department have chosen to ignore the seemingly blatant overpricing and under-marketing strategy of Mr Doonan, and still conclude that the inn would no longer be viable as a public house. They also comment on the poor state of the buildings which have been left neglected and unheated by Mr Doonan for a considerable time, suggesting that a publican might not want to invest in such buildings. However they do not seem to demonstrate any evidence for taking this position other than that presented by Mr Doonan himself.

Duncan Davidson, the Chairman of the Trust says:

“It is amazing that the Planning Department, having requested that the Inn be put on the market and then that it be evaluated as a precaution against false marketing, has neglected to consider its own research and findings, and now, surprisingly, has now made the recommendation to accept the application for change of use. And they seem to be in such a hurry to push this through - what is going on?”

“The planning application also runs contrary to the numerous local and national policies that seek to maintain historic listed buildings in their original use, and to protect and develop tourism, local employment, and community facilities. The planner's report seems to gloss over the concerns of the statutory consultee the Upper Tweed Community council and focuses on a paltry sum of under £2000 which the developer has promised to pay Broughton school as a 'development gain'.”

“If the council could give the community a chance to have a shot at buying the place at a reasonable market value as outlined by their own valuation report, then we could demonstrate economic viability – not just for Tweedsmuir, but for Scotland.”

“The inn has always been renowned for the quality of its food and its range of cask beers brewed by the nearby Broughton Brewery. It has provided much needed local employment and housed wedding and funeral receptions, club meetings, dinners and music evenings; it

has provided a venue for community activities – clay pigeon shoots, raft races and new year's bonfires. It has even acted as a local post office, right up until May 2006. This historic beautiful building has supported tourism in the area, offering food, drink and fantastic accommodation to visitors and it's one of the stopping off points for any Robbie Burns fan. We want to be part of the Year of Homecoming next year and remain part of a proud Scottish heritage."

January 28th may be crunch time for the Crook Inn

<http://www.savethecrook.org.uk/>

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