Stoke Ferry Community Enterprise Limited is the Community Business Enterprise behind the community-owned Blue Bell Pub-Café in the small village of Stoke Ferry, West Norfolk.

The people of Stoke Ferry first considered buying The Blue Bell at a public meeting in February 2019. A small group of five individuals put themselves forward to begin the process of determining whether there was a business case for saving the last pub in the village. Immediately volunteering was considered essential to the campaign, and was included in our strategic planning for the following reasons:

* To get maximum buy-in and support for the campaign
* To share the workload and benefit from a wide range of skills, talents, abilities, and ideas in the community
* To bring opportunities and benefits to individual residents
* To bring the village (and surrounding villages) together in a positive campaign

Bringing the village together in a positive campaign may be the last point on the list but it was never the least; we ran a volunteer-centred and led campaign to unite our whole community.

In conversations with village groups and different villagers, it became clear that saving The Blue Bell was a cause that had considerable support and could be a something that everyone could get behind. And so it was that we deliberately set out to run a positive and widely inclusive campaign with volunteering running as a golden thread through every aspect.

From the very outset, the enthusiasm of our volunteers has never waned: through two years of a global pandemic, difficult and challenging negotiations with property developers; two planning applications; one planning appeal; two Asset of Community Value applications; and an auction! And still, with the strength of our community’s resilience, we came through and purchased the last pub in our village on June 30th 2021.

This deep-rooted volunteer involvement in our success came, in no small part, through our decision to make buying shares in the pub affordable to all. At £50 a share practically everyone in our village was able to afford to buy a part of their village pub. As a result, at the end of our share launch we had 415 shareholders. This has created a broad swell of support for the Blue Bell project and the involvement of a considerable number of committed volunteers.

Currently we have an active volunteer group of 72 local individuals who offer a whole range of skills from Gardeners to Interior Designers and Events Organisers to Electricians. Plus, we have a five-strong Project Team and sub-teams numbering a further six volunteer heroes. And all this from a village of just 515 households!

* The enthusiasm, energy, skills, and dedication of our volunteers has been unflagging and overwhelming. In placing volunteering at the heart of what we do we hoped it would bring individual as well as community benefits and this has been the case. The experience of volunteering at the Blue Bell has helped to transform individual lives as people have gained in confidence, Enabling people to take on a challenge has been fun as well as bringing the Blue Bell direct benefits. Individuals have challenged themselves to try something different, achieve personal goals, practice use of latent skills and discover hidden talents. This has always been acknowledged and the mutual support given by volunteers to each other, sharing skills, experience and learning has been a joy to observe. At least two more people can now expertly dry-line walls having never heard of the practice a short time ago! These two short case studies show example of how individual changes have been made:
* Cast Study 1: A young female volunteer in her 20s who has lived in the village and surrounding district for some 10 years but had very limited local connection within our community. Through her experiences of associating with a range of people she would not normally meet, she rapidly gained in confidence while, importantly, displaying her skill in furniture renewal, a long-held hobby. She is now developing her own furniture restoration business and selling her stunningly painted products through a local outlet. Her achievement is a source of great pride to our organisation.
* Case Study 2: A quietly spoken middle-aged man who moved to our rural village and our area relatively recently. His natural tendency towards seclusion was exacerbated by the pandemic and its attendant lockdowns and social distancing. Through volunteering his self-assurance has blossomed. He now takes a lead in the practical aspects of the renovation of the pub, is learning new skills as he volunteers alongside skilled trades people and has taken the initiative of writing of his positive volunteering experiences in our parish magazine.
* Volunteer Wellbeing: Through the process of connecting with others, friendships and relationships have been formed that would certainly not have otherwise occurred due to COVID-19 restrictions. Such living connections have played a vital role during the periods of pandemic lockdown and the restrictions brought about through small social bubbles. Physical health as well as mental health is also improving as volunteers carry out some of the more arduous tasks involved in the refit of the pub; gardening, moving huge amounts of plasterboard, repairing & fixing overhead joists, etc.; as seen in the accompanying images.

Our everyday practices are helping to develop a sense of pride and collective ownership. We notice our volunteers are gaining in confidence and are taking on the role of ambassadors. This is exemplified by our ‘open door’ policy at the pub where people are encouraged to pop in to see the progress being made in the renovation. Any volunteer who happens to be present makes such visitors welcome, able to give a ‘guided tour’ and talk about the vision of the pub and to answer questions as The Blue Bell moves towards opening once again.

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We believe that The Blue Bell volunteer project has had an even greater positive impact that we had dared hope. We have achieved an incredible level of buy-in and support for the campaign; through our volunteers The Blue Bell renovation project is benefitting every single day from a wide range of skills, talents, abilities, and ideas from our village community. And it has undoubtedly bought individual opportunities and benefits to many.

