

Meating Place in everyone's language

Dingwall sits at the sheltered head of the Cromarty Firth and a place from which the west coast can be reached by way of easy overland routes along the river valleys. Dingwall has three independent butchers and only one supermarket. It used to have four supermarkets and now there is only one left – well technically two – but alongside the three butchers, there's room for three bakers, two greengrocers and a whole range of local shops.



It was the birthplace in 1005 of Macbeth and maybe it wasn't quite Birnam Wood moving to Dunsinane when Charlie Munro refitted his Dingwall shop but he took the most radical of steps by demolishing everything that was there. He explained:-
"The old shop had a new shop front installed in the 70's but it really needed a new roof, it needed a new front shop layout, a new back shop and a replacement shop front. That left two outside walls which wouldn't have been strong enough to support a second storey so we decided to demolish the whole building and start again.



We were able to rent a run-down former florists shop four doors down the High Street for six months. We were handed the keys on a Friday night and we stripped out and re-lined the walls, re-plumbed and re-wired it, installed a walk-in chill, moved over serve-over cabinets and we were ready for business by the Monday morning. In less than 48 hours we had created a butcher shop and fishmonger from virtually nothing, and we saw an increase in sales over our original shop!



Charlie Munro, John M Munro, Dingwall



"In the course of demolition, the contractor struck asbestos lining the pipes. And not your friendly grey asbestos this was the really horrible stuff. So stop the job until a firm of specialists were called in, the Health and Safety Executive were notified and four weeks of valuable building time were lost. But after the six month build, we had ourselves a new butchers shop, a deli counter and a fresh fish display, with new preparation area and chills, and a couple of two bedroom flats upstairs to boost the income. All built from scratch.

"Dingwall is a conservation town and so the building is all stone and slate and wet-dash on harling, with a 45 degree pitch and skew-stones, all matching the other traditional High Street shops. Construction was completed just over a year ago, and we re-opened for business on 24th March 2006. There was no great fanfare or opening party, we were so shattered by the project, we simply opened the doors and started selling. The interest was amazing. People came from far and wide to see the shop. People we hadn't seen for years – customers, suppliers, other butchers, farmers, journalists and even the odd councillor, all offering their best wishes."

There is little doubt that Charlie's confidence to invest in Dingwall town centre was boosted by the strong independents presence that gives a very traditional market town feel. There are two shopping streets, so the town is relatively compact. They have a sprinkling of national chains such as Boots, Woolworths and the usual banks and building societies. Maybe crucially Dingwall has free unrestricted parking that is hugely popular. This free parking has made a huge difference and has kept a lot of people in the town for shopping. Our butcher described how important that is given the proximity of the Highland capital:-

"We are only 15 minutes from Inverness which has all the appeal of a city albeit a small city; it has all the big names and the big stores but the Inverness shopping experience is such a trauma with horrendous parking and traffic that we do find that people prefer to shop in the small towns."



Dingwall is still the main town in Ross-shire and lots of locals support it. Cast as a possible template for other places it boasts a selection of good shops and good local businesses and plenty of them - clothes shops, gift shops cafes, restaurants and bars.

New development is not just at John M Munro's, the vacant Somerfields' supermarket has been re-developed into five new retail units. An auction mart ensures Dingwall handsomely fulfils the role of a small market town.



Even his reserved Highland style cannot hide Charlie Munro's obvious delight at the reaction to his shop replacement:-

"I think even we were surprised by how well it's done. After a year's trading we now have some realistic figures, and overall sales are up 35.1% on the old shop, which is quite satisfying. A large part of this extra business has come from former supermarket shoppers, and also from increasing customers' average spend by offering a wider product range. Many of the new faces who came to see the shop have become regular customers over the past 12 months, generally because manager Kenneth Gillanders and his staff have worked hard to make the "shopping experience" as rewarding and enjoyable as possible. Customer count is definitely up, particularly on the last three days of the week. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday are still slow but now Thursdays are busy, and Friday has overtaken Saturday as our busiest day."

The Friday trade is boosted by the fish counter that is manned by different staff. There were always two shops side by side in the High Street and fish sales were struggling, but with the new fish counter opening in the butcher shop there has been a remarkable recovery.

