

## Good and bad in the southern Lake District

21 Apr 2007 by FT/ Nick Lander

Good fortune, some very good food and a serious culinary disappointment dominated 24 hours in two picturesque villages on the border of Lancashire and Cumbria last weekend.

The good fortune manifested itself most obviously in the bright April sunshine which made the four hour journey from London to junction 34 on the M6 so much more bearable than it can be. The unusually warm spring weather allowed the open countryside on the 15 minute journey from the Lancaster exit along the Lune Valley to The Highwayman pub to appear lush and verdant.

Fortunately, too, **The Highwayman** had just opened for business the day before after a three month renovation under the new ownership of chef Nigel Haworth and his long time business partner, Craig Bancroft, so the sight which greeted my hungry party was incongruously hectic. Several very happy customers were walking out of the pub's main door carrying as a memento of their visit the large cardboard menu which, as Haworth was to comment later, is his most effective form of advertising, while all around them a score of builders were working to finish the exterior of this airy pub in the village of Burrow just south of Kirby Lonsdale.

My good fortune continued because Haworth was there (his business also includes **Northcote Manor**, the celebrated hotel and restaurant near Langho, Blackburn, and his first pub, **Three Fishes** at Mitton) so that before this new venture becomes as busy as I am sure it will be, he was able to show me the brand new kitchen he had designed.

Standing 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 20 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. 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. You have to educate everyone from the chefs who have been with me for years to the new kids starting as waiters that what they are serving is the result of passionate individuals' hard work and commitment."

On the back of the menu – so simple – 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 covered in black and white photographs of them which 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 EU's, Defra's and local development programmes in funding this useful and sensible accreditation – an approach which I hope will be widely copied.

The flipside of the menu is even more appetising. There is a huge range of dishes to choose from but the emphasis is strongly focused 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 Cartmel just half an hour away to the west.

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

For the past five years Cartmel has also been home to chef Simon Rogan who has now built up an attractive restaurant, **L'Enclume** (French for anvil) with some very comfortable rooms attached not just to 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, pumkin and tonka', 'lamb 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 and that the blancmange as dessert was a mousse was also a bit disconcerting.

Precision, and a good understanding between the kitchen and the waiting staff, are also pre-requisites that were lacking here. Our table of five was served at every course in three waves with lengthy gaps in between each rather than all at once - presumably because the kitchen could not add all the fancy swirls and foams Rogan demands in time. No sooner had we all finally been served than we each had to wait another couple of minutes while the restaurant manager explained each single ingredient to us even though we had not that long ago ordered the dishes ourselves. And, with a flourish which 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 the Village Shop which makes the sticky toffee pudding was, sadly, closed.

The Highwayman, Burrow, Kirby Lonsdale, Lancashire LA6 2RJ.  
01524-273338, [www.highwaymaninn.co.uk](http://www.highwaymaninn.co.uk)  
L'Enclume, Cavendish Street, Cartmel, [www.lenclume.co.uk](http://www.lenclume.co.uk)  
Cartmel Village Shop, [www.stickytoffeepudding.co.uk](http://www.stickytoffeepudding.co.uk)