



↑ Owner Gemma Cook

Women Running Micropubs

“Women know as much about beer as men. The female presence is prominent here and because we have a woman behind the bar there’s no stigma towards women. We want women to feel welcome. As a result we have a lot of females who come in on their own”

Amanda Johnson, The Old Grocer’s

Still an extremely low percentage but slowly but surely more women are starting to run their own micropub. **Emma Eversham** investigated the current situation with interesting feedback

The Curfew in Berwick-upon-Tweed, The Hackney Carriage in Sidcup, and The Beer EnGin in Whiston, Merseyside are located in three different parts of the UK, but they all share something in common: Each one is exclusively owned by a woman.

In the 21st Century this opening paragraph sounds ridiculous. It’s hardly news that women own and run businesses, is it?

Yet perhaps we do need to highlight that the fact that women are the driving force behind successful micropubs because each of the three female owners of the aforementioned pubs have had that status overlooked on several occasions.

“There’s a tendency for people to think that if a woman’s behind the bar they’re a barmaid, not the owner,” suggests **The Beer EnGin’s** owner Leanne Dillon.

Dillon was working in health and social care when she decided to take over ‘the little gem’ that is the Beer EnGin.

“The previous owners were looking to sell. I’d been drinking in there for the past two-and-a-half years, and it had a nice community atmosphere, so I wanted it to stay in the community and as it was,” she says.

After securing a loan, Dillon took over the pub on 9 March 2020, just two weeks before the UK went into lockdown and all hospitality venues were forced to shut.

Instead of panicking about the loss in trade so soon after launching her business, Dillon used the time to research new beers and build relationships with breweries. She also submitted a request for an off-trade licence so she could continue to sell beer to customers.

“I learnt loads about new breweries and beer that I probably wouldn’t have learnt about it properly if

I was open,” she says, putting a positive spin on the situation. Despite building her knowledge of beer and a local CAMRA award win, Dillon has found herself being ‘mansplained’ to on social media several times.

She also recalls occasions when passers-by would address a male staff member she’d hired temporarily to help in the cellar: “They would say ‘are you open, mate?’ and look at him, not me.”

The ‘constant battle’ to reassert her ownership of **The Curfew** in Berwick-upon-Tweed became an ‘irritant’ to Gemma Cook and is part of the reason why she took ‘a bit of a step back’ from running the business when her son was born four years ago.

While it was Gemma and husband David’s mutual love of real ale and craft beer which led to the eventual creation of The Curfew in 2014, it is Gemma’s name above the door.

“My husband is an employee, I’m the owner, although we run it together,” she explains. “But everyone assumed it was my husband’s pub and that I was working for him.” →



↑ Leanne Dillon (r) receiving her CAMRA award



↑ Liz Twort running The Hackney Carriage in her own style!!

Women Running Micropubs

↓ Owner Amanda Johnson with partner David at The Old Grocer's



“They are all about women in beer and challenging the sexism. We’re lucky around here to have a core of women standing up and shouting about the value women bring to the industry”

Leanne Dillon, The Beer EnGin

Liz Twort, owner of **The Hackney Carriage**, has suffered a similar fate. Her husband’s only claim to her micropub is that his profession as a black cab driver provided inspiration for its name.

“Sometimes my husband pops in to help me out,” she says. “People ask to speak to the manager, I say ‘yes what can I help you with?’ they look at my husband and say ‘oh, the owner.’ I tell them my husband’s a black cab driver and that I own the business, and they go ‘oh.’”

While the lack of awareness from some customers is frustrating for the women who are running micropubs, the assumption that a man owns the premises is not entirely misplaced. Only 4 per cent of micropubs are currently owned by women, according to Micropub’s database.

Amanda Johnson, who owns **The Old Grocer’s** in Pontefract with her partner David, sees no reason why that figure can’t grow, however, having noted how the female-friendly space she set out to create is attracting an increasing number of female drinkers since opening in 2019.

A member of staff hired to help David at The Old Grocers while Amanda juggles a full-time job as the manager of a carpet shop with book-keeping duties, is female and has been actively encouraged to research and taste all the beers. There are also on-going collaborations with the female-led Tarn51 Brewing Company.

