

Back to its roots

A couple have lovingly restored a once grotty pub back to its former glory. James Wilmore reports

INDIVIDUALITY CAN be a difficult thing to achieve. It requires confidence to take a risk, branch out and separate yourself from the crowd.

But when it comes to running a business, taking risks can reap rewards.

For licensee Helen Wood and her partner Andy Seratt these rewards have been achieved by trusting their instinct and creating something a little out of the ordinary for their area.

Part of this success is down to the time and money the couple have spent on renovating their pub: the Broad Leys in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. When they took it over nearly five years ago, the venue had a bad name in the community and was in dire need of a facelift.

"It was a run-down pub of dubious reputation really," says Helen.

Despite the project's enormity, Helen had vision. Having worked for Whitbread for 20-odd years, she was keen to take her own pub and when the lease for the Punch-owned Broad Leys came up she jumped at the chance.

16th century beginnings

Helen and Andy began by researching the pub's history and discovered that it was originally a coaching inn,

Fact file

THE PUB: the Broad Leys, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire
THE SPEND: £200,000
THE WORK: Complete overhaul of bar, back bar, kitchen and garden, restoring it to some of its 16th century coaching inn glory
THE RESULT: A significant upturn in trade



Helen Wood proudly shows off the pub's dining area which was created from the site of the old stables

dating back to the 16th century. They set about restoring the building to some of its original style, while giving it a contemporary feel.

To ensure they maintained complete control Helen and Andy chose to self-finance the project. "It meant we could design everything on our own and bring in electricians and builders who we knew," explains Helen, who was confident of Andy's background in engineering.

Everything needed changing. The whole shebang from the carpets to the back-bar as well as plenty of structural alterations. Once these were complete, the former stables site was converted into a restaurant. Next came the lounge bar, public bar and conversion of the outbuildings into a kitchen.

Helen, with an eye for detail, began by decorating the pub with a variety of bric-a-brac to afford the pub its own character. "There has been something very satisfying, bringing the building back to its original state," says Helen.

And it seems that the \$200,000 transformation of the Broad Leys has gone down well with the regulars.

"Most of our customers are really appreciative of the style," explains Helen. "At the end of the day it's a business, but we wanted people to enjoy the little touches and quirky aspects, to provide them with talking points."

The work on the interior was finished last year and saw the pub shortlisted for Design of the Year in the *Publican Awards 2007*. But for

Helen and Andy their mission was not complete. "We had steady trade, people knew about us, but there was still the problem that others didn't know what we looked like on the inside – they would just drive past," says Helen.

A shop window

To rectify this situation, they set about creating a shop window for the pub by overhauling the exterior space. The garden now boasts an impressive array of seating, as well as a Roman-style statue which doubles as a fountain. However, the statue has become such a distraction, that passing drivers are nearly causing accidents by gaping at it.

The garden was completed a few months ago, ready for summer, but then came the awful weather. "But because the garden was there, people were already interested," says Helen. "Now as soon as we have a warm evening, the garden is packed."

Surely it's now time for this entrepreneurial couple to rest on their laurels for a while?

But no, Helen has more plans. "The next thing we want to do is install a Balinese hut in the garden area – and put a bar in," she says. Again it's not the most obvious thing to do, but it will undoubtedly further the Broad Leys's reputation.

"We like the idea," says Helen. "No-one else is offering this kind of thing round here, so why not?"

And who could argue with that?



Above, left, the bar area now reflects the pub's origins as a 16th century coaching inn and right, the revamped outside area has proven popular