When the project was launched one key pillar of our volunteering objectives was to help to heal community divisions. At the time, we could never have predicted that we would also face a health pandemic. But we have come through better and stronger. We bought the pub, and we are moving ever closer to our Spring opening; all thanks to our amazing volunteers.

We have always understood that some people, for a whole variety of reasons do not come forward and formally register their willingness to volunteer. Their contributions come in other guises; offering craft objects for raffle prizes, contacting us with news of fundraising opportunities, etc. All this creates the widest volunteer community and has helped foster a culture of voluntary action and a more ‘can-do’ attitude in a community that has in the recent past struggled at times.

As we move into the next phase of opening The Blue Bell, we will continue to promote quality volunteering opportunities and the myriad of associated benefits.

We will strive to widen, deepen, and improve our commitment to volunteering. To receive a Tudor Trust award for the volunteering efforts of everyone involved will mean so much to all who are part of The Blue Bell family but also, and perhaps more importantly, it is something the whole village can celebrate and take pride in.

**Volunteering and the media** Throughout we have promoted our volunteers’ contributions and achievements and indeed have used these channels to attract more volunteers. Quotes in the press and voices on the radio are varied to include those of our volunteers with a special emphasis to ensure women’s voices are to the fore.

Social media coverage has been regular and extensive. Through our regular videos there is a weekly record of the contribution our volunteers are making. The videos also reach a wider audience by being shared on the Facebook pages of all the villages in our area. Twitter has also played an important role in communicating to the wider world; e.g. officers of the Plunket Foundation, potential funders and donors, fellow community-run pubs, and potential suppliers.

All this and more helps to create the widest volunteer community and has helped foster a culture of voluntary action and a more ‘can-do’ attitude in a community that has in the recent past struggled at times.

**Green volunteering**

From the start we have had a policy of Re-use/Recycle, this has been embraced by our volunteers who for example, have spent many hours reclaiming wood, removing nails and screws from old timber, stripping and taking electrical cables to salvage, and have seen the benefit of their labour as the timber, screws and nails are re-used and re-incorporated into the fabric of the pub. In particular, the creation of multi-coloured seating and tables from old beer barrels as well as the re-use of reclaimed pallets has been rewarding as well as great fun. It has helped change the mind-set of some of those involved who now see the wider benefits of the re-use of materials in their private lives.

**Corporate volunteering.**

Staff at UK Power Networks joined our volunteer efforts to revive our west Norfolk village pub. Two teams of staff from King's Lynn volunteered their time on the 9th and 10th of August to help Stoke Ferry villagers fix up the Blue Bell. Jon Stannard was the liaison person for this marvellous corporate effort. He commented that it was great to volunteer at a place where the organisers are organised! He told us:

“So often in the past our teams have turned up and the hosts did not know what to do with us. But that did not happen at the Blue Bell. Each day we were given a prepared list of tasks and a member of the Blue Bell Team provided us with dedicated support and guidance. This not only made our lives easier, but it meant we accomplished more tasks in the time we were there. The welcome we received from our hosts was fantastic as was the great food and the enthusiasm on the site. We’d certainly want to come back again!”

**Crossover volunteering effect**

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic individuals in Stoke Ferry, as with many rural communities, stepped up to offer support to their neighbours. This altruism had something of a snowball effect as people in the village developed a growing reality of interdependency and the common decency of their neighbours. This volunteer drive and goodwill benefitted the Blue Bell as it called for volunteer assistance as many of those in the Blue Bell leadership were also leading players in the COVID-19 Neighbourhood Support Group. Thus, an effective crossover of experienced volunteers was achieved.

Volunteering will take many forms: helping with events, marketing, volunteering behind the bar, in the kitchen, or front of house. In each case a volunteer role description will be created, and we will ensure our volunteer teams are supported and valued to enable them to provide a warm and welcoming atmosphere and efficient customer service. All of the bar/catering volunteers will receive a full induction and training on customer service, food hygiene, Health & Safety, safeguarding as well as being offered opportunities to attend training courses (e.g. Food & Hygiene Certification).

Involvement in the national Volunteers’ Week (held 1-7 June each year) will be a permanent fixture in our diary and will involve recruitment of volunteers and trustees for the numerous non-for-profit organisations in our district. These are all small, rural voluntary organisations with low incomes and few members of paid staff – if any at all. They generally exist in isolation from each other. Through hosting an annual Volunteers’ Fair at The Blue Bell we will contribute to both the quality and number of volunteer opportunities in our district as well as offering opportunities to meet and learn from each other. The Blue Bell will soon open its doors again and we hope it will add to the attraction of Stoke Ferry and along with other existing local businesses and all the surrounding countryside has to offer, will provide a reason for people to come. The Blue Bell is committed to working with local food and drink producers, local tradespeople, to continue to support the growth of our local economy. In fact, by using the large numbers of volunteer hours we use their time as a major source of ‘match funding’ in grant applications thus enabling an economic ‘multiplier effect’ and allowing us to bring investment directly into the local economy.