“Women know as much about beer as men,” asserts Johnson. “The female presence is prominent here and because we have a woman behind the bar there’s no stigma towards women. We want women to feel welcome. As a result we have a lot of females who come in on their own.”

While Cook has taken a step back to look after her son in recent years, she too set out to create a space that would appeal to women drinkers at The Curfew.

“One of the things I was really conscious of was making the pub itself accessible to women because we are creating an environment that is beer led but a lot of women are still not comfortable drinking beer. I focused on the furnishings, but also got in some wines and things like cherry beer as an introduction. I wanted women to feel comfortable in there and thought ‘if I was on a night out with the girls what would I want?’”

Wider initiatives to encourage more women to enjoy beer, such as the Ladies That Beer movement in Liverpool, push this further, believes Dillon of The Beer EnGin and can only help to change perceptions.

“They are all about women in beer and challenging the sexism. We’re lucky around here to have a core of women standing up and shouting about the value women bring to the industry.”

Johnson agrees. She believes this growing interest will snowball to redress the balance between male and female-owned micropubs in the not-too-distant future.

“People like Lucy Do (of the Dodo Micropub in Hanwell) have set the bar high and proven women can do this,” she says. “I think moving forward it will be female dominated industry in small micropubs, so if this is something you’re interested in as a woman, I encourage you to go great guns!” →



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Women Running Micropubs

Micropubs run by Women

The Drummer's Arms, Blackburn
Mother and daughter Hilary and Lark Carr had often talked about one day working together if the chance arose and in July 2019 it did when the owners of The Drummer's Arm's, a 30-seat micropub in the centre of Blackburn, asked Hilary if she and Lark would like to take it off their hands.

Hilary already knew the pub, having worked behind its bar since it opened in 2016 and Lark had hospitality experience, so it felt like the perfect opportunity to realise their dream.

"Of course, we loved the idea more than anything," says Lark. "We were also very honoured that they had asked us. I can't imagine it ever being easy to hand something like that over, so it meant the world that they trusted us to carry it on."

Honouring the hard work of the previous owners, who had transformed the building from a community creative workshop into a mecca for real ale, was important to the Carrs, who have poured 'heart and soul' into the business.

Pub memorabilia – including original pub signs from around Blackburn – adorns the space to retain the feel of a traditional pub and its main speciality remains an 'ever changing range of locally-brewed real ales' from breweries such as Three Bs, situated on the outskirts of the town. Five real ales are always on and mainly include a stout/porter, a mild, a ruby or red ale, a traditional bitter and a light ale.

"We also sell as many other drinks as we can fit behind our very small bar," laughs Lark, listing cider, wine, spirits, soft and hot drinks among those on offer.

"We do sell a lot of these drinks, especially on special occasions or if something is happening in the town, however the real ale is by far our biggest seller."

Stocking quality drinks is inevitably a core aim for the pair, but they also felt it important to create an inclusive space.

"We pride ourselves on creating a friendly welcoming atmosphere for our customers from all walks of life. Because of this, we have a solid



↑ Lark (l) and Hilary Carr, The Drummer's Arms

“We pride ourselves on creating a friendly welcoming atmosphere for our customers from all walks of life. Because of this, we have a solid base of regular customers, many of whom we have grown to know very well over the years”

Hilary Carr, The Drummer's Arm's

base of regular customers, many of whom we have grown to know very well over the years," Lark continues.

"We have also been told that many of our female customers feel safe and comfortable enough to visit the pub alone, which means the absolute world to us. We both love seeing people enjoying themselves and it's great to be a part of that and be the cause of it"

Despite their success in running The Drummer's Arms, both mother and daughter have encountered sexism and gender-linked prejudice over the last few years, although it is 'thankfully not too frequent' says Lark.

"Often it is apparent that the prejudice derives from a more old-fashioned view of pubs, however whatever the situation we make sure we stand our ground with confidence to show that pubs are always great no matter who is running them."

The Hackney Carriage, Sidcup
Former estate agent Liz Twort had no idea what a micropub was on the night in 2014 that she'd arranged to meet her friend for a drink at One Inn the Wood in Petts Wood, south east London.

Thinking she was heading into a wine bar to wait for her friend who was running late, Twort was 'a bit shocked' when the friendly owner approached her and explained the concept to her.

