

Highwayman comes riding...  
Westmorland Gazette  
9<sup>th</sup> February 2007

When Nigel Haworth and I met for a sneak preview of his latest acquisition, he was en route to Waberthwaite with director of food operations, Robert Marshall-Slater. The pair have spent the morning checking out a couple of local wholesales before heading out to Cumbria's west coast to meet Richard 'by royal appointment' Woodall (of air dried ham and dry cure bacon fame). The tight schedule included calling in on Howbarrow organic farm at Cartmel on the return journey.

Nigel is nothing if not thorough. But then Mr H didn't get where he is today without seeking out only the best. Robert reckons it is this quest for quality which is his boss's greatest strength – and his greatest weakness. Everything has to be perfect – even something as simple as checking out a potato suitable for chipping. Nigel will want to meet the farmer, to discuss the variety, to check the quality, etc, etc, etc, said Robert. And yes, there will be chips on the menu at The Highwayman. Which is now undergoing a £1 million revamp. But they'll be deep-fried to perfection in the finest beef dripping.

There won't be any pasta, however, for it is the potatoes that are part of our regional food heritage, not pasta. And therein lies Nigel Haworth's reason d'être.

Born in Accrington, he attended Accrington & Rosendale Catering College before leaving to work five seasons, one at Gleneagles in Scotland and four in Switzerland. In March 1984 he took over as head chef at Northcote Manor and became joint MD and 50 per cent shareholder with the hotel's rising star manager, Craig Bancroft, in 1989. Northcote was awarded a Michelin star in January 1996, which it has retained to this day.

Lancashire's producers and growers, as well as the country's culinary history, form the foundation stones of Nigel's menus.

Two year's ago, he and Craig decided to fly Lancashire's flag in a new direction with the formation of Ribble Valley Inns and the acquisition of The Three Fishes, at Mitton. The pub has since scooped a clutch of awards including CAMRA best children's menu. Morning Advertiser Top 20 Pubs in the UK, and Best British Cheese Board, the latter in no small part due to Nigel's famous 'length of Lancashire cheeseboard'.

'Sourcing food from our doorstep and supporting our local artisan producers is a way of life at The Three Fishes' says Nigel. 'But there can be few better examples of a local embarrassment of riches than Lancashire cheese'.

For The Highwayman, Nigel has already checked out Low Sizergh Barn's delicious Kendal Creamy cheese range. He's had a look at the Lowther estate's organic chickens too; Mansergh Hall Farm, near Kirkby Lonsdale; Kitriding Farm; The Lancaster Smokehouse; Cornvale Foods; even Tebay's meat co-operative at Junction 38.

'We were hoping to unearth things that would be absolutely fantastic,' said Nigel. 'And we're already very excited. In fact, we've found more than we thought we would do.'

When Nigel sat pondering the long-term future of Ribble Valley Inns, his plan was to take food into five counties – Lancashire, Cumbria, Cheshire, Yorkshire and Derbyshire. The Fishes was the answer to his Lancashire prayers. He was 'open-

minded' about ticking the remaining boxes. 'We were just looking for a nice location,' he told Food and Drink, 'somewhere very rural but somewhere that had chimneys nearby.' The Highwayman is still in Lancashire. 'But it's very near to two other counties and highwaymen are known for raiding the borders,' quipped Nigel, whose arrival, it seems, has caused a few ripples.

We have been told that some people are not looking forward to us coming into the area (because of the competition). But we think it will help the area, and will help other people,' he said.

'When people challenge us, we have to raise the bar. Food is like all things – it is fast moving, you have to keep upto date. And some people talk a lot about regional food but they don't actually deliver.'

Not so Mr Haworth who, as the new face in The Highwayman's frame, is determined to stand by his reputation in order to deliver yet more award-winning regional food.

'We will be keeping the food on simple lines, very much into the season,' explains Nigel. He fears we have forgotten our food heritage and 'what this area stands for'. 'Regionality is also an important thing to link to tourism,' he added. 'We are going to get more and more European visitors as well as English ones and we have to have places that represent the area. That's what people want.'

It is hoped that, for a trial period, The Highwayman will offer a sort of 'taster' menu. This should give Nigel's new suppliers time to get into their stride too.

'I'm not bothered if some of the smaller people can only supply every now and then but I will not compromise on quality. It has to be quality and it has to be better than what you get elsewhere. It's no good using something just because it's local. It has to be quality.'

Nigel admits he's more nervous about The Highwayman than he was about the Fishes. 'The Fishes just sort of happened... we have actually engineered The Highwayman. But I'm hopefully going to make a statement with the pub. The location is absolutely lovely and there is this amazing regional bounty.

'I have a gut feeling that The Highwayman is right.'