

Yes, it really is a lovely life with all that beer



Three Cranes landlord Roy Salter checks the first pint for clarity.



Roy taps a barrel in the cellar.

MOST of us at some time have idly thought we would like to run a pub — all that lovely beer, all that friendly chatter across the bar. In the third of this occasional series about other people's jobs, DOUG BOWKER investigates a day in the life of a publican.

ROY SALTER was one of "most of us," doing a number of jobs but always hankering to get behind the bar. The difference — he's realised it.

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Paradise is pub shaped

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Meanwhile, the Army had given him a liking for a pint, he ran a friend's pub when he was away, and found himself noting the good and bad about the various pubs he visited.

"I vowed if ever I ran one I'd know what to do."

But there was a major stumbling block — his wife Madeleine. She was running a very successful family motor

brewery. He still got the job and the attractive Three Cranes taken from the crest of the Higgins family who were responsible for the development of this lovely Bedfordshire village.

I fear an early start but Roy suggests 9 am. He's a "night bird", prefers to clear up each day at the tail-end rather than early the following morning, even if it usually takes him past midnight.

Even so, the takings are ready for Madeleine to take to the bank. Roy's

of steak, trout or today's special — steak and kidney pie.

"If you don't do food you're dead," says Roy.

Assisting Madeleine is 22-year-old Chrissie Panter who has succeeded her mother who had 30 years at the Cranes. Happily she looks in at that moment and fascinates me with a description of the kitchen of her day — scrubbed table, flagstone floor, wooden mangle, eels from the river, and her speciality — black pudding.

It doesn't materialise. The Cranes is off the main road, relies on regulars rather than passing trade. Roy likes this, doesn't favour the occasional pint and pie man, builds up relationships, real customers.

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"It just looked a good job, one where I could make a lot of money. But after a month in the trade I lay in bed, aching from head to toe, thinking I've made the biggest mistake in my life."

That was seven years ago. He's still in the business, now running the Three Cranes at Turvey, and outwardly very happy. But probably still aching from head to toe.

A north Londoner from Tottenham, Roy left school fancying himself as an accountant. After all he was a bit more academic than his three brothers.

In fact, he became a fitter with an engineering firm, then had three years in the Army. Back in civvy life he

became a draughtsman until the firm was taken over. Then he became increasingly unhappy and frustrated.

Meanwhile, the Army had given him a liking for a pint, he ran a friend's pub when he was away, and found himself noting the good and bad about the various pubs he visited.

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But there was a major stumbling block — his wife Madeleine. She was running a very successful family motor business with her brother. Couldn't see herself pulling pints of beer rather than petrol. But Roy's misery increased so she agreed to take the plunge.

They found themselves running a pub in Colchester. Not quite Roy's idea of the country inn with the sunlight filtering through the latticed windows. Thus those early doubts already mentioned. But also a determination to find somewhere else.

So, four years ago, he found himself driving to St Neots and Paine and Company. He favoured real ale but admits he'd never heard of this

brewery. He still got the job and the attractive Three Cranes taken from the crest of the Higgins family who were responsible for the development of this lovely Bedfordshire village.

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Even so, the takings are ready for Madeleine to take to the bank, Roy's restocking the shelves (15 minutes), clearing the empties (10 minutes) next the cellar (half an hour).

Perhaps I can help?

The commonest customer complaint about a bad pint of real ale (or cask conditioned ale as Roy properly defines it) is that the landlord hasn't cleaned his pipes properly. Roy concurs.

"Do you like shaving every morning?" he asks. "It's much the same sort of chore, easy to put off to the next day, and the next."

As Roy taps a barrel he explains that air is the enemy of beer; his real ale is already starting to deteriorate. A barrel must be shifted quickly, that's why he keeps the small firkin (nine gallons) for weekday trade, the 18 gallon for the busier weekend.

While he looks after the barrel end, I go to the bar and pull my first pint — of cleaning fluid, not beer. A wait of five minutes, another pull to dispel those horrid 'furry' bits, then clean water.

Meanwhile, the other half of the partnership is back from the bank and garnishing the bar with dahlias from her acre of garden. Madeleine loves the pub life now. "Marvellous," she says, "sharing in a business with your husband, meeting people."

I get a cup of "the best coffee in Bedfordshire" and she goes off to supervise the food. Those early-day sandwiches have given way to a menu

of steak, trout or today's special — steak and kidney pie.

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She acknowledges some of today's gadgetry as good but not all, and throws in a marvellous saying, "If you can't scrub or boil it don't buy it." There's an article in itself!

Another Christine had polished and burnished if not flagstone floors, everything else in the Cranes, it's 11 am, the doors are open — for business.

Not much, alas. A fellow publican from Lavendon who samples the Medoc — Roy provides basic rather than connoisseur wines — and, would you believe, a young Frenchman, Jerome Burtin, over here working with GEC.

No, Roy does not favour the open-all-day Continental hours. Doesn't think they'll catch on here. Perhaps flexi-hours.

Eleven to 2.30, 6 to 11, seven days a week, 365 days a year, it all starts to seem long enough to me as Madeleine assumes the bar position and Roy goes off to shower away the grime of his morning's work.

Roy insists on an immaculate pub and immaculate staff. Madeleine is dressed to the nines at nine in the morning and evening, favouring long skirts or dresses.

"I can wear comfortable shoes underneath." Roy always sports a tie and any staff coming before customers have to be similarly tidy.

Roy is edgy. The staff and food are there — have to be paid for — in anticipation of a full lunch-hour trade.

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From 2.30 to 6 sounds a generous break from business. But is it? There's several dozen glasses to wash, ashtrays to empty, their own lunch to have and, because food goes on in the evening, more preparation.

Roy and Madeleine try to have a day off a week but — different days! They go out one night together. They grabbed four days away in April, may take four more in October.

Of course Roy could take on a relief manager, but you sense he's jealous of the way he runs his pub, fears someone else would miss out on the small details.

Like different glasses for different drinks so you don't wonder which is your glass, a phone link and bell push to the kitchen which brings staff scurrying if custom is stretching Roy's lightning service.

And to Madeleine, of course, the Cranes is home — "Bigger than most and subject to wear and tear from people. I like to keep it nice."

Six o'clock rolls round quickly enough, still quiet — the odd homing villager wanting a quick pint. Roy's bored, poised for action but inactive.

"People are probably drinking less, coming out that bit later. The recession doesn't help."

The clock ticks on, seven, half past. What Roy calls "crunch time". They'll come now or not at all. All that staff waiting, those lovely steak and kidney pies.

They do come. Youngsters in the games room (darts, bar billiards), couples who mix easily, know each other. "Evening Roy, evening Charlie". Roy knows hundreds of Christian names, is not sure of some surnames." A friendly, very intimate pub.

Drinks, food, talk — everything hots up. But never panic. The man wedded to detail copes, Madeleine finds time to circulate and charm the customers to return again and again.

A couple who felt they would like a change tell me they went to another pub, were uneasy with the atmosphere and menu, and fled back to Roy and Madeleine.

Not all the customers are local. One or two wonder if they could be put up for the night. A room to prepare, breakfast in the morning.

At last a bell signals 'Time'. Instant bed for us, chance of a lay-in tomorrow as its Saturday. For Roy and Madeleine their busiest day; stamina, fitness, are no small part of a publican's stock-in-trade.

"The job has its compensations," says Roy as I go off tired having done 'nothing'. I wonder what on earth they are!

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Roy taps a barrel in the cellar.



Salter (left), Nicola Savage and Christine Panter hard at work in the kitchen.