



## BY THE END OF THIS YEAR, 2,500 POST OFFICES ARE SET TO CLOSE THEIR SHUTTERS FOR GOOD. CHARLOTTE COX LOOKS AT THE FUTURE FOR COUNTRYSIDE POST OFFICES, AND MEETS RURAL COMMUNITIES COMING TOGETHER TO FACE THE CHANGES

It's a busy morning at Rippingale Village Post Office and Stores. A buzz fills the shop as customers call 'good morning' and pause to chat. The door swings open as people come and go with their parcels, pension books and grocery bags. But, under the Post Office closure plans, by now Rippingale Post Office's door should have closed for good.

Rippingale, Lincolnshire, is one of the 2,500 post offices due to close around the country by 2009. The Network Change programme, which began in October 2007, aims to make the Post Office's finances more stable, following losses of £220 million in 2006-07. Many of the Post Office's

7,754 rural branches will be affected, Rippingale among them.

Scheduled to close in January this year, for now the small village still has its post office thanks to the campaigning of local residents.

Sub postmaster Simon Deane says that the survival of country post offices is vital to the survival of village life. 'Rippingale is a traditional village, and the post office and shop is its heart,' he says. 'If we closed it would force people to travel to towns or use direct debit, so you'd never see your neighbours. It would become a ghost village.'

At the moment, Rippingale is anything but. The post office door continues to clatter open to customers

who come for all kinds of reasons. Stef Clarke greets Simon by name as he makes his daily visit in to withdraw cash. The Clarkes are a young couple without private transport, who rely on the village post office to access money, pick up benefits and pay bills. If it were to close, they would have to catch the bus to the neighbouring town.

Then there's Rose Doncaster, a Rippingale resident in her 80s who arrives on her mobility scooter. She uses the post office for financial services such as paying bills, and worries how she'll access branches in neighbouring villages if the Post Office closed. 'It's a job for me to get anywhere,' she says. 'I wouldn't be able to get on a bus with





**OPTIONS:** An outreach service could be the only alternative for villages that have lost their post office

## Community campaigning

Back at Rippingale, the village community has been fighting the proposed closure of their post office since it was announced in October 2007. Not only is the post office attached to the only village shop, but its closure would also leave locals a 3.2-mile walk from the nearest branch, along a country road with no pavement. The nearest post office to be reached by bus is five miles away, and timetables mean that it would take a three-hour round trip.

The campaign has been a long process, and the fate of Rippingale Post Office still hangs in the balance. The fact that it is still open is due to the efforts of the Friends of Rippingale Post Office, showing that local action can make a difference. But only, says campaigner Jim Latham, when local action is ruled by the head rather than the heart.

'You have to tackle it on a business level, you can't be emotional, as the Post Office is making business decisions,' he says. 'I've shouted at local protests with their placards on TV. That won't work: local feelings have to be channelled effectively and factually instead.'

Rippingale residents wasted no time channelling their feelings effectively. On the day of the closure announcement, an action group began researching the amount of customers using the post office and transactions taking place, and gathering as much financial information as they could access. Next, they compared the village against the closure criteria, looking at demographics, the local economy and public transport.

Armed with information, the group

put together a business dossier as a response to the consultation period.

'It showed we meant business, and the dossier caused the consultation process to begin all over again,' says Jim. 'Then we made as much noise as possible.'

The Friends of Rippingale Post Office have had high level meetings with MP Quentin Davies, opposition candidate Nick Boles, and head of Post Office Ltd's Network Change programme, Sue Huggins. They've also put together countless letters, press releases and petitions, and even organised a march along the 3.2-mile journey to their nearest post office.

It's been a hard fight, and not one that all communities can easily take on, says Jim. To help those that want to, Rippingale's campaigners have created a national action group, Communities Against Post Office Closures (CAPOC). The group provides a step-by-step guide to campaigning, and so far has 41 member communities.

'The aim is to provide advice so local feelings can be heard on a national level,' says Jim. 'We want all communities to do their research, then if they feel that they want to take action, to do so in the right way.'

Someone who agrees is Richard Green, from the Hampshire village of Goodworth Clatford. The village post office there was scheduled to close in October 2007, but members of the Save Our Clatford's Post Office campaign (SOCPO) had different ideas.

'We used our business skills to look at the figures, and highlight areas that weren't taken into account,' says Richard. 'We showed that 40 per cent of the population here is elderly or disabled, and that the bus service to the

nearest town stopped a half-mile walk from the post office. We presented all this in an unemotional, logical briefing.'

The campaign was a success, and in January 2008 it was announced that Goodworth Clatford's post office would remain open. 'It was great that we managed to save such a vital service in the village,' says Richard. 'But we're very aware that people now need to use it – or they might well lose it.'

## Offering outreach

For many more rural communities, losing their post office will become a reality. What then for these villages? According to the CRC's Malcolm Craig, the news is not all bad.

'If a community finds itself without a post office, there are alternatives,' he says. 'Outreach services are the next best thing. While they don't make up for the loss of a full branch, they are certainly better than nothing and need to be looked at positively.'

There is funding in place to provide around 500 outreach services to communities where post offices have closed. They are most commonly mobile services, where the post office travels around a number of communities by van, or 'hosted' or 'partner' services, where a sub-postmaster uses host premises, such as a shop, petrol station, village hall or church.

The Post Office Rural Pilot Activity Report, 2006, says that outreach services are not only 'better than nothing', but that customer satisfaction levels are as high as 67 per cent. But what is life really like for communities that have already had their last post?

