

'Without substantial help, we won't survive'



■ Hard times - Robb Smith (right) runs the The Vine Inn, in Black Notley

“I WAKE up in the morning and don't know if somebody is going to kick me where it hurts,” says Robb Smith, a veteran of the hospitality industry and owner of three pubs, including The Vine Inn, in Black Notley.

He seems to be representative of the growing number of people in the hospitality industry who think the Government has forgotten they exist.

“I came here from South Africa in 1986 and walked the streets of Bournemouth, looking for work, before I realised the hospitality industry was for me,” said Robb.

“In all that time, I've never witnessed such difficult times as the industry is going through at the moment.

“I bought this pub in 2016 with the intention of making it a local, where people could come for a drink and a plate of classic British grub.

“Until this year, we were managing to survive, despite all that was being thrown at the industry by successive Governments.

“However, the way the current lot have almost turned their backs on us is a travesty.”

I look from Robb to his empty pub and it's obvious this man, and thousands of others who bring us hospitality, are hurting.

“This year I've had to make 18 people redundant and I've never made anybody redundant before,” he added.

“I can tell you that it's not something I ever relish doing again.

“It's been a real shock seeing this virus come along and ruin your business and it's not been helped by a Government who don't seem able to make up their minds how best to manage this situation.

“Take the 'substantial meal' situation.

“It's confusing and lacking in clarity.

Column: Tony Harries, from the Winefulness Magazine and Circle of Wine Writers, reflects on a challenging time for the hospitality industry and chats to publican Robb Smith.



“Years ago, when we faced something similar, a judge ruled that a sandwich wasn't a substantial meal but a sandwich with pickles and beetroot on the side was.

“All I can say is that if we follow the same logic, pickles and beetroot will be making a comeback soon.

“The Government has got a choice.

“The sector can survive in the short-term, but if we continue without substantial help then a lot of us will go under.

“That will mean less money going to the treasury from taxes and greater amounts being paid in benefits.

“Surely that will have a profound effect on how much cash the Government can give to the likes of the NHS.”

I ask Robb if the furlough situation had been a help.

“It was great for the individual, but for businesses like this it's been a nightmare,” he said.

“We've still got to pay national insurance, pension contributions and the like, but the amount I've been given is nowhere near enough.

“A VAT cut would help, but only if we remain open.

I've never witnessed such difficult times as the industry is going through at the moment.

“(Prime Minister) Boris (Johnson) and (Chancellor) Rishi (Sunak) have got to realise the importance of the hospitality industry.

“It brings in billions of pounds and employs thousands of hardworking taxpayers, but there isn't even a Government minister to look after our interests and make sure we survive.”

Could it all change?

“When the vaccine has helped restore society, people are going to want to visit the pub; people are going to want to stay in hotels, have meals and experience hospitality, but we're not going to be there because of short-term thinking and misguided assumptions that those people who serve you drinks, make your beds and cook your meals will manage somehow,” said Robb.

“Prime Minister - we will not manage if you don't dig deep and give us the sort of financial help that will not only allow us to survive but contribute fully to society.”

I once again look around The Vine Inn and feel a little ashamed that I can't do my bit by buying a couple of pints.

It's a crying shame where this reporter can't even cry into my beer!

I wonder if there have been any positives to come out of this sorry situation?

Robb said: “We do take-outs and I've been amazed by the support given from the local community.

“It's brought the pub and the people closer together and it's demonstrated how supportive friends and family can be.”



■ Heart of the community - The Vine Inn, in Black Notley