

Uncharitable Behaviour: - Locals fight to save the Halfway House at Box

Since the Halfway House at Box closed on 8th July, there has been a vigorous campaign to get it reopened. Every Friday at 6pm there is a demonstration outside the pub, an online petition has garnered 1,096 signatures (and counting) and a website www.savethehalfwayhouse.com has been set up. The local MP has written expressing his concern and campaigners are demanding an investigation by the Charity Commission.

The Halfway House is an attractive stone-built building dating back to 1779. It is picturesquely situated on Minchinhampton Common above Nailsworth and adjoining the village of Box.



The pub has had a chequered history since it was bought by the neighbouring Cotswold Chine School in 2002. Now part of the Novalis Trust, the Cotswold Chine School was set up in the 1960s to cater for young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties following the principles and methods of Rudolf Steiner.

The school claimed its reason for buying the pub was to secure 'legitimate' vehicular access to the common and additional car parking by enlarging and sharing the pub's car park. An additional motive may have been to influence the running of a pub with a garden adjacent to the school. The school was adamant that it wanted to retain the building as a pub.

Which initially seemed to be the case. A manager was appointed and a rolling programme of improvements undertaken. This included a new kitchen and toilets, extending the bar area into the old toilets, providing internal access to the lower floor and refitting it lavishly as a dining area with a bar, new toilets and individual dining cubicles divided by wooden screens. At the time and subsequently there has been criticism of the lavish and excessive nature of some of the improvements, and whether it did not represent overdevelopment damaging to the character of the building as a village pub. There were also questions as to whether it was right for a charity to spend this sort of money on non-charitable objectives.

After initially being managed directly by the school, the pub passed through a series of more or less 'hands off' management set-ups-going bust in the process with debts of £272,984-before being leased to Venueplus in 2008 free-of-tie for £100,000, with an annual rent of £60,000. New landlord Niall McInerney stated: "I very much want to return the village pub to the village. We will have classic pub menus, hopefully an open fire and be dog and welly friendly."



Faced with a rent rise to £72,000, Niall tried to buy the freehold of the Halfway House from Novalis Trust in 2012 but was unsuccessful. The pub closed on Sunday July 8th with Novalis Trust saying they wanted to turn it into a cafe and village shop offering work experience for their pupils. Incredibly, Jake Lukas, chief executive of

Novalis Trust claimed: "The signs are there that nobody wants it to be a pub." This flies in the face of the success of the pub under Niall's management and the fact that he wanted to buy the freehold-would he want to buy the freehold of a pub he of all people should have known 'nobody wanted'?"

As soon as the pub closed, the trust stripped it of its inn signs and identification as if to deny its very existence as a pub. Thieves took the hint and promptly stripped the building of lead in broad daylight.

Almost immediately, a campaign was launched to reopen the Halfway House as a pub by villagers of Box incensed by the closure and the claim that nobody wanted it as a pub. A petition is circulating protesting at the closure. Its promoter, Sean Kelly, says: "The closure of the Halfway House and the way it has been handled is of extreme concern to the community. The closure is completely unnecessary and clearly represents another agenda. The community do not want a café or shop."



The campaign has attracted high-profile support from many well-known figures such as Sir Richard Eyre, who has a house in Box. The MP for The Cotswolds, Conservative Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, wrote expressing his concern:

"I fully appreciate the hugely important role pubs play in local communities, in particular in rural locations. I believe it would be a tragedy for Box to lose this important facility and I can understand why the local

community are very concerned on this issue.

'I have written to Jake Lukas, Chief Executive of the Novalis Trust, for a full explanation and to ask for any assistance he can offer to protect this important part of the Box community.

'I have also written to Phil Skill, Head of Planning at Stroud District Council, for an explanation of the Council's role in this matter and to request that the huge opposition to the change of use for the property in question is taken into consideration.'"



Meanwhile, the campaign continues with signatures to the petition growing, letters to the papers, and the regular Friday demonstrations. The closure and the campaign have featured on BBC television's Points West and on local radio.

Campaigners are demanding:

- A full investigation into the financial and operational affairs of the Chine school over the last 10 years
- Independent Trustees who can be 'Trusted', appointed to the Board of the Novalis Trust and Chine School

For regular updates and further information-and to sign the petition-go to the Save the Halfway House website

www.savethehalfwayhouse.com The site has extensive sections headed 'Exposing Novalis / Chine...What You The Public Need To Know', 'Questions For Jake Lukas, The Directors & Trustees' and a history of past goings-on.