

BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL

Working men's clubs look for key to success

FOR thousands of Calderdale people the traditional working men's club is still the centre of their social lives.

Several clubs have survived the recession and are continuing to thrive through a difficult period.

But some have found the going too tough.

Increased competition for trade has seen a decline in club numbers in recent years — the latest casualty was the Luddenden WMC which closed this month after 125 years.

But elsewhere clubs have battled through the recession offering cheap beer and good entertainment.

Clubs such as Lee Mount WMC, Halifax, and Thornhill Brigs, Brighouse, have gone from strength to strength. They are financially sound and capable of attracting hundreds of members each week.

**Stories: BRIAN COATES
Pictures IAN SWIFT**

The key to success is good management, according to a leading official.

Mr Ken Wainwright is West Yorkshire branch secretary of the Working Men's Club and Institute Union, of which 30 Calderdale clubs belong.

Nationally there are 3,400 clubs and four million members attached to the union.

But numbers have dropped considerably in recent years from a peak of more than 4,000 clubs.

Mr Wainwright blamed the fall on a lack of suitable volunteers.

"It's difficult to get people to do committee work," he said.

"If we could get more people interested in running clubs then we would get better clubs."

The union aids the running of clubs by running various courses on club management.

"Where management is good clubs will survive," Luddenden had lacked volunteers to run the club efficiently.

Mr Wainwright, of Bradford, said the biggest advantage clubs had over pubs was cheap beer.

He believed the long tradition of professional entertainers appearing in clubs was declining.

"A comedian today will cost £175 to £250 on average and for groups it's more. They are pricing themselves out of the market," he said.

Although youngsters tending to favour pubs to clubs he was confident many would switch to clubs in later years once they married and settled down.

The closure of Luddenden WMC has been blamed on a change in drinking habits.

Membership dropped in recent years as elderly members were not replaced.

Club secretary Mr Jim O'Dowd said its closure was the only option as it had several debts including £48,000 to the bank and £3,000 to the brewery.

Villagers saddened at its demise include members of the Crapper family who live opposite the club in High Street.

Mr Arnold Crapper, aged 75, joined in 1962 and is a club trustee.

He can remember when the club was a thriving place and a popular venue for functions.

"It's bad news for the village," he said.

"A lot of members have died but the younger people don't want to spend an evening at one place. They want to visit discos and pubs."

His wife, Doreen, said the village once boasted several shops, a doctor's surgery and its own policeman, all now sadly gone.

"I think we are losing everything gradually and there is going to be very little left," she said.

Their three children, David, Denise and Derek have all been regular visitors.

The club's longest serving member Mr Walter Halsstead, aged 80, of High Street, joined in 1937, when the club was in converted village shops. It moved to the current building, a former chapel, in the mid-1940s.

"In the early days people were more likely to drink in the club and I will miss it," he said.

"I shall have to use the village pub or stop in."

Another member Mr Gibson Abel said repeated burglaries had made a difficult situation worse.

And although trade was bad sometimes the club could still attract a lot of people on a good night.

EVENING

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