

The Centurion, Chester

Location

*Oldfield Drive
Vicars Cross
Chester
CH3 5LN*



www.centurionpub.co.uk



[@CenturionThe](https://twitter.com/CenturionThe)

About the Centurion Pub

The Centurion was built in 1966 and is the only pub in Vicars Cross. In 2016, when current owners, Admiral Taverns, declared development aspirations for the site and submitted plans to demolish the pub and construct a care home, the local community took action and registered the pub as an Asset of Community Value (ACV).

Over 400 objections were submitted to the Council, and ultimately the planning application was turned down and refused by the Council. This led to a Public Inquiry, pursued by Admiral Taverns, who decided to fight the Council's decision. 120 people, including Ward councillors and the local MP, gave evidence and the Inspector sided with the community and dismissed the Appeal.

At a public meeting held in the United Reformed Church Hall, attended by about 100 interested people, it was agreed to launch a campaign to re- open the Centurion. Within 2 weeks of the meeting around 100 individuals had invested over £20,000 to enable the community group to open the pub.

On 16 September 2016 The Centurion reopened as a community led pub. It is currently being operated by the Centurion Community Action Group Ltd (CCAG), under a two year lease arrangement from Admiral Taverns, with the intention of it being purchased from Admiral by the end of the lease period.



First Steps

CCAG held preliminary discussions with the Plunkett Foundation, Pub is the Hub, Power to Change, and the Parish Council, to confirm that there was sufficient interest from within the Vicars Cross community to support the purchase of the Centurion.

As well as approaching the Plunkett Foundation, who provided a specialist adviser through the More than a Pub programme, CCAG also sought advice from a wide range of organisations that support community businesses and the pub sector, such as the local branch of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) and Pub is the Hub. This enabled the working group to secure some small grants to set up and formalise the action group and subsequently to register as a Community Benefit Society.

A funded study visit was also undertaken to The Dog Inn at Belthorn, another community owned pub in Lancashire, where the group met with shareholder members and chairman, Dave Hollings. The study visit was invaluable and provided insight into a business model where the pub is managed with support from a team of committed volunteers.

Other support and involvement

Political support was central to the initial success of the CCAG securing a lease of The Centurion. Members of the parish and district council attended the initial community meetings, listened to why the community wanted to save the pub and provided support to the community action group during both appeals against planning permission applications submitted by the construction company.

Without this political support CCAG feels they would not have been successful in winning their appeals. The campaign was also backed by Chester's Labour MP Chris Matheson, ward councillors, Great Boughton Parish Council, CAMRA, Pub is the Hub and the Plunkett Foundation.

Legal Model

The Centurion Community Action Group Limited (CCAG Ltd) was registered as a Community Benefit Society in 2016 to enable local people to take over the lease and running of the pub.

The management committee is made up of volunteer directors (the Board) and was formally and democratically elected in October 2016. They manage the building and oversee the running of The Centurion in partnership with an experienced landlord, who is responsible for two full-time members of staff and seven part-time staff.

The directors are tasked with securing the long-term future of the business, and they are in the process of developing a plan to allow the community to buy the freehold for the pub and secure the long-term sustainability of the business.

Fundraising

CCAG was awarded a £2,500 bursary from the More than a Pub programme which paid for a valuation, an electrical safety check of the premises, registration as a community benefit society with model rules, as well as membership of the Plunkett Foundation.

In the space of a fortnight the community of Vicars Cross showed their support for the project by raising a staggering £21,000 to pay for three months' rent in advance and other set-up costs.

CCAG are now in the process of applying for a package of financial support, made up of both a loan and a grant from the More than a Pub programme as well as grant aid to assist with future development plans.



Key Strengths

1. The Centurion has benefited from the hard work, commitment and determination of a small group of volunteers who have driven the project from the start. The working group galvanised the support of the community to oppose the redevelopment of the pub, negotiated with the owners to purchase the lease and organised volunteers to prepare the pub for re-opening in a very short space of time.

2. CCAG recruited people with a broad range of skills and experience including finance, law, architects and civil engineers. Any gaps in knowledge were covered by seeking support from a network of contacts outside the local community who provided their skills and expertise for free.

3. Keeping costs low has been important to the financial success of The Centurion. This has been achieved through purchasing products on the open market and negotiating with suppliers to reduce overheads. Also, as a free house they have free rein to purchase all their beers wines and spirits and other goods at better prices than are offered by being in a "tied" arrangement. This has given CCAG the freedom to set their own pricing, enabling a far more profitable model than the previous tied system.

Trevor Jones, a member of the management committee, said: *"We always put on a huge number of monthly events including charity fundraisers, community bingo, Age UK Brightlife meetings (organised to tackle social isolation in the over 50s), parties for kids and family fun days. All of these events designed to cater for as large a cross section of the community as possible."*

Social Impact

In order to increase the social impact of the pub, the plan is to market the Centurion as a community pub which fully meets the needs of the local residents. This involves not only maintaining high standards and providing good quality beers and beverages, but the pub also needs to meet the needs of the community consistently, and act as a central social hub for activities, as well as a venue for a range of events.

A number of opportunities and new customer bases have been identified which include working with the local tourist information centre – appealing to visitors, walkers and cyclists, and marketing the pub to people in search of good beers and drinks, and eventually locally sourced, good quality food.

The property has sufficient internal and external space available for a number of activities. It is an ideal training venue in the heart of the local community and yet it is within easy reach of the city centre. Birthday gatherings and christening parties, funeral wakes, coffee mornings, car boot sales, group training sessions and IT courses are all catered for on site. A number of local charities and associations, such as Age UK, the Scouts, football clubs and school PTA's use the pub on a regular basis for meetings and a small Spanish language group has been established. There are regular weekly quiz nights, free access to Sky and BT Sports and special theme nights and entertainment evenings are also very popular and well attended.



The business is very responsive to local need and it provides a wide range of services for the community in a friendly and family orientated environment. It provides a meeting space for residents, it is a popular venue for celebrations and events, and it is also a facility for local sports clubs and interest groups. These combined activities meet the social goals of a community pub and also help to engage a loyal customer base that sustains the business.

As well as the management committee, there is also an enthusiastic team of local volunteers who are always 'on hand' to help out with social events, as well as routine maintenance tasks and repairs.

The management and staff play an important role in the successful running of the pub by creating a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, demonstrating good knowledge of what they are selling and paying close attention to customer needs and what the community wants.



Further information

To find out more information about the More Than a Pub Programme visit www.plunkett.co.uk/more-than-a-pub.

If you would like to contact us about support under the programme please fill out our initial contact form at www.plunkett.co.uk/initial-contact-form, email info@plunkett.co.uk or call the Advice Line on 01993 810730.