

Local heroes on the map

By Nicholas Lander

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The good fortune manifested itself most obviously in the bright April sunshine that made the four-hour motorway journey from London to Lancashire so much more bearable than it can be. The unusually warm spring weather made the open countryside on the 15-minute journey from the Lancaster exit along the Lune Valley to The Highwayman pub appear lush and verdant.

The Highwayman had just reopened for business after a three-month renovation under the new ownership of Chef Nigel Haworth and his long-time business partner, Craig Bancroft. When my hungry party arrived, several very happy customers were walking out of the pub's main door carrying as a memento of their visit the large cardboard menu that serves as Haworth's most effective form of advertising. All around them, builders were working to finish the exterior of this airy pub in the village of Burrow just south of Kirkby Lonsdale.

My good fortune continued. As Haworth was present, (his business also includes Northcote Manor, the celebrated hotel and restaurant near Langho, Blackburn, and his first pub, Three Fishes at Mitton) he was able to show me the new kitchen he has designed.

ding by the fish and chip range he has installed to ensure that he can serve this northern delicacy correctly, Haworth explained what, after more than 32 years in the kitchen, he now sees not just as his role but also his responsibility.

"What makes me so proud as a chef here in Lancashire, and I have to say sometimes even brings a tear to my eye, is working with all the local suppliers," Haworth says.

"What is so extraordinary about them is that whatever they produce, however good I think it tastes, it never seems quite good enough for them. They always want to do better. And my job is not just to encourage them to do so but make sure that all my staff know this. There is no point simply putting good ingredients on the menu."

On the back of the menu - like so many good ideas a simple one - is a map that runs from the Irish Sea to the Pennines and the Cumbrian fells to Manchester with each of the pub's 35 suppliers pinpointed alongside a description of their specialities. The Highwayman's walls are also covered with black and white photographs of them; these pictures also appear as a collage on the table mats under the banner "food with roots from our local heroes." The menu also correctly and gratefully acknowledges the European Union's and local development programmes in funding this useful and sensible accreditation - an approach that should be widely copied.

The flipside of the menu is still more appetising. There is a huge range of dishes to choose from but the focus is strongly on maximising the inherent flavours of all these local ingredients. A round dish of warm Flookburgh shrimps (from the north of Morecambe Bay) comes with blade mace butter and a toasted muffin. Potted wild boar is served with slow-cooked onions and sour- dough toast, and a small Kilner jar full of an organic chicken liver pate from chickens raised on the Lowther estate near Penrith is, naturally, accompanied by Cumberland sauce.

Local cheese on local toast with Cumbrian bacon is a triumph but not the only treat for

lovers of melted cheese. Alongside the fish and meat main courses is a distinctive cheese and onion pie made with Chris Sandham's creamy Lancashire.

This far north, sweet teeth must be catered for, with the likes of an elderflower syllabub and jelly with crushed Grasmere gingerbread and crystallised lemon peel;

Formby rhubarb; and a great rendition of the classic sticky toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce, the culinary bequest of the absurdly pretty village of Caramel just half an hour away to the west.

Cartmel's other charms in the late afternoon sunshine included a magnificent 12th century priory, possibly the most charming racecourse in the world, and a series of narrow streets that are the equal of any in Burgundy or Tuscany villages.

For the past five years Cartmel has also been home to chef Simon Rogan, who now built up an attractive restaurant, L'Enclume (French for anvil), with some very comfortable rooms attached not just to the restaurant but also in a separate house five minutes walk away.

But it was here that good fortune was to desert us because while nothing could detract from Cartmel's inherent beauty and the cooked breakfast was good, our dinner was a disappointment.

Rogan's style of cooking is experimental, in that he eschews the proven and attempts such dishes as "50 degree cod with black beans, pumpkin and sofa's aplomb with pomegranate, smoked roe and avocado" or "cold and colder foie gras with quinoa and pistachio. All these dishes may appear clever and unusual but anyone taking this rarefied approach must follow the basic principles of any chef and put themselves in the place of the customer and taste what is going out on the plate. Unfortunately our sequence of dishes seemed to lack correct seasoning and, in the case of the fish main courses we ordered, any vital acidity. That the sole described as "a la Plancha", or grilled, was served sautéed was also a bit disconcerting.

Precision, and a good understanding between the kitchen and the waiting staff, are prerequisites that were also lacking here. Our table of five was served at every course in three waves with lengthy gaps rather than all at once - presumably because the kitchen could not add all the fancy swirls and foams Rogan demands in time. And no sooner had we all finally been served, than we each had to wait another couple of minutes while the restaurant manager explained each ingredient to us. And, with a flourish that I hope never to see repeated elsewhere, he pointed to each ingredient with the little finger of his right hand hovering no more than a couple of inches above our plates.

We left hungry, our spirits somewhat restored by the walk back to our room but our stomachs aggrieved that Cartmel Village Shop, which claims to have invented sticky toffee pudding, was, sadly, closed.

MIXED BAG

The Highwayman, Burrow, Kirkby Lonsdale, Lancashire LA6 ZRJ, £25 for three courses, tel: +44 (0)1524-273 338; www.highwaymaninn.co.uk

L'Enclume, Cavendish Street, Caramel, £50 for three courses, www.lenclume.co.uk

Cartmel Village Shop, www.stickytoffeepudding.co.uk

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ROAD HOG

The Highwayman, Nether Burrow, Lancashire

Most pubs write a menu, laminate it, and then work out how to get the ingredients. The Highwayman has a more sensible plan.

Each week the chefs contact local suppliers and come up with a menu based on what's available. The pub is now part-owned by Nigel Haworth, long-time chef at the Michelin-starred Northcote Manor restaurant in nearby Langho. Haworth specialises in reviving and adding twists to traditional regional specialities and making the supplier, rather than the chef, king.

His latest venture is situated not far from the M6 near the market town of Kirkby Lonsdale, just outside Lancashire and bordering Cumbria and Yorkshire, giving Haworth plenty of regional variety to choose from. There are 35 suppliers on the menu.

A starter of chicken liver pate uses organic chicken livers from Lowther near Penrith. The livers are marinated in Kilner jars, sealed with butter and cooked in the jars, which are served at the table with slow cooked onions, Cumberland sauce and toast. Or there are warm Flookburgh shrimps from Morecambe Bay or Shorrock's Lancashire cheese on toast with Cumbrian sweet-cured bacon.

In the week of my visit, the main dishes included Kitriding Farm Cumbrian Sausages and mash or Farmer Sharp's Herdwick mutton pudding. Forager's mash and black peas. Round it off with homemade ice cream using milk from local cows or an elderflower syllabub and jelly with crushed gingerbread.

The wine list, for those who aren't driving, could rival a top London restaurant's - but it all comes without the London price tag.

SAMPLE MENU

Cod fishcakes with curly leaf parsley sauce, £5.50; Kitriding Farm Cumbrian sausages with mash and onion gravy, £8.75; homemade ice cream, two scoops for £3; tri-countries cheeseboard, £12.50.

The Highwayman, Nether Burrow, Kirkby Lonsdale 01524 273338.