

The new life of the British pub

7 Nov 2007 by Nick Lander/ BA Business Life

The Great British boozier is dead. Long live the Great British pub.

This sentiment may initially seem somewhat incongruous but it recognises that the long overdue legislation which came into force in England and Wales on 1 July and banned smoking in public places has hammered the final nail into the coffins of the smoky, invariably neglected, male dominated pubs. These were a gloomy feature of the British landscape, which also invariably boasted one of the most depressing food signs ever: 'Hot Food Served All Day'. This meant not an eager set of chefs waiting in the kitchens but the inevitable presence of a microwave oven.

The smoking ban follows two other pieces of legislation which have gradually transformed British pubs over the past generation. The first was the introduction of the drink driving laws, which affected country pubs in particular, while the second was the breaking of the monopoly the breweries held over both production and their tied pubs. The ending of the second has led to a great number of interesting properties coming on to the market which young, aspiring chefs and restaurateurs have been able to take over, renovate relatively inexpensively and run as their own with the only commercial stipulation being that they continue to sell the brewers' beers.

Although therefore alcohol still plays an important part in any of these pubs' financial make-up, what has transformed them over the past 15 years since The Eagle opened in Farringdon Road, E1, has been the food that they offer. No longer an afterthought, something to soak up the booze, it is now the main attraction although it generally comes with a distinctive twist. When most of the pubs in Great Britain were built, the kitchen that was provided was invariably small, principally in fact for the publican and his family, so their new occupants invariably have to stick to dishes that are relatively straightforward but encompass strong, distinctive flavours.

Over the past six months, two pubs over 200 miles apart have undergone such a transformation and it seems only fair to start with **32 Great Queen Street** in Covent Garden for several reasons. Its main shareholder is Michael Belben, who opened The Eagle in 1992, and the kitchen is run by Jonathon Jones and Tom Norrington-Davies, who have made such a success of The Anchor & Hope near Waterloo, which Belben also backed.

Once somewhat alarmingly called 'The Rampage', this pub's interior now incorporates pine tables and chairs, a long bar at which you can eat and a wonderfully no-nonsense menu whose descriptors are all short but distinctly sweet. First courses range from crab on toast to octopus, tomato and pepper salad and beetroot with horseradish and a soft boiled egg while main courses include lemon sole with clams, leeks and sherry to semolina gnocchi with greens and morels. What also distinguishes the menu is that the kitchen buys in its meat on the carcass at the beginning of the week and then butchers it to produce dishes on its dinner menu such as a steak pie for three or a large, slow cooked leg of lamb for four or five to tuck into. Go hungry.

It is unlikely that anyone will arrive other than hungry at **The Highwayman**, which chef Nigel Howarth has opened with his partner Craig Bancroft in the little village of Burrow just outside Kirby Lonsdale on the Lancashire/ Cumbrian border.

Howarth believes that his role as chef is predominantly to enhance the produce of his 35 local farmers and suppliers whose photos grace not just the walls of The Highwayman but also the table mats on which his food is served under the banner 'food with roots from our local heroes'. On offer are shrimps from nearby Morecambe Bay; plump chickens from the Lowther estate near Penrith; a scrumptious cheese and onion pie made from Chris Sandham's creamy Lancashire; and, of course, Grasmere gingerbread from the Lake District as well as a great rendition of Cartmel's sticky toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce.

32 Great Queen Street, London WC2B 5AA, 020-7242 0622. Closed Sunday.

The Highwayman, Burrow, Kirby Lonsdale, Lancashire LA6 2RJ, 01524-273338. www.highwaymaninn.co.uk