



Oxfordshire Village Shop of the Year Competition 2009

The seventh Oxfordshire Village Shop of the Year Competition was launched by the ORCC in the autumn of 2009. ORCC has promoted local services and their role in maintaining vibrant rural communities for many years and this competition aims to promote and celebrate village shops by:

- Encouraging shopkeepers and managers to assess their business and the services they deliver to the community
- Encouraging customers to assess the importance of the village store in community life and the special services it offers
- Celebrating the special social role that village shops have in rural communities

The competition has two categories: one for independently owned stores and post offices and one for community run village shops. Certificates are awarded to shops judged to be worthy of special commendation and each category has a winner, second and third placing.

Nominations

Shop customers were invited to nominate their favourite village shop and give reasons for their choice. Nominations were received for 18 independently owned stores and 11 community run shops. The shops varied from modern convenience stores, such as those at Sutton Courtenay and Minster Lovell, to the traditional village shop and post office at Lower Shiplake and East Hendred; from the farm shops near Brize Norton and in Horley to the small community shops at Leafield and Islip. Customers wrote enthusiastically about the advantages of having a local store in the village. They praised the high level of service they received; the importance of cleanliness, a broad product range, good quality of product and convenient opening hours. They also wrote about the extra services that many shopkeepers provide – prescription delivery service, deliveries to elderly people and those who are housebound, an informal information exchange, parcel collection point, contributions to village raffles and events, even changing a flat tyre! Many view the local shop as the heart of their community and consider it to be a very important asset in their village.

Judging

Two shortlists of five independently owned shops and five community run stores were drawn up from all those nominated. Nominations were assessed on the comments made about the shop by the customers and the number of votes received was noted as a percentage of the village population, so as not to advantage larger communities.

The final stage of judging for the independent stores was completed during December when the judge, Richard Lee, visited the shops. Richard is an executive member of the Rural Shops Alliance and has many years of retailing experience. The community shops were judged in early January by Helen Datson, an ex-rural shopkeeper with considerable first-hand experience of setting up community shops whilst employed as the Village Shops Development Worker at ORCC several years ago.

The judges were looking at all aspects of the village shop including the appearance of the shop both inside and out; the atmosphere inside the shop; the range, quality and presentation of the goods; the quality of customer service; evidence of involvement in the community and an enthusiasm for retail and for serving the community.

The Winners: Best Independent Shop Category

First place is awarded to Rob and Sally Babij at Taste Buds in Adderbury, who have run their butcher's and general store for ten years and provided consistently good service throughout that time. In fact, this is the second time they have won this category. The judge praised the range and quality of the produce (including award-winning sausages), the cleanliness of the store, the warm, friendly atmosphere and was particularly impressed by their professionalism and eye for detail. Its customers could not praise the shop highly enough. "The village's greatest asset; don't know what we would do without them" wrote one of their customers.



In second place is The Postbox in Wolvercote.

Carl Keeble and his wife Katie run this store with great enthusiasm and humour. Not only does the shop provide a wide range of goods for the local residents, it will respond to special requests and regularly alters its stock range to keep customers interested. You can be sure of a warm, friendly welcome – one customer described it as a shop "where customers always leave with a smile on their face!" It is also a focus for community information and activity - customers were particularly grateful for Carl's help in the floods a couple of years ago.



Carl & Katie Keeble at The Postbox



Dennis and Mollie Ingrey

Third place goes to the stores in Stanton St John.

Mollie and Dennis Ingrey took over the shop just over two years ago and have worked hard to improve the range of products and services, particularly following the loss of the post office following the Network Change Programme in 2008. They respond to customers' requests and will deliver goods to those who are unable to get to the store because of illness. They have raised the profile of the store within the community and take an active role in village activities. "The shop is the place where many villagers meet each other. We would be lost without our shop," said one customer.

Highly commended certificates are awarded to **Aisha Stores in Warborough** – a bright, well stocked shop run by Raj Niventeran who one customer described as 'a good Samaritan' - and **The Corner Store at Lower Shiplake** – a busy, friendly post office and general store offering a wide range of local foods, run by Carol and Mark Harvey. "Excellent service, always with a smile. We are very, very lucky" was one customer's verdict.

The Winners: Best Community Shop Category

The winner is Ewelme Store which opened in May 2009 after the village had been without a store for 7 years. The shop was praised for being “very bright, clean, welcoming; busy with customers who were all served in a friendly, informative and efficient manner”. The store is well stocked with an interesting range of goods including local produce, and is clearly focussed on maintaining the balance between financial profitability and fully involving the community. The shop is run by a manager and forty volunteers and there is a good volunteer training and social event programme in place. The judge commented that ‘This shop is not only providing a service for the community, it is part of the community’.



Second place goes to Wootton Stores which is clearly valued by the community. The shop was well organised and nicely presented with well dressed windows. The forty villagers who volunteer in the running of the shop were warmly praised by the manager for their support and dedication. The regeneration of the shop as a community run venture two years ago has renewed and boosted community spirit within the village and this was particularly evident in the recent wintry weather when snow made it almost impossible to leave the village.

Radley Village Shop is awarded third place. This shop was set up by the community in 2007 when the previous store was closed because of redevelopment of the site. A team of 65 volunteers help the manager to keep the shop open seven days a week. Alongside the well stocked, standard range of goods was a dedicated fair trade section. The judge was impressed with the clear business focus of the shop and its useful and informative website.



Highly commended certificates are awarded to **Appleton** –soon to celebrate its tenth anniversary as a community shop and clearly valued by its customers - and **Tackley**, a friendly and popular community store.

All the customers who nominated their village shop demonstrated what a valuable asset a local shop is to a rural community, not only for its convenience but also for the vital social function it performs. Congratulations to all the winners!

Jane Barker, Village Shops Development Worker, February 2010