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## **How pubs are rising to the challenge of lockdown**

With pubs rumoured to remain closed until December, landlords are finding inventive ways to put themselves at the heart of their community

Last month, if a man in a pub had told you that you would not be able to buy another pint until December, you'd wonder what he'd been drinking.

But at Monday's Downing Street press conference, Michael Gove suggested that [pubs would be among the last venues in the country to re-open](#), leading to speculation that they could remain shut until Christmas.

That news certainly came as a shock to John Garside, who realised the gravity of the situation on 20th March, when he was helping to pull pints behind the bar at his north Yorkshire pub when the prime minister came on television to make an urgent statement about the [ongoing coronavirus crisis](#).

It was a busy Friday evening, and the main bar was full of revellers keen to break in the weekend with a pint. Garside rushed to turn up the volume so that Boris Johnson's words boomed across the room. "We are telling cafes, pubs, bars and restaurants to close tonight as soon as they reasonably can, and not to open tomorrow," Johnson said from Downing Street, as he announced the Government's latest measures to stymie the spread of infection. Full lockdown was imposed three days later.

Garside had known for a while that closure was likely, but he was still crestfallen to realise that he would immediately have to shut the doors at his popular village pub, [The White Swan](#) in Wighill, Yorkshire. He placed his bar staff on furlough and cancelled on the 120 diners who had booked a table for Mother's Day lunch, which would normally have been among the busiest days of the year.

"If you're looking for one word I would say devastating," remembers Garside, 57. "Devastating to me as a

business and devastating to the community.”

But Garside, who manages the pub with his wife, Diane, says that “closing down is not in my vocabulary”. He quickly devised a plan to keep business ticking over, and has spent much of the last three weeks selling takeaway food and delivering essential supplies to the elderly and vulnerable.

It is just one example of how many of Britain’s 47,000 pubs have been forced to reinvent themselves, as landlords face the biggest threat to their trade in living memory. Boozers famously remained open during the Blitz, when they were actually allowed to extend their hours in some areas to ensure that servicemen got a chance to drink. And many kept their doors open even in the Great Plague of 1665, the bubonic outbreak documented so famously by [Samuel Pepys](#), which killed a quarter of London’s population.

Landlords say that the mass closure is likely to hit rural communities particularly hard, because they are more reliant than urban areas on pubs as a source of community. Indeed, Garside says his pub is a “hub of the community” in Wighill, which only has one pub and one church.

He took over when it was struggling two years ago and is proud to have substantially boosted turnover in his first year. But times are now tough, and half of the emergency coronavirus grant he received from the government has already been eaten up.

To keep money coming in, and to keep his community abuzz, he quickly drew up a menu of food that could be taken away and reheated in the oven - pub grub classics, mostly, like steak and ale pie and smoked haddock; and for dessert, sticky toffee pudding and apple crumble. He also sells about 50 takeaway Sunday lunches each week.

He has started driving around the village delivering flour and toilet roll - famously hard to get hold of a few weeks ago - to the doorsteps of elderly people who cannot leave their home. And on Thursday and Friday evenings, he has started a popular fish and chips night.

“It’s gone down tremendously, everybody is really pleased,” he says. “We regularly get thank you cards.”

But landlords agree that the effect on pubs is likely to last far longer than the official lockdown. Garside says that even once government restrictions are lifted, many customers might be reluctant to return to crowded spaces. He says this applies more to rural pubs like his, which tend to attract older folk, than to city centre pubs, which may fill up again as soon as commuters return to work.

“It will just make people think twice,” he says. “Anybody who thinks that pubs are going to be chock-a-block as soon as lockdown is lifted is delusional. [Our new scheme] is like setting up a new business, but it’s not going to pay the bills, it won’t pay the rent. I’ve got suppliers to pay, [and I’ve got to pay for] produce, rent, electricity.”

At least 10,000 of Britain’s 47,000 pubs are ineligible for government grants because they are worth too much money, making them particularly vulnerable to the collapse in footfall, according to The British Beer & Pub Association, which has urged the government to provide more help for some of the country’s most-loved - and most vulnerable - institutions. “Pubs may have to remain closed longer than any other business, so it is imperative the Government tackles the gaps in support facing our industry,” says chief executive Emma McClarkin.

Having survived deadly plague outbreaks in the past - not to mention Luftwaffe bombs - Britain’s pubs will probably survive the coronavirus outbreak, in one form or another, and some landlords will seize the once-in-a-generation opportunity to serve their communities.

And hopefully it won’t be long before we can enjoy a pint there, too.