

Owner happy to discuss the future of village pub

BY LEWIS CLARKE

The owner of a closed pub has said he is bemused none of the “rather wealthy locals” came forward to buy it.

Last week, the **Journal** reported on a campaign in Prieford to save village pub the Ring O’ Bells.

Malcolm Higdon, leader of the group, expressed fears that the owner, Philip Milton, was eyeing the land for development.

Mr Milton, who bought the property in August 2015, contacted the **Journal** to say he had no immediate plans to sell or develop the site and would welcome dialogue with the community.

Mr Milton said Mr Higdon’s comments about the history of the building last week were misleading. He added: “The property was listed as an Asset of Community Value in 2013. The community succeeded in securing the full support of the Fullbrook Community

Interest Company to buy the property and rent it to the community, rent-free for one year, £7,500 for the second year and £15,000 for the third and subsequent years but for the community to be able to buy it at the initial price at any time.

“All the community had to do was to find the difference required, which we understood was £150,000, to fund the refurbishment and equipping and to cover initial working capital and that this sum was actually pledged.

“The scheme seemed good and the organisers were making the necessary noises about the very generous tax schemes for the community to invest. It could have happened but the risks were high and still are.

“After countless false starts, the community decided the risks were too high, that the project was unviable and it died a death.

“We remain bemused that with many rather wealthy locals in the community and indeed the community group as was and with City business connections that not one of them chose to buy the property themselves.”

Mr Milton said he bought the property in August 2015 but “since then we have not even had drawings done, so we have not considered our options”.

“For security and financial sense, we have refurbished the living quarters at some cost and let the property to two families who otherwise had nowhere else to live,” he said. “The rents cover the holding costs for the moment.

Mr Milton concluded that he would have been very happy had the community acquired the property.

“We were the only community-spirited people prepared to risk our money in buying the property,” he said. “No one else from the

community did that despite a few of them having the wherewithal.

“The site is under no more threat or opportunity than when it was for sale initially. However, its commercial viability becomes more and more challenged as the problems facing rural pubs grow.

“For the immediate moment the property is not for sale nor development, though constructive, realistic and positive support from the community might encourage a reprioritisation of other projects to achieve mutual goals.

“Contrary to the picture which Mr Higdon has tried to paint, Philip J Milton and Company plc and its related entities have excellent reputations in the local area for integrity and honesty and have been successful businesses for over three decades.

“We are always willing to engage in constructive dialogue and to put our resources to use to help achieve mutual goals.”