There has been a mobile post office in the Upper Eden Valley and Carlisle

## The people's post

As rural post offices close, many communities are taking matters into their own hands. Community ownership is an increasingly popular option for villages that find themselves without a post office or shop, with locals deciding that if they want to have the service, they can provide it for themselves.

Sally Orrell, of Nenthead, Cumbria, came to that conclusion when the village's shop and post office was going to close in March 2007. 'A group of us saw community ownership as the only way to save it,' she says.

A committee of five residents called a public meeting, sought funding to carry out a feasibility study, and held community workshops. Shares in the shop were sold in the village for £10 each, raising £8,000 – quite an achievement in a village of just 400 people.

With assistance from ViRSA (Village Retail Services Association), the group raised grants and loans, and secured premises in the Nenthead Over-60s Club building. Now the community runs its own thriving shop with groceries and crafts, and has a sub-postmaster providing post office services 17 hours a week.



As the community only hosts the post office, none of its revenues go towards the shop. 'It takes a lot of space and means extra work and costs,' says Sally. 'But we want to keep it because Nenthead is very isolated so we see it as an essential service.'

ViRSA shares Sally's concern over the sustainability of community-run post offices, of which there are around 100 in England. 'Community ownership is a model that benefits the wider countryside, but it should not be a substitute for the adequate provision of services by the government,' says Gill Withers, ViRSA manager. 'But it is positive that communities are helping themselves.'

### SUCCESS: Nenthead Community Shop is popular with villagers

Another such community is that of Exbourne, in Devon. After their post office closed in 2001, they were the first village in the West Country to have an outreach service provided by a visiting sub-postmaster. Each Monday morning, services were set up in the cramped kitchen of the village hall. For villager Sally Hordern, it wasn't enough.

'There was no place for people to meet,' she recalls. 'We got thinking that we could make a business around the post office hours giving people a place to sit and have a coffee.'

The 'little business' was so popular that it soon grew. The local volunteers began selling local produce as well as coffees, and the range soon included farm products, cheeses, jams, vegetables and fresh bread. The Exbourne Shop and Post Office expanded to take over the village hall itself, and doubled its opening hours to every Monday and Friday. The shop also has a weekly visit from the borough council for outreach advisory services.



### SERVICE: Mavis Barclay, the sub-postmaster at Whitwell

areas of Cumbria since 1996.

Travelling 500 miles a week, a large green van pulls up at 35 remote communities, bringing with it post office services including pensions, cash withdrawals and banking. Some residents describe the van as a 'lifeline', but for others its visits are too few and far between. While some locations enjoy up to a

half-day slot, others can be limited to as little as 20 minutes.

'Outreach is a realistic way forward, but the concern is that the mobile's short opening hours means it is not a significant service,' says David Stephens, rural programme manager for Cumbria County Council.

The introduction of the mobile has led to a 25 per cent fall in numbers using post office services in the district, but on the whole locals are relieved to have the mobile rather than no post office at all.

'Communities are making the best of the situation,' says David. 'But they would prefer outreach hosted in a building with other services. This way village life is maintained, giving people social interaction on a regular basis.'

## Special deliveries

Villagers in the small Isle of Wight community of Whitwell felt much the same way. When their post office and shop closed in 2006, it was the last in a

long line of services to be lost, leaving locals with no place to meet and chat.

'It seemed we had lost everything, there was no centre for day-to-day contact,' says Rev Sandra Lloyd, the parish vicar. 'Every community should be viable when it comes to services and when it comes to knowing your neighbours. I realised that we could, and we should, try something different.'

That 'something different' was to host an outreach post office service in the Whitwell's church, St Mary and St Rhadegund. Outreach post offices are opening around the country in premises such as pubs, village halls or petrol stations. But for Rev Lloyd, it seemed a natural use for a church that was at the heart of the community.

While the parishioners fully supported the idea, it was medieval church building that posed a problem. Having little room and no facilities, the only suitable area was the six-by-eight foot space of the belltower that would come to host the tiny post office. 'We call it the Whitwell Post Office-by-the-Font,' laughs Rev Lloyd.

Now every Monday and Friday morning tables are placed over pews to make room for the post office computer system and scales, bought over by the sub-postmaster Mavis Barclay, from the neighbouring village of Niton. Among the church's bellropes locals now post parcels, pay bills, or withdraw money.

Rev Lloyd was inspired to take the

idea even further. 'For those two days a week, we wanted the church to be somewhere to come together, even if people aren't regular church-goers,' she explains. The church now sells coffee and cakes during post office hours, and on Mondays stalls sell locally-made handicrafts, plants, baked goods and preserves, and offer a dry cleaning service.

'It's been brilliant for the community,' says Rev Lloyd proudly. 'People are aware that if they want the service they'd have to support it, so its very well used.'

For Whitwell, outreach has been a success, thanks to the support of the local community. It is also community support that made the difference in saving the Goodworth Clatford Post Office, and that inspires the continuing campaign to save Rippingale Post Office. Whether Rippingale will have the success of Whitwell or Goodworth Clatford remains to be seen. But what is for certain is that communities like them see their post office as worth fighting for, in whatever forms it may be available in the future.

'There are serious question marks over the future of the Post Office,' says Rippingale's Jim Latham. 'But it is more than just a business, it's an essential service, and so the issue has really bought the community together. And its when communities work together that it is sometimes possible to make a difference.'