

Joseph Connolly goes on an unintended diet

ONE hundred years old. Yes, all right – no more tittering at the back: joke over, thank you. Not me, no (though by God it can feel like it sometimes) – but Selfridges, the venerable Oxford Street store. It is owned by a rather glamorous and incalculably rich Canadian family called the Westons (as, indeed, is the 300-year old Fortnum & Mason) and it is they who are responsible for making the store a very chic and apparently addictive destination for the world's fashionistas – although this is not, I think, how some of us remember it.

When, in the days of yore, I was a short-trousered schoolboy at St Anthony's in Fitzjohn's Avenue, virtually every Saturday I would take the No 13 Routemaster from Swiss Cottage (a threepenny half, as I recall – top deck, right up at the front) direct to the Orchard Street entrance of, to my mind, just simply the most fabulous place on earth.

Being penniless, I never actually bought anything there: it's just that I knew of no better spot for a series of long and concentrated stares, and much aimless mooching. The biggest attraction was the magnificent toy department, and then the quirky basement – a true hodge-podge of a place with everything from Brolac distemper to tablets for dogs to counteract the other kind. God knows it's not like that now – so very cool and cutting edge, it could freeze and slice you. Christmas was really the time, of course, when nothing, not even Santa, could come close to the thrill and fascination of Uncle Holly – in memory, a 9ft tall and red-faced benefactor in his bright green frock coat and a yellow top hat. He doled out badges – free! Here was the crowning festive moment.

This was an age where, in the menswear department, the signs read "Raincoats", "Slacks" and "Harris Tweed Jackets" – not Valentino, Dolce & Gabbana, or "Cruisewear". And Selfridges was the official outfitter for my boarding school: I just gaped at the stiff white collars and studs and cufflinks and thought they were joking. My mother found a blazer that fitted me perfectly and rejected this in favour of another which lent me the leeway to grow into, a thing I very visibly never managed to do. Throughout my first year I garnered great sympathy for bearing with fortitude the double disadvantage of having legs barely 12ins long, and no hands whatever.

Eating in Selfridges was a very rare treat indeed – ancient waitresses tricked out like "nippies", hard white cloths, heavy silverware and almost invariably fillets of plaice. These days, there are surprisingly few options when it comes to eating. There is the legendary Brass Rail, where I stopped going when they got rid of the peerless roast beef sandwiches (it's all just salt beef now) and there's a Square Pie concession – good, but you do have to perch up on a stool and eat from a shelf – as well as a Yo! Sushi (to which I tend to say No! Thank You).



NOT CELEBRATING: Joseph Connolly looking glum outside Selfridges.

Nothing to eat here

In the basement there's a very murky-looking Frankie's (another chain set up rather improbably by the jockey Frankie Dettori and the caveman Marco Pierre White). This seems to be a pizza joint where aggressive children can instruct their very glum and browbeaten parents as to what they are next about to buy them.

Gordon's is a decent wine bar with OK sandwiches – though if it's wine you're after you'd be better off in the Wonder Bar. Here are very special wines (at extraordinarily special prices) dispensed from the gadget du jour, an Enomatic: eight grand apiece, these gizmos cost – a hefty chunk, you might think, to pour out a glass of wine, but I daresay the Westons can run to it.

Then there is Selfridges' finest: The Gallery Restaurant, which some very gormless designer elected to slap in the middle of the handbag department, at the top of a spiral staircase – so close to the ceiling that throughout your lunch, if we are to dignify what is to come with so noble an appellation, you are face to face with one of the Ionic capitals that crown the iconic columns.

So there we were, 30ft up and next to a glass half-wall, my wife and I trying hard to blot out all memory of James Stewart, Kim Novak and that belfry in Vertigo. Way back down on terra firma, a very bored salesgirl was ruing her high-heeled shoes as she loitered at Prada, well into her daily wait for some passing madwoman to relieve her of a £3,000 handbag. There was a sea of bright yellow carriers – people did seem to be rallying to the cause and keeping the Westons in Wagon Wheels.