"He said you could share tables and talk to each other," she recalls, laughing now at her reaction. Twort's views changed rapidly over the course of the evening and having been keen to change careers for a while, she declared to her husband Mark – a black cab driver – on returning home that she was going to open a micropub.

Mark was less than impressed with his wife's sudden new career direction, but nevertheless did give the support required to set the business up over the next two-and-a-half years.

After gaining experience in other micropubs to check she could hack working evenings and weekends, and researching locations, Twort found the 'perfect pitch' in 2016, a small site on a parade of shops close to Sidcup train station where she could capture commuters on their way home.

The site, which seats a 'comfortable 40' with standing for up to 80 was opened using funds the couple had saved, and is named after Mark's choice of livelihood, but it is Liz who is the named owner and who has driven its success.

Five cask and four key kegs from local breweries like Westerham are served at The Hackney Carriage which has also collaborated with Beerblefish Brewing Co in Walthamstow to create its own house beer – a 4% ABV bitter called Hackney TNT (pump clip pictured above).

The beer's intriguing name has been led by Twort's playful nature and is a tongue-in-cheek response to the sexist behaviour (snapping of fingers and an assumption her husband is the owner for example) she and female staff have unfortunately encountered over the years.

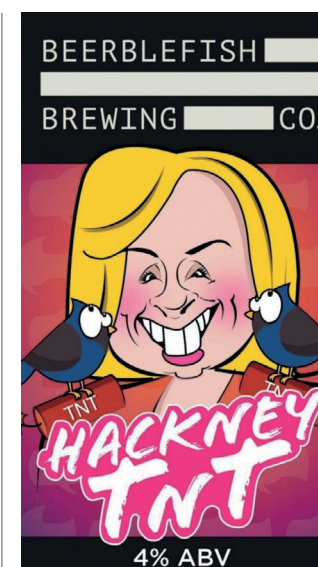
"If anyone gets upset, I just say to the girls 'tits and teeth'" she says, as a way of encouraging them to shrug off the comments and show they aren't bothered.

The pump clip features a cartoon image of Twort – a blonde with a big smile – with a stick of dynamite

on each shoulder and a blue tit perched on the dynamite. "I wanted a picture of big teeth and a large chest, but we couldn't do that," she laughs.

Sexist attitudes have driven rather than deterred Twort and she plans to continue greeting guests new and old with her dazzling smile.

"I consider myself really lucky. I've met lovely people. I've united people and get invited to all the barbecues now. It's great." →



↑ Seating at The Hackney Carriage

Women Running Micropubs



“If anyone gets upset, I just say to the girls ‘tits and teeth’, as a way of encouraging them to shrug off the comments and show they aren’t bothered”

Liz Twort, The Hackney Carriage



Wise women: Five top tips for starting a micropub

Leanne Dillon, The Beer EnGin, Whiston: “Get business support and advice”

“I did book-keeping, social media, and business planning courses with The Women’s Organisation in Liverpool. The courses were free, and they also helped with my loan application and business plan. They are tailored for women in business and gave me valuable support and advice. I’d recommend seeking out an organisation in your area that can do the same as ultimately you’re running a business.”

Lark Carr, The Drummer’s Arms, Blackburn: “Ask as many questions as you need to.”

“Most people will want to help and for your place to succeed, so don’t be afraid to ask questions. As women running a micropub, we would always do our best to help others trying to run one too and would try to answer any questions we could. It really is the best experience!”

Liz Twort, The Hackney Carriage, Sidcup: “Believe in yourself and your product”

“If you’ve got a strong product and believe in it then the rest is natural and easy. It’s hard work but passion drives you.”

Gemma Cook, The Curfew, Berwick-upon-Tweed: “Make it accessible to women.”

“When I set out The Curfew, I wanted women to feel comfortable in there so focused on the soft furnishings and soft lighting and ensured we stocked drinks everyone would like. I thought ‘if I was on a night out with the girls what would I want?’”

Amanda Johnson, The Old Grocer’s, Pontefract: “Think about the location”

“It was really important to me to find the right location for our micropub. I wanted to be in my town where I knew people and I knew there would be good footfall. Before you go for it, ask ‘Will you fit in? Will it work there?’ Consider the environment around you.”

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