

Dear Friend

thought we'd drop you a line to follow up last week's newsletter. We had many replies from wellwishers and patrons alike, mostly saying how pleased they were to hear The Rockford is back on track. Also, the decorating in one of the bar rooms is coming along nicely and will be finished by Xmas, hopefully. We've taken out the false ceiling, added wood panelling and laid a traditional slate floor which suits the countryside mess that is sometimes traipsed in by walkers and farmers. We're using a local builder/decorator, Nick Bowen, who is doing a fantastic job, plus, importantly, he cleans up at the end of every day. A rarity amongst men!



One of the attractions of a country pub must be the open log fire. Its a quintessential prop that signifies the traditional values of countryside living. The summer was over and we're in mid October, autumn was in full swing and thoughts were turning to the colder months of winter. We love a log fire. The smell and sounds of a crackling fire can really lift the ambience of any pub, especially a remote one in the middle of the moor. So without too much trepidation we decided to open up the fireplace in the lower bar. An easy decision to make but one that was to prove more difficult to implement!

First we had to move the existing wood burner out of the way. This went into one of the other bars so wasn't wasted. Then a made to measure 'log-size' cast iron grate was commissioned through a local blacksmith - it would take 2 weeks to make. Then we had the chimney swept and checked for blockages. All fine so far, and very exciting. Along with the other works this would be the finishing touch.

That's when it all went pear-shaped. The grate was duly delivered and put into position. The fire was enthusiastically set: bottom layer of paper, then cardboard, then a mass of kindling, then coal topped with logs. With much excitement a lighted match touched paper, which set off the cardboard and soon the kindling began to crackle. As bright orange flames sprung up the coal began to smoke furiously (it was probably wet).

Problem was none of it went up the bleedin chimney, instead it chose to flood into the bar. Thick, choking smoke. Within seconds you couldn't see your own hands. The fire alarm burst into life, howling down the valley. As we rushed to open the windows and doors people came running from nearby houses. By now the fire was well and truly ablaze and there was nothing we could do until it died down a little. Luckily it was still morning so there were no customers and the guests had gone off to do their thing. It was a disaster, this shouldn't have happened. We tried again later but the same thing happened, although we made a smaller more manageable fire so we didn't get the choking smoke. However it still made your eyes water and was too uncomfortable to bear. We were terribly disappointed after such anticipation.

The problem was there was just no draw of air up the chimney. It was the talk of the valley for a few days with many people coming in offering their advice. Somebody said it was caused by a 'cold air plug' in the flue. Apparently this sometimes happens when a chimney hasn't been used in a while. So we tried warming the chimney by burning a bunch of candles for a few days. It didn't work! Then somebody suggested raising the grate, so it was put on bricks. This didn't work either. 'The problem is the area of the fireplace compared to the diameter of the flue' said farmer Tom who proceeded to sketch a diagram on a beer mat. 'You need to close up the face of the fireplace a little'. So we added a smokehood. Needless to say this didn't work either, and we still got more smoke in the bar than up the chimney. It looked as though we weren't going to have our much wanted 'open log fire' after all, and which was also central to our advertising theme. No authentic country pub should be without one.

This was confirmed to us by a previous landlord who popped in for a drink and told us that he had encountered the same problem and was why he had installed the wood burner in the first place. We should have talked to him first before embarking on such an expensive operation. When it comes to fires it's amazing how many experts we had around us. All men, naturally! Sarah & I, two women, were really out of depth. It really looked like failure. We tried everything but to no avail. Customers would come in, look at the fireless fireplace, and then leave feeling somewhat cheated. A country pub without a real fire, huh!

On the verge of defeat, we decided to seek the advice of the only woman chimney-sweep in the country. Exmoor Chimney Sweeps (whose logo, interestingly, is a black witch on a broomstick) is a family affair where Dad is passing on the tricks of trade to his daughter. Anyway, she came out to the pub, got on her hands and knees and actually peered up the chimney announcing that she knew what the problem was. Apparently the flue didn't run up the centre of the breast instead it veered off to the left,

meaning that the smoke would bounce' back down and into the room taking the easiest route out. She moved the grate over to the left hand side of the fireplace so it was situated directly under the mouth of the flue entrance.

Fire was lit, and magic, success!!

So now we have the only lopsided fireplace on Exmoor!

Yes it does look odd but we dont care, we love our new open log fire!

Sarah & Cathryn

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