

THE INDEPENDENT

The next chapter

Open a few second-hand bookshops and your ghost town will come back to life. It certainly worked for Hay-on-Wye - and now a US entrepreneur is hoping it will do the same for Atherstone. Sarah Meyrick reports on a novel idea

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Turn off the A5 between Hinckley and Tamworth, and you'll find Atherstone. It's a small market town (population 8,600), somewhat scruffy and drab. It's had its moments of glory - the Romans finally defeated Queen Boudicca here in AD60, and Henry Tudor is said to have spent the night before the Battle of Bosworth at the Three Tuns in Long Street in 1485. For 300 years it had a thriving hatting industry. But since the last few factories closed in the 1990s, Atherstone has declined. Discount stores and empty shops pepper the main street. There's an air of weariness about the place.

All this, however, is about to change, as Atherstone relaunches itself as a book town. The man behind the scheme is James Hanna, the American bookseller who was responsible for a similar project in South Wales. Two years ago, Blaenavon turned itself from a depressed former mining town into a successful tourist attraction based almost entirely on old books.

The concept is simple: you take a small rural town with a distinctive history and fill it with second-hand bookshops. What's more, you also cram books into every other corner imaginable: the butcher's, the bakery, the pub. Visitors flock to the area, and the local economy thrives.

The concept was born in Hay-on-Wye, where Richard Booth, a friend of Hanna's, opened his first bookshop 40 years ago. There are now 30 or 40 bookshops in Hay. "I don't know that Richard intentionally created the first book town, but he certainly is the godfather of the idea," says Hanna.

Since then, people have adapted the Hay model elsewhere in Europe and North America. (Wigtown in Scotland is one example). Hanna got involved after he sold his bookshop in New Orleans. He meant to retire, but was bored silly. He happened to be visiting Booth in Hay when Booth was approached by some traders in Blaenavon who wanted his advice about following Hay's example. Hanna sensed an opportunity.

"The town must have been about 75 per cent boarded up. It was very difficult to see it coming back from that brink," says Hanna. Once he started talking to people, however, he became increasingly convinced of the potential. The shops might be empty, but rents were low. Blaenavon was home to the Big Pit National Mining Museum and Blaenavon Ironworks, and was about to get World Heritage Status.

Hanna and Booth worked out a package to get people started in the business: £5,000 for shop-fitting, £5,000 for stock, and £5,000 for training and support. "In February I stood up at a public meeting and said, 'Who wants a bookshop for £15,000?' and three people put their hands up. I was committed then." At this point, Booth stepped back from Blaenavon, and left Hanna to it. In the event, £15,000 wasn't enough, and Hanna spent £70,000 of his own making up the shortfall, but four months later, in June 2003, Blaenavon Booktown was launched with 10 bookshops. "About 8,000 people turned up and books flew off the shelves. It was one of the best days of my life," he says.

Blaenavon is still thriving. Cafés and B&Bs followed the bookshops, and the town has hosted two literary festivals. "In the past three months, 10 new businesses have shown up: from a poodle parlour to an accountant," says Hanna. Visitors keep coming and

property prices have soared.

John Rodger, Torfaen County Borough Council's project director for Blaenavon Booktown, is delighted. "Blaenavon was imploding with vacant buildings. The number of empty properties has now halved," he says. "We've achieved a five-year leap in the regeneration progress." Rodger is confident that the prosperity will last. "It's not a flash-in-the-pan thing. I'm very impressed by the way the booksellers have grafted to make a success of their businesses. Some are better than others, and some have fallen away, but most have put down very good roots. It's a continuing success story. What we have achieved is not necessarily down to the book town alone, but it has been a catalyst for change. Blaenavon has turned a corner."

So what is it about second-hand books that lights the touchpaper? "I think it's a treasure hunt," says Hanna. "People enjoy browsing, and they enjoy finding that special book."

Books make a reason for a day out, he says, and while they're out, visitors need other services. "Somebody will come to Atherstone and spend £10 to £20 on books. But while they're here, they're going to have lunch, some beer, and if they come from further away, they're going to need a room."

The bottom line is tourism. "Some people go to an amusement park to ride the rides, and some people will come to look at books. If you did a food town or a music town, it would probably work just as well." It's also a tourist industry that is not entirely dependent on footfall: the book-town brand leads to interest, and most booksellers end up conducting half their business over the internet.

The key to success is convincing the locals that they will benefit. Hanna admits people in Blaenavon were initially cautious. "They said things like 'Nobody here reads. Why do we want bookshops?' I literally had to go to every place in the town and win them round. And the day we opened, people

came in their droves, and said, 'Thank you so much - we've been starving for this'."

