

SMALL TOWNS BIG DIFFERENCE SEMINAR PRESENTATION

Hi! My name is Alison McClelland and I am here representing the Royal Hotel in Sea Lake.

This is the story of how a community bought the pub back to life.

At the end of June 2017, the last operating pub in Sea Lake closed its doors. Sea Lake had no pub! A magnificent building was left idly boarded up in the middle of the main street of town. Then, word spread in October 2018 that the hotel was going to be auctioned and a group of locals started to have a look around to see what could be done to resurrect the old pub and bring it back to life.

Cousin Andrew and his brother-in-law Jimmy, a builder, broke in through the back door to check out its potential. He was quickly spotted by John Clohesy and the idea for a few community members to buy the pub was initiated.

The idea to buy the old pub was discussed with me by John, and I said that I didn't want to be a part of it. All I could see was a dilapidated old building that would cost an absolute bomb to get it up and running. So, it wasn't until auction day that I really became involved and excited by what its potential could actually be.

Auction was scheduled for November 2018. The auction was well attended and the bidding was spirited. Luckily Bobby (the Berriwillock publican and an integral part of getting the pub back up) told John, "Go again" and his was the final bid that secured the property.

At this time, John had lined up about 14 locals, mainly local farmers and Sea Lake ex-pats to form a company to buy the old pub. Within a week the Sea Lake Hotel Pty Ltd was formed.

As soon as the ink was dry on the purchase contract, again within a week, the call went out to the Sea Lake community to join the investors for a working bee to clean the old pub up. Over 80 people turned up with trucks, trailers, tools, brooms and brushes to remove all the rubbish that had built up over the time.

I don't think anyone there would forget the stench emanating out of the old kitchen coolroom. Meat had been left in there rotting for 18 months! As Kenny would say "the smell would outlast religion." Took a while for the team cleaning the kitchen out to regain their sense of smell, that was only after they'd finished dry reaching!

So, the pub was basically cleared out and cleaned up in the day. It was truly an amazing effort.

Buloke Shire Council had a works order on the façade as it was starting crumble. A scaffold was put up and Ralphie our nearly 80-year-old Italian concreter got to work filling in the cracks. Seeing Ralphie up on the top of this building freaked us out a bit but he was in his happy place working hard and giving orders. John said that if anything happened to Ralphie it would be like killing Bambi!

The renovation was now in full swing. What was initially considered to just be a bit of a touch up here and there turned into a full-blown make-over.

This old building has seen a lot of incarnations in its time. But the legacy of a previous publican from the early 2000's who was the recipient of a grant to paint the inside of the building, and chose the colours of peach orange with pale blue skirting boards must've made this old girl groan. The stairs were also painted navy blue and there was a kaleidoscope of fluorescent colours in the rooms upstairs. So, to say the place was looking sad would be an understatement.

Over the next few months our dedicated builders Jimmy and Reece started to transform the pub. What was initially considered to just be a bit of a touch up here and there turned into a full-blown

make-over. It started with the balcony and then the bar. Every day was a working bee! All our shareholders chipped in to help when they could. The new look Royal Hotel was starting to take shape and the front doors of the pub were left open so passers-by could look in and see what was going on. Everyone was excited to see the progress.

Over the course of a few days and weeks, probably as a result of the working bee, more people asked if they could invest. Of course, they could! However, with Company rules capping investors to a maximum of 20 we would need to change this status and the company transferred to a co-operative to accommodate the growing interest. The Sea Lake Hotel Co-Operative Ltd was then created.

Getting the building renovated was one thing, getting the business documentation all in order was another! That was my job. There was a mountain of paperwork to get through for gaining Council permits, the liquor licence, supplier contracts, point of sale and bank merchant facilities just before we could open the doors. Everything fell into place and from purchase it took only 6 months to transform the neglected old building into what we have today.

Our goal was to open the hotel to coincide with the Sea Lake Mallee Rally on the long weekend in June 2019. What a great way to celebrate with an influx of visitors to our town. Unfortunately, though, the Rally was cancelled at short notice. But we still went ahead and, on the 7th June 2019, the Royal Hotel was proudly re-opened to the public with a grand opening weekend of celebrations. We are very proud of our business and what it means to the community.

The idea of co-operatives is not new in Sea Lake and District. In the late 1950's our supermarket was purchased by locals and they created Sea Lake Development (SLD). Then later was Berriwillock Grain Co-Operative, Nandaly Grain Co-Operative, Sea Lake Hardware, Nandaly Community Hotel and the latest is the Royal Hotel Sea Lake. What is interesting about most of these co-operatives is the that the same family names pop up as backers in each of them.

I'm also proud of the fellow co-operatives that we have advised on their journeys. The Lockington Hotel, the Colbinabbin Store and the Cootamundra Store.

So, what convinced me to be part of the Royal Hotel project? It was partially this. We found ourselves in the unusual predicament that our young folk, especially the boys out of school didn't want to move from the area. They already had opportunities on their family farms or in other local businesses like plumbing, electrical or shearing. My youngest son was a clear example of this.

In 2019, we had 23 young males under 25 staying in the community and renting or buying houses. Apart from seasonal sport there was no other social hub in town and as parents we had concerns with them travelling to Swan Hill or other areas for entertainment due to drink driving and the availability of drugs. It may seem that we are being overprotective but the scourge of drugs in rural areas is becoming a real problem. So, you could say that we were controlling the narrative in this regard to a certain extent but what parent wouldn't!

But what the pub has turned into has been so much more than a sanctuary for our locals. With the other offerings in the area like Lake Tyrrell, Green Lake Recreation Reserve and the magnificent silo and street art in the town we have quickly turned into a destination pub. Many travellers from far and wide have made the journey just to spend some time in the Royal Hotel. They have heard about our story and liked what they heard. Social media and word of mouth has been amazing in this aspect. But I especially like to talk to those visitors who have stumbled across the pub in their travels. One example was the manager of Rolls Royce International stay with us on his. He loved it!

The magic ingredient to our success? Working well together. Getting people with different strengths to take on different roles and respecting everyone's point of view. Not always easy but in our case it has worked.

Small towns are unique from our bigger regional and city counterparts in that if you want something done you pretty much have to do it yourself. Meaning you have to put your hand in your pocket to make it happen. This also builds stronger communities as we all have a vested interest in our success.