

Pleasant stroll takes an endive into chaos

AND so to Highgate. A mild and sunny day, so the idea was for my wife and myself to take the 210 bus from Jack Straw's Castle, have a mosey around the village, plump for lunch in the most seductive place on offer and then – full of good and tasty things – wander back across the Heath.

I was musing that it was a fair old while since I'd been to Highgate; the bus, I noticed, terminated in Finsbury Park, and it's true to say that it's a fair old while since I'd been there as well: on the last occasion, The Beatles were playing a Christmas concert at the Astoria. Jesus.

Anyway, we were tooling along that long and broad road so like the one in the old Start-Rite posters with the two very sweet little well-shod kids unwisely tottering straight down its centre, and then I was remembering why I'd left it so long to go back to N6: memories of school.

Not my school, but those of my children – Channing and Highgate, by name. We went there as parents either to witness a concert (not The Beatles, alas) in an ill-lit and echoey hall with some bloody father standing bang in front of you and manically filming his useless offspring, or else to view a hanging of art – largely dire, spiked by the odd incipient Leonardo who generally wanted to go to Durham to read economics and eventually lead the Conservative party. Or – worse – one was being given a damn good dressing down by a headmaster over some real or imaginary transgression on the part of one's son, whereupon I had to look deeply serious and so concerned while stifling a need to leap across the desk and smack him on the nose: not daring to so much as smirk or else he might not have allowed me to continue paying him a million or so a term.

Still – what price education? Answer: king's bleeding ransom.

God, it was slim pickings, though; San Carlo was busy becoming Flutes and we were left with Pizza Express, Cafe Rouge, Strada, Costa and – least enticing of all – the Wetherspoon Gatehouse. And then I remembered hearing about The Bull. You get there by walking down a motorway and hugging your ears against the traffic's roar (all of Highgate is much like this) past a beautiful row of Queen Anne and later houses, in the middle of which some witty aesthete has dumped a petrol station.

You can't miss The Bull because it's got a great big elephant outside it: odd, I thought – but no odder than their matchbox depicting a bison on one side and on the other, a giraffe: something of a bear garden then.

The interior is written in the shorthand that these days passes for a cool and easy-going style: white walls, little inset

The day started well, but once thoughts of the old headmaster snuck into his head, novelist and guest food reviewer Joseph Connolly just knew the meal was going to reflect his mood

downdrighters, an open kitchen hatch, leather banquets and a mishmash of straight-backed dining chairs from Alan Bennett's childhood parlour. No "music", thank God – good home-baked bread and an attractive lunchtime deal of two courses for £12.95 and a pudding for two quid extra. I bagged a table for four – the smaller ones didn't run to a cloth – and studied the specials blackboard. This was covered in, um, just the one special, actually – shepherd's pie for a tenner.

The set lunch (there is no a la carte) offers three choices per course. My wife kicked off with celeriac soup with a reasonably creamy initial hit, becoming

increasingly bland. My home-cured ham with rocket salad was more or less a disgrace: if you're going to do something at home, you've got to do it as well as Waitrose, no? Else it's just an exercise in economics and – who knows? – eventually leading the Conservative party.

This was not transparently fine like prosciutto but near a quarter of an inch thick, undercured and practically impenetrable. Chewing on a great hard chunk of salty raw pig is really not much fun, so I stopped doing that.

Then there was braised ox cheeks for my wife, with pearl barley, carrots and braised leeks.

Ox cheeks (it's never cow, is it? Always ox) seem to have taken over from belly as the new and faintly repellent idea in order to shave those margins. It was OK – superficially akin to a beef stew, but without the deep and yummy lusciousness that such a dish should conjure. My risotto with wild mushrooms lacked all intensity: no perfume, rather claggy and palate-adherent. The flaked parmesan helped it out a bit, as did a twist of the pepper mill, but a shredding of truffle would truly have been a godsend.

There's a good selection of Old and New World wines by the glass and bottle, so my wife had a Beck's. Not me, though – I was excited to see a Chinese red wine on the list, and I was offered a taster. Shandong Noble Dragon, it was called, and although I had expected it to be not very good, once one had wrapped one's tongue around the thing, it actually turned out to be quite totally disgusting: a low-rent Spanish with the thoughtful addition of manila envelope

mulch, the whole then left to fester.

I had instead a very good and fruity glass of rose, Chapel Down: it tasted of flowers.

As we ploughed into pudds – not quite gooey enough chocolate pudding with chocolate ice cream (pretty good) and treacle tart with vanilla ice cream (pretty good if you're a fan of Tate & Lyle's Golden Syrup) – wafts of cod were drifting out of the kitchen hatch: that fishy smell that fish is never meant to smell of. Four of the other six diners now were leaving.

"Nice food", said one. Well... not very... This place, you see, has unjustified pretensions: there is a complacency here that in the sorts of restaurant it aspires to be is just never detectable. It's all big white plates and endive, but not much delivery – no flourish, and little joy.

On the doors to the lavatories, the name of the establishment is reinforced with vigour: "Bulls & Cows", it says. The baby changing room is labelled "Cow

& Calf". Oh yes, it is. And if I tell you that the lavatory with wheelchair access has a sign saying "Disabulled", you'll think I'm just horsing around: it's true, though. I could happily have exchanged such strangulated punning for the glimmer of a smile on our waitress's face.

Oh, and a word about the art on the walls: usual unrelated porridge of quite silly nothingness, of course, but with an amusing twist: it's for sale! So if you fancy a framed, slightly damaged Vogue cover from 1964 for £295, you now know where to come.

God, though – I do hope I'm not going to get summoned to the headmaster's study over it all: this time around, I'm not sure how deeply serious and so concerned a face I could decently manage to hold.

□ Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack the Lad and Bloody Mary*, Faber and Faber, £8.99.

FACTFILE

- The Bull, 13 North Hill, Highgate, N6 4AB.
- Telephone: 0845 456 5033
- Food: ★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★☆☆☆
- Open Mondays to Fridays noon to 11pm, Saturdays 11am to 11pm, Sundays 11am to 9.30pm.
- Lunch is £12.95 two courses and £14.95 three courses.



Joseph Connolly not being happy at the Bull in Highgate.

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