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EXCLUSIVE HAVING A BIT OF CRAIC DOWN THE

'I thought I was wise to get out of the building trade... now my pub is going down the drain'

PUBLICANS CALL TIME ON BOOZERS AS RECESSION GRIPS

IT'S THE place to go for the craic, gossip and familiar faces.

But lately down the boozer there's been less of the cheers, more bottoms up, as we all toast the hangover from hell – the recession.

All over Ireland, publicans are calling time – for good. Whether you blame the drink-driving and smoking bans, rates, licensing laws or the recession, one thing is clear as gin – the pub trade has been reduced to slops.

Never mind the pub with no beer – we may soon have towns with no pubs.

The border town of Beltnabret, Co Cavan, until recently had 18 thriving pubs. But over the last two years five have closed.

Danny Boy's used to be a good spot for a sing-song. Now the only thing locked is the door.

A few doors down, the row of whiskey bottles in the window of the Mad Ass look inviting. A plaque on the wall boasts that it won Irish Pub of Distinction.

But it closed just last year. Neighbouring publican Francis Cahill was sad to see it go.

"It wasn't a rival to us. It was a real bikers' pub," Francis says.

"But you don't see as many bikers now. People can't afford to go touring around the country on their Harley-Davidsons."

Francis is hoping his own pub, the Seven Horseshoes, can ride out the recession.

Lucky

The *Sunday World's* Pub Spy gave it five stars last year.

His parents bought it in 1978, and he's been working behind the bar since 1980.

Wife Dolores and sons John (17) and Ronan (16) help out.

Daughter Sonia (12) will row in as soon as she's old enough – if the pub is still there.

When the *Sunday World* walked in on a Friday afternoon, the place was eerily quiet. Just two ladies were having a quiet drink.

When long-time punter Francis McCaffrey dropped in, he was greeted with open arms.

"I've been drinking here 60 years, through good times and bad," he explains.

"There is even an oil painting of him over the bar, by his nephew Ian McCaffrey."

Francis, who lives out of town, relies on a lift to the pub every Friday night. "If I didn't have that lift I'd never get to the pub. I'd be drinking at home, miserable."

Booze is not enough to keep the pub going, owner Francis points out.

He has opened a B&B upstairs, heated the smoking area and now serves pub grub from lunchtime to 9pm.



A CHEEKY LITTLE WINE: Our Geraldine with Sean Maguire in the office of Beltnabret's Yukon Bar



OPEN: Ray Slaughter, the Ducking Stool; Francis Cahill, the Seven Horseshoes; and Ian McCaffrey



By GERALDINE COMISKEY

"It's not the smoking ban – we've overcome that. People are afraid to drink because they have to drive home. That has destroyed community life," he says.

"There used to be loads of committees who'd meet in the pub afterwards – but people are not going to meetings anymore because they can't have a drink."

Down the road in the Duckin' Stool, owner Ray Slaughter is duckin' the debts.

For Ray, closing would mean giving up his job as a fireman for Cavan County Fire Service.

"I have to be based in the town so I can get to the fire station in an emergency."

He has just one berran but admits his wife Diane would normally help out in the bar, but business is so slack there's no point.

"We had the worst Christmas on record. The first week in December, we made €537."

Regulars

"Out of that, I had to pay the band €200. It wasn't worth my while opening up."

The Duckin' Stool, mostly attracts sporty types. There's a pool table, the walls are festooned with soccer and GAA jerseys, and Ray runs an annual trip to Liverpool for his regulars.

But most of his younger patrons have taken the boat – for good. "I counted 70 young fellas or young

girls who had to emigrate in the past few weeks."

Ray says the Government should extend the opening hours, and reduce the licence fee for small pubs.

Publican Sean Maguire was dusting off a bottle of wine in the office beside his pub, the Yukon, when we dropped in.

"Only for the off-licence. I wouldn't be in business at all."

The pub sounds like the place you'd expect to find gold prospectors, but while gold has indeed been found just across the county border in Monaghan, it hasn't trickled

down to the till behind the bar. Sean thought he was being wise when he cashed in his building business to buy the pub.

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