The shop was designed by Charlie Munro but he acknowledged a lot of help from Colin Hewitson of KRH and added:-

"We knew the area we had, we knew the range of Arneg cabinets we wanted, so we simply cut out scaled down drawings of the counters including corners and bends, and laid them out on a plan until we were satisfied shapes and laid them out on the plan till we were satisfied. We had decided on so many metres for red meat, for poultry, for deli etc., and shuffled the shapes around the paper. Although it is a double fronted shop, the shop is only about 9 metres wide, but we finally fixed on a layout which seemed to flow well and which met all our criteria. Now that it has become a reality we are delighted with the overall layout and impact of the display. With full air conditioning and a very subtle lighting scheme, our customers benefit from a superb shopping environment.



It's not a huge shop but it's big enough for a town like Dingwall. The back area houses two separate fridges for meat and fish, large enough to cope with the demands of poultry at Christmas."

When starting from scratch, shop design requires a major decision, window display or no window display, Charlie spelt out his thinking on the old chestnut:-

"We always had a window display in the old shop and we always used to sell from the window display. Effectively the window was the main display of the shop, internal cabinets were only secondary and people would have a look at the window and see something they like. Then they would come into the shop and see trays of sausages and mince and other uninspiring things inside. So we put the main display cabinets such that they can be seen from outside at an angle of 45 degrees. But when people come into the shop they can stand almost anywhere and see the contents of any of the displays from end to end.



"It works better for customers when they come into the shop. The shop itself is attractive enough from the outside and once they come in through the automatic doors, that's when the shopping really starts. If they are planning a meal we can talk them through a variety of starters and main courses, with everything on display inside the shop."

The shop is bright and attractive with a fine display of fresh meats surrounded by all sorts of goodies, predominantly with a local flavour. There are many opportunities to be enticed into picking speciality foods off the shelves and out of the chilled units. The four full-time and three part-time staff are responsible for making their own sausages and burgers daily in every shop but with four other butcher's shops, Munros do all their main manufacturing in their cutting plant adjoining their modern abattoir in Dingwall.

"We manufacture our puddings and haggis there. We also have a bakery in our Muir of Ord shop, where we produce a range of steak pies, mince rounds and sausage rolls. But the individual shops create their own displays, fresh every morning and make their own range of sausages and burgers depending on local taste, especially during the summer barbecue season when we do a much wider range. Summer in Dingwall is roughly from March till the end of October!"



A workstation in the front shop ensures that even at quite times there's always something happening in the front shop.

Despite many of their total staff of 80 not being involved in the retail side of the business, Munro's view their retail side as an essential part of what they do. It also helps the wholesaling side of the business:-



"As retail butchers we can go to any of our butcher customers throughout Scotland knowing exactly what they are facing from day to day, because we've been there too. We know how hard it is to open up a business in Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday knowing we're not making a penny profit. We know it's difficult to keep smiling six days a week.

"Secondly, we know how hard it is to achieve higher margins - in theory the more value we add, the more profitable. In the real world it doesn't always work that way.

"Thirdly, - having five retail shops allows us to offer fortnightly specials to help clear surplus stocks, for example half price brisket, fresh or pickled, and we can move tonnes of product.

"Fourthly, retailing provides very good training for young butchers in all aspects of the trade, and those who make the grade can be employed in shops, catering, wholesaling and manufacturing, depending upon where we need them most.

"There is a fifth thing. Generally, we are involved in every part of the meat trade from slaughtering , wholesaling, boning, manufacturing work, catering work, retail work – now there is always one bit of the whole trade that is doing very badly which has to be supported by all the other bits. Ten years ago retailing was in the doldrums and wholesaling kept it afloat. Now slaughtering is doing badly because of expenses and cost of by-products. So retail is resurging and keeping that afloat. The whole thing works together as one unit, the key is to keep it as a productive unit."

As you drive out of Dingwall after a couple of hours in the company of Charlie Munro you are in no doubt that you have just met a man whose business is well run, well focussed and thought out. The fertile lands of Easter Ross and the Black Isle may well provide him with the quality of raw material that makes it hard to fail but it is John M Munro that mature the meat to satisfy their customers high expectations.

Dingwall owes its place-name to Norwegian Vikings who ruled northern Scotland from about the end of the ninth century AD. In Norse, the name Dingwall means meeting place, seems they foresaw Munros were going to make it just that.