

HOTV Management Committee meeting minutes

The Royal Oak, Tuesday 13 June 2023, 6:00pm

Present: Mike Blair (chair), Simon Dauncey, Graham Glead, Jason Keswick, Martin Keswick, Nick Sloan, Ann Woods. Apologies from John Davison and Paul Fielding.

This was a special MC meeting called to discuss two plans for Phase 3 of the refurbishment of the Royal Oak, prepared by Jason Keswick and Tom Hartley (re:DSGN) and Nick Sloan, in anticipation of a grant application to Valencia in July.

- 1 NS explains need for an early decision on Phase 3 to take advantage of a Valencia grant up to £50K which will only be available for applications up to July. We applied in April for a grant towards kitchen equipment. We will not know until the end of June if we have been successful and what the chances are of succeeding with the follow-up grant, but we have to assume success in order to meet the July deadline.
- 2 Jason talks the MC through his plans, previously circulated by NS [and viewable [here](#) (13MB)]. He and Tom have brought a fresh pair of eyes to a very awkward building and come up with a “top end scheme” that would require a lot of money and commitment. Their principal aim has been to make the Oak more welcoming to visitors with a wider cross-passage with entrance doors at each end, and an airy glass-walled café/dining area in place of the existing toilets and kitchen. The new toilets and kitchen would be sited in the LH skittle alley, and a stock-room where the existing café is. The garden would be re-landscaped, access to the function room would be improved with a new staircase, and the upstairs toilets and other spaces would be reconfigured.
- 3 NS points out that the estimated cost of the new scheme (£200K) would easily exceed the potential grant from Valencia, and the need for planning permission would preclude the possibility for applying until after the deadline. JK argues that the scheme could be phased, and that the work in the skittle alley could be completed first, while we find a source of funding for further work.
- 4 SD asks why it is necessary to install new toilets upstairs when the existing ones are functional. JK says that some elements of the scheme would be nice-to-have rather than essential. Much of the upstairs refurb could be accomplished by volunteers. In response to questions from NS about the kitchen he says that the details are still to be worked out: the position of walls and doors could be tweaked to optimise the spaces. NS points out that wheelchair users could not independently reach the accessible toilet from the main level because of the steep ramp in the passage, nor the upper garden except round the top of the alley. (It is later agreed that nothing can be done to make the cross-passage ramp independently accessible to wheelchair users, but that it can easily be managed by pushing, and that this is at least as convenient as a lift operated by an assistant.)
- 5 The new dining space would become the main, though not necessarily the only, eating area. There would be a net increase of 22 covers over what we have now (54 inside plus 50 in the garden). GG has concerns about reducing the size of the kitchen by 40% while increasing the number of covers. JK argues that the kitchen could be slightly enlarged and laid out efficiently. SD says that a properly designed kitchen does not need to be big.

- 6 GG says why not do both schemes? Make grant-funded improvements now that would not compromise the longer term plan, then get a loan to cover the cost of the re:DSGN scheme, paid for by income from additional covers. JK says the Valencia 2nd grant, if successful, could cover the new kitchen and toilets. NS suggests that you then have two kitchens, a lot of toilets and no extra covers, without any certainty that enough money could be raised to complete the scheme. He thinks it would be lunacy to commit HOTV to further bank loans when we are actively trying to reduce those we have. He thinks Jason's plan is a creative solution to a minor problem.
- 7 Attention turns to an examination of the simpler scheme drawn up by NS (visible [here](#)). [This is an evolution of that first proposed two years ago, and displayed in the Oak for much of that time.] NS acknowledges that there are issue, but argues that both plans contain trade-offs to achieve advantages in some areas at the cost of others.
- 8 MK suggests we take a step back to ask what our vision for the Oak is—can it survive as just a local pub supported by its community or does it need to become a destination pub, drawing in custom from further afield? He feels that the Oak will struggle if it relies purely on local custom, and that to attract outside custom it needs to become more attractive. SD and NS feel that the first priority is to serve the local community, including the less prosperous, that we can do this successfully, as well as drawing in more distant customers, by being a friendly local pub with good food, and that being somewhat quirky and rustic is simply not an issue. JK feels that both plans retain the core elements of a local pub.
- 9 GG says that we have two good options on the table, and wonders whether there is not some middle ground that would enable us to take advantage of the Valencia loan but still progress to more radical improvements in the future. Two of our three loans will be paid off in the next three years and he believes we could still make a profit out of 22 extra covers if we ask Triodos for £200K more to cover building and employment costs. He is chiefly concerned about incompatibilities between the two plans.
- 10 MK suggests we discuss the simpler proposal in more detail. NS explains the logic as being to do the minimum possible to solve the most significant problems we have, principally improving accessibility throughout and moving the stockroom to a more convenient site. GG and SD both have serious concerns about the new dining area becoming a corridor to the toilets. SD has concerns about the separation of dining areas and the noise of skittling next to diners.
- 11 AW asks whether the the area occupied by the current toilets could be incorporated into a café/dining area instead of a stockroom, leaving the kitchen in place. JK points out that this would constitute a halfway house between the two schemes. The saving in construction work might free up money to build an independent stockroom outside. MB feels that a much smaller stockroom could be an advantage. There is a general feeling that this could work and NS is keen to draw up a new plan incorporating AW's suggestion.
- 12 NS reiterates his opposition to new loans and GG reiterates his theory that investing to achieve greater profits could lead to a more secure future for the pub. MK and SD doubt that the shareholders would view this favourably. GG is principally concerned at present that we should not shut off options for the future and asks if anything in this proposal would inhibit later work we might want to do. JK thinks that we ought

be able to achieve most of what is needed within the existing structures using grant funding. There would still be scope for a radical facelift to the café area at some later date if required and money became available.

NS (and JK?) to develop additional plan/s incorporating changes proposed.

- 13 NS suggests that we inform the Members of the new proposal and invite comments. GG points out that the previous proposal was publicised and displayed in the pub for two years without exciting much comment.

MK will include an item in the next newsletter.

- 14 The MC appreciates all the thought and hard work that Jason and Tom have put into this project.

Meeting closes at 7:22

The next regular MC meeting will be in the Royal Oak at 6pm on 4th July.