



THE CROWN INN



If The Bull in BBC Radio 4's *The Archers* was real, it might look like this. A picture-perfect pub-with-rooms in a small, rural, Cotswold village offering a friendly welcome, locals at the olde worlde bar, comfortable accommodation, tasty food and wisteria around the front door. Peter Slee has been off to find out more...

I like the Cotswolds as much as the next cake-scoffing, tea-glugging tourist, but there is something disconcerting about the way it all looks the same. The Lygon Arms in Broadway, say, looks scarcely like half a dozen or so other places in Stow or Cirencester. This homogeneity is a major part of the area's charm – honey-coloured stone, cutesy villages. But it can also leave me yearning for a bit of originality. From the outside, the Crown Inn, taken over by new owners George Irvine and

wife Victoria just a year or so ago and since sensitively restored, definitely ticks all those classic Cotswolds boxes. It is a 17th-century building tucked away in Church Enstone, not too far from the hurly-burly of the area's principal chocolate box villages of places such as Chipping Norton, Moreton in Marsh, Stow on the Wold and Stratford Upon Avon. Step through the wisteria-draped front door and you're in a cosy tavern. A little front parlour with a piano in it and a fireplace is the first place you get to and there's a wide, light-filled extension at the back, with floor-to-ceiling windows and while the olde worlde vibe is not exactly shattered: it does come with some added extras here; this

hotel is bold, bright and very much of today. There are newspapers to read beside the fire, and an array of local information by the front door. The decor mixes neutrals with splashes of colour, and there are playful pieces of art on show, some of which are available to buy. That is not to say the character of the original inn has been destroyed. On the contrary, pains have been taken to retain the original features. The wooden beams, crooked staircases and some unusually shaped rooms are all intact. It is a successful marriage of old and new, mixing ancient floorboards with modern, silky smooth Farrow & Ball walls, exposed stone with lux, 2019 bathrooms.



Our room, up some wonky stairs, is at the top of the building: low entrance, sloping ceiling, gigantic beams overlooking the front to one side, and a little car park to the other.

Although the walls are mainly decorated in a designer symphony of cream and off-white tones, there are colour sparks here and there. Bespoke furniture fits the unconventional spaces, there are lovely Scandi-style cushions and throws and each room has in it a copy of a little book called 'Lifting the Latch' worth dipping into to connect with the local past.

On the first night, we sample its garden area, a beautiful space which somehow manages to feel cosy (with some of the nicest outdoor furniture I have ever seen) yet still lively and vibrant. A couple of outstanding real ales later, and we can't wait for dinner.

The restaurant area is every bit as good. Step inside and you're in a wonderfully mellow space with a bar, decent armchairs and open fires. You instantly relax.

The generously large restaurant is in a clever, orangery-style extension behind. Filled with light from long windows, it is a halcyon room. It's all enormously comfortable and looks nicely welcoming without being too glamorous or starchy stiff.

Its menus are carefully created by head chef Chris Taylor with a happy range of short, eating options which reflect his commitment to freshness. Dishes are beautifully presented and packed with local flavour.

The bar has a well-priced, all-day menu with the main restaurant offering some interesting flavour combinations. You pay around the £7-£8 mark for starters and between £11.50 and £20 for mains and for that you get a good if not too over-the-top taste adventure for your money.



My starter is a confit chicken terrine with pickled artichokes and a tarragon creme fraiche, a rare case of improving on a classic, while my main is delicious Barbary duck breast with pancetta crisp, dauphinoise potatoes and a cherry jus.

I search for a negative, an overlooked detail, but there is nothing.

There's nothing modern or outwardly trendy about The Crown but that's the beauty of it. It has stuck to its roots, boasting English country-inspired interiors offering the perfect place to chill, good walks on its doorstep and a decent nights sleep in a bedroom you will want to pick up and take back to your own home.

Finally, something to distinguish those identikit Cotswold towns: a pretty much faultless hotel we look forward to going back to.

IN SHORT: A husband and wife team who have put a lot of effort into creating something a bit special out of what was once their local boozier. Décor has been kept simple so as to show off the character of this old building. It is exactly what is needed if you want to re-charge the old batteries, offering up what is a good value and unpretentious hotel that's loaded with style and low-key glamour, particularly in its bedrooms. There's a warm atmosphere here we loved... and you will too!

WHEN TO GO: All year round really as who can predict the English sunshine? We had blazing sunshine one day, torrential downpours the next.

BEST FOR: This is a classic weekend-away spot, so it wasn't surprising to see a lot of couples making the most of the place.

* Accommodation and meals were provided by the Crown Inn, Mill Lane, Church Enstone, Oxfordshire O1608 677262.

Doubles from £110-£130 a night on a B&B basis for two people sharing. One dog-friendly room available costing an extra £10 a night per dog. www.crowninnenstone.co.uk