

Continuing our occasional Q & A series about Dolton & Dowland's businesses – this month we bring you an insight into

Church Street Stores

Dolton's amazing convenience store



Our absolutely vital local store owned and run by Richard Hughes.

Q. Richard, when did you acquire the shop, what did you do before, why Dolton?

A. I came to Dolton in April 2007, exactly 12 years to the day of this interview! Taking on a village store was a big step, having previously been a Branch Manager for builders' merchant Travis Perkins in Petersfield, Hampshire. I was seeking to escape the 'rat race' of the London commuter belt for a better quality of life in rural Devon, even though taking on the shop was a challenge and a steep learning curve. It has taken time and hard work, but I hope everyone thinks we've done a good job.

Q. What was the shop like when you first took it over?

A. Under the previous owners it had already become a little 'tired' and in need of a boost. Many people will remember the shop as it was in 2007, with the old bakery counter where the freezers are now – it was all very dated and in need of modernisation, which hopefully we have largely succeeded in doing!

Q. It's called a Premier Store, but you own it. How does that work?

A. The shop is owned by me and is completely independent – it is called Church Street Stores, with the "Premier" fascia simply being the buying and marketing club, a scheme to pool together many local stores all over the country to get a better deal when buying from manufacturers. This results in lower prices, better products and more choice for our customers. Premier, Londis, Budgens and Family Shopper are all part of the Booker Group, which in turn is owned by Tesco, hence the great buying power.

Q. You're "Open All Hours" and thus need lots of staff. Does it work well?

A. We try to make sure we're open when the village needs us, meaning every day except Christmas Day! Obviously this is a lot of hours, not just serving customers at the till or Post Office, but also restocking shelves, cleaning, ordering, and all the paperwork. We have 8 staff including myself, all recruited locally and doing a fantastic job, meaning our services are reliable, available when people need them and the staff get to know our customers.

Q. Is your son Adam still involved, or is he developing his own career now?

A. Adam is mostly retired from the shop, but still helps in the background. He lives and works in central London as an analyst for the Bank of England, having completed his degree in Natural Sciences. He's still on call for emergencies though, and he keeps an eye on what's going on from afar! You'll see him around helping when he visits.

Q. You obviously serve Dolton well, but where are your other markets?

A. Most of our customers are from Dolton, Dowland, Beaford, Roborough, Merton and Ashreigny and it is these that are most important to us. During the holiday season we also see many visitors to the village, including those visiting local camping & caravan sites, holiday rentals, B&Bs, pubs, hotels, etc.

Q. Do you try to source from local suppliers?

A. Many of our products are locally sourced – milk, bread, eggs, fresh meat, cider, apple juice, and most of our fruit and veg (though this can vary by season) all come from within Devon. We try to use local suppliers as much as possible – even our very popular range of herbs and spices come from all over the world but are imported and packed by a Devon firm. This gives us a good balance of local quality and wide choice.

Q. What are your main additional services?

A. We try to make Church Street Stores a “one-stop-shop” for the area, with as many extra services as possible. We run the Post Office, including a satellite branch in Beaford Village Hall on a Tuesday and Friday, as well as services like electricity top-up, National Lottery, cash dispenser and off-licence. Some of our customers either don’t have time or are no longer able to get to the shop, so we offer a home delivery service. Newcomers are often surprised at the wide range of products available, often at good competitive prices.

Q. *You also sell tickets for village events and act as a collection point for the Diary?*

A. All part of our “one-stop-shop” ethos. The shop is one of the main focus points of the village, with an important social aspect – we like people to come in regularly and feel that the shop is part of the community. We are happy to be involved and help.

Q. *Has last year’s refurbishment been a success?*

A. In the 18 months since that week of chaos we’ve had hundreds of comments on the improvements, mostly complimentary! As always we welcome feedback as there’s always something else to be improved. This is always an ongoing challenge, whilst being conscious about keeping disruption to a minimum.

Q. *What are the main challenges and difficulties facing village stores like yours?*

A. These are many-fold, from changing shopping habits to the rise of internet shopping. Local shops are increasingly overlooked in favour of the big national and international supermarkets, who can spend millions on advertising & promotion. We need growth in villages in order to sustain viable local facilities and shops; we need customers to come and enjoy the experience of a local shop; save the cost of always driving to a supermarket, keep your custom local, save the planet!