There has been some caution in Atherstone, too. Hanna is still smarting, slightly, from a recent letter in the *Atherstone Herald*, denigrating the success of Blaenavon and accusing Hanna of abandoning the town. "Ironically, it appeared just when I was spending nine days down there at the book festival. No matter what you do, there's always some opposition. But if you looked around Blaenavon, would you see a town that was failing or one that is regenerating? There are still boarded-up shops. But if you'd been there five years ago, you would see the difference. I counted the other day - 30 new businesses have opened since it became a book town."

Generally, though, he has found Atherstone people supportive. He first visited the town at the invitation of Richard Meredith, deputy mayor of North Warwickshire, who read in an article about Blaenavon that Hanna was looking for a location in central England for his next project.

Hanna was quickly persuaded of Atherstone's potential: the cities of Birmingham, Leicester and Coventry are all half-an-hour away, and there are eight universities within a 20-mile radius. The town's other attractions include the Coventry Canal and one of Britain's largest garden centres, Dobbies Garden World.

"Atherstone has a lot of empty buildings, a great market square and good architecture," says Hanna. "Sure, it needs a lick of paint, but it's not down on its heels like Blaenavon. It doesn't need regeneration so much as a new identity, now that hatting's gone, but I think it needs a catalyst."

The local authorities enthusiastically embraced the idea, and agreed to commit £35,000 of regional development agency funding to the scheme. Hanna held a series of public meetings to explain the project and generate interest. Learning from his Blaenavon experience, he worked out a new set-up package that should break even: this time, he's charging £7,000 per

module (a total of £21,000). He has promised to be around for the next 18 months to support the booksellers.

Hanna wants six bookshops open for next month's launch, and up to a dozen over the next year. Four have already signed up, and there are others in the pipeline. The first shops will all carry a mix of titles alongside their specialist areas, which so far include travel, transport, the Isle of Man and languages. He hopes children's books, natural history and photography specialists will follow.

Gwen Short, a primary-school teacher, is dipping her toes in the water with an internet-based store selling large print and special-needs books, including Braille. She saw an advert about the book-town project, and went along to one of Hanna's public meetings. "I thought, 'What a brilliant idea'," she says. "I was impressed by the fact that some of the councillors had been to Blaenavon and seen its success, and that they'd committed public money to [the scheme]. I'd like to see Atherstone become a thriving town. I think it's very exciting, and I want to be part of it."

If her business takes off, she'll expand; in the meantime the internet-only option is an ideal way to start out while still teaching full-time in Coventry. "I'm not sure how it will work out, but I'm now looking for some kind of shop space to share," she says. "Eventually, I would like to have a full-time bookshop of my own."

Geoff Cole, a hairdresser in the town for 30 years, is also taking the leap. He has always wanted his own bookshop. "Years ago, I bought the shop next door to open a bookshop, but at the time, business in the town was really poor and I had to sell it," he says.

When Hanna came in one day to have his hair cut, they got talking. Cole was hooked: he now plans to stock books on hair and beauty alongside his haircare products. "I can put some books in my reception area, and if it develops, I've got two floors upstairs I could use," he says. "Atherstone is a

good location for something like this, and I want to do everything I can to support it. If people grasp the idea and tell all their friends to come to Atherstone, we could all benefit."

Another businessman who looks likely to benefit is Dean Holgate. Only 23, he has struggled over the last year to keep his computer-repair shop in the market square going while also working full-time in IT support at a factory down the road in Nuneaton. As increasing numbers of retailers in Atherstone expand their IT systems and move towards broadband, he can now see a business opportunity for himself in the town, and has decided to base himself full-time in his shop. He's going to stock computer books, and he's also hopeful of securing a grant to open an internet café.

"We are jumping on the bandwagon," he says. "The book town is going to be good for business, because it will boost trade and it will boost tourism. It will bring new blood into the town, and that can only be good."

One major boost for the Atherstone project came when Allen Lloyd became involved. Lloyd opened his first branch of what became the Lloyds Pharmacy empire in the town; in 1997 he made a reported £32m personal profit when he sold the group. "He likes the town," says Hanna. "He has a vision for Atherstone, to make it better than when he started here."

Lloyd owns a lot of property in the town, and is doing it up in preparation for prospective tenants. He's also restoring the Old Red Lion, a Georgian coaching inn that had fallen into disrepair; there will be 28 bedrooms, a wine bar, and - of course - a bookshop.

Plenty of other businesses are also on board. A hotelier plans to sell food-and-wine titles, and the proprietor of a Chinese restaurant is talking about oriental books. Others are quietly supportive. "It's something different, and a small town like this lends itself to it. Good luck to them," says John Day, a florist. "Anything that brought the tourists in would be good," says Lois Jones in the sweetshop.

When he first read about the book-town concept, Councillor Richard Meredith confesses to "jumping up and down with excitement". A year on, he's still convinced that this will be the making of Atherstone. "Sometimes in life, things come along, and if you don't grab them with both hands then and there, they are gone," he says. "We've grabbed this one with both hands."