

Quality standards

The pull of the Bull

Former Punch tenant Richard Pope, of the Bulls Head, in Repton, Derbyshire, tells **Sonya Hook** about the work he and his wife, Loren, put in before being crowned 2010 BII Licensees of the Year

How I got here

"My background is in the pub trade and I've been working in it since I was 15 years old, ending up in the headquarters of various pub companies.

I gained cross-discipline experience with the deliberate aim of eventually running my own business, and as I had spent most of my time working in the pub industry it made sense for my first business to be a pub.

When I felt ready to take this step we put every penny we had into making the dream happen.

The idea originally was to move into the pub and Loren would keep her job as a solicitor, but we found that this pub is all-consuming. She needed to help out from the start and the business grew so big so fast that she decided to pack in her day job after just six months.

Facts 'n' stats

Covers: 60 downstairs, 56 upstairs in restaurant, 170 outside.

Staff: 65, of whom 21 work in the kitchens.

Wet:dry ratio: 55:45

Wet GP: 68%

Dry GP: 70%

Average meal cost: £7 lunch, £18 restaurant on mid-week evenings; £24 restaurant, Friday to Sunday evenings; £6.50 to £10 per pizza.

Growth rates: year two: 15% year-on-year increase on year one; year three: 18% year-on-year increase on year two; year four, current: 40% year-on-year increase on year three

The pub

I had a range of criteria in mind for my pub, two of which were definite: the size and the demographic. My model wouldn't work if these two areas weren't perfect.

I had a call from Punch about the Bulls Head because its prospective lessee had pulled out at the 11th hour. It was derelict and all its windows were boarded up, but Punch already had a renovation lined up for it.

The pub was in quite a state when I first saw it, but I could see that it was the perfect pub for my model. It was in an affluent area with space for a restaurant on the first floor, and it had a big car park and a good outdoor space. It was ideal for us.

I took on the Punch lease three-and-a-half years ago on condition that I would coordinate the development, because this is an area in which I have expertise. It was a huge development to get the pub back to life, but it was worth the effort because it's been in growth ever since.

The renovation

The Bulls Head was totally derelict – the drains and ceilings had collapsed and there were problems with deathwatch beetles. It had been empty for two-and-a-half years and previous landlords had run it into the ground; I think one had even ended up squatting there for a while.

From the start I shelved all the plans that were lined up for the pub and did it all myself, with mood boards and a complete re-brief for the designers.

In my view it shouldn't be about putting in new furniture and fittings in a typical gastropub manner, which was the original plan for the pub. Instead I only sourced old furniture and renovated existing features wherever I could, such as the original bar and timber flooring.

The renovation cost £600,000, of which £400,000 came from Punch and the rest was my money. The whole project took 12 weeks on site.

Starting up

The fact that the Bulls Head had been empty for so long was in my favour: it meant we weren't taking on a pub with a bad reputation and could start from scratch.

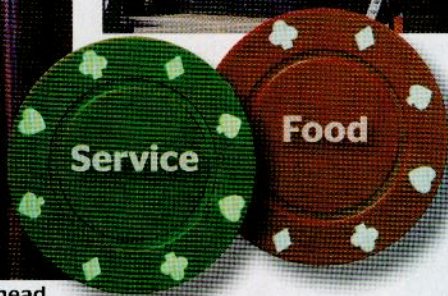


Pretty unique: Richard and Loren Pope and their unusual hand-made wood-fired Italian pizza oven



PHOTO: RUSS HAMER

Consistency: the Bulls Head has maintained its business hours – 12 noon to 12 midnight – since it opened



Recycled: the typical gastropub approach has been turned on its head

We delivered 100,000 leaflets to specific postcodes and I even took one month out to learn how to build a website.

The main foreman was also a poet, and he wrote poems about the development every day, which I posted on the website. It helped us develop quite a following, and also got us some good media attention.

We also went around local schools and colleges and the local history society to get them involved in a time capsule, which we buried on the site on the launch day. The mayor came for the opening ceremony and this also boosted our media coverage.

When we opened

I am a strong believer in opening for as many hours as you can from day one, then scaling back as necessary. We opened from 12 noon to 12 midnight, seven days a week, and still do, because it worked from the start.

Top tips

- Think about what kind of offer you want to deal with before you start
- Be different from your competition – we have about 20 points of difference for each area (products, service, environment) and so there are plenty of things for people to remember us by

Our staff

We employ 65 members of staff, which is a lot, but we opted for more staff working fewer hours each. On the website there is a section for staff, with areas for training and rotas. They can log their availability for the coming weeks, which is really good for them. This flexibility is an attractive part of the package we offer. We put a big effort into building the team, staff training and on the service side of things.

Service standards

We aim to do more than our direct competition in four key areas: our team, environment, service and product.

One thing we launched to measure our service levels, for example, is a

chip system. Each customer gets two casino chips – one labelled “service” and the other “food” – with the bill after they’ve had their meal. On the way out they can put these into one of five boxes ranked from “poor” to “excellent”. If we get more than 70% in the excellent rating, staff each get a £10 voucher for the Bull’s Head.

It’s really powerful, although really it’s a blunt tool in that you don’t know what the problem is, although you can identify that there is a problem.

Customers love it though, and the staff really get into it. The chefs stay behind each night to open the boxes and check the scores.

Investments

In August last year we bought the freehold from Punch, which released

us from the tie and meant we could invest money in the property, which we were reluctant to do before.

We invested in a new terraced area to give us an extra 80 covers, and we also converted a derelict room into a front-of-house pizzeria, serving pizzas from a hand-made wood-fired Italian pizza oven (Jamie Oliver has the only other one of these in the UK in his garden).

It cost a lot of money – the oven alone set me back £10,000 – but it’s been so successful that the payback took only 89 days.

I expected the pizzeria to cannibalise some of the restaurant trade. We deliberately opened it in January so that we could entice in some of the restaurant diners who visited us over Christmas. But in reality, the pizza sales have all been incremental and this move has actually broadened our market rather than attracted the same people.

Plans for the future

Our plan now for the Bulls Head is really for it to run more as a business. We’re happy with the level of trade it’s now attracting, but Loren and I want to grow the team to be more independent of the two of us. Ultimately we want more businesses and have set up a company, Chilled Pubs, to cater for this in the future.

I spent 20 years running multi-sited pubs and now I’ve spent three years running just one, so my aim is to build on this.



Warm welcome: the pub’s environment is key to its successful growth