Yellow is Selfridges' colour, and just everywhere is so very full of it. The centenary exhibition downstairs in the – don't laugh – Ultralounge is well

FACTFILE

- **The Gallery Restaurant**, Selfridges, 400 Oxford Street, W1A 1AB.
- **Food:** ★★☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
- **Service:** ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- **Open:** Mondays 9.30am to 6.30pm, Tuesdays to Saturdays 9.30am to 7.30pm. Sundays noon to 4.30pm.
- **Cost:** £20 for two. More if you want to eat something. Which you won't.

worth a look, as are the windows, though the one devoted to food and drink is rendered bizarre by the inclusion of an infestation of yellow plastic rats: designers, they truly are a breed unto themselves.

It's very canteeny, The Gallery Restaurant – dark walnut floors, small white Corian tables and one large vase of flowers (yellow, need you ask). My wife went for the Gallery caesar salad with chargrilled chicken and I suddenly fancied the Gallery steak burger. This was £12.70 – bacon and cheese £2 extra, and chips, £3.45 more. This made the whole ensemble, at over £18, the most expensive I know: much more than The Wolseley, The Ivy, Claridge's bar, and nearly twice as much as my favourite in the Groucho – so boy, it had better be good.

Well. If I tell you that it was the worst burger I have ever eaten... well I didn't eat it: that's how bad it was. Tiny, fibrous, dense and way overcooked – here was something from the Birdseye Steakhouse of unfond memory, with a folded fatty rasher, a lump of unmelted cheese and a whole pile of lettuce in a doughy bun. Truly uneatable. "Is everything all right?" asked the waiter, already moving on. "Actually," I responded (for unlike everything else around here,

there's nothing yellow about me), "this is the very worst burger I have ever encountered." He said he would replace it, and left. Didn't actually take the thing with him, of course. My wife had finished her Caesar salad, eventually having located a bit of chicken lurking amid the ceaseless drifts of lollo. (Did you know that this lettuce was named after Gina Lollobrigida, in recognition of her "salad-tossed" hair? Yes well).

During a very long wait, I tried to ignore the "music" – a muted boombox, like an undulating rumble of gossip straining so hard against the traffic's roar.

New burger came. Had to ask for ketchup. Ketchup arrived in little bowl. Had to ask for spoon. Needn't have bothered: second effort equally loathsome. Left it. Had some so-so chips. Drank the now-warm rose: it was OK. My wife had a glass of orange juice (I feared they might only do yellow juice, but no). And that was that. They didn't charge for the burger: it was the lowest restaurant bill I have ever received – but then of course, to be fair, I hadn't actually eaten any lunch. Dear God.

On the way to find the loo – two staircases down and many departments away – I glanced at the glossy brown and yielding Prada handbag that high-heel-girl had still not managed to flog: I thought it looked absolutely delicious.

And on my way out I learned from a hoarding that during the hour-and-a-half I had wasted on this unutterable fiasco, I had just missed the opportunity of meeting Jamie Oliver! So at least something went right.

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel Jack the Lad and Bloody Mary*, is published by Faber and Faber £8.99. www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

New chef is missing link



TUCKED away from the hub of Highgate, you might not notice the Red Lion and Sun during a chance visit to the area. But inside the pub, which is just a stone's throw from the heart of the village, there has been a metamorphosis. What used to be a groggy boozier is now a warm, open-plan eatery with a warm, bubbly atmosphere that combines a good selection of beer and wine with a dog and family-friendly policy.

Proprietor Heath Ball is a New Zealander who brings an aura of antipodean sunshine to the venue, and he is hoping that this, his third summer running the pub in North Road, will be a long and hot one.

"In the summer we bring out a hog roast at either the front or the back," he said. "It's rained the last two summers and now we are praying for sun."

But he also keeps an open fireplace for roaring log fires in the colder months. He has now finally settled on a chef, Frenchman Vincent Millet, the third he has tried in two years, and it is clear he has found the cook of his dreams.

"We run a traditional British menu but with a slight twist on classic dishes," he said.

I started with half a dozen Dorset rock oysters – fresh from Poole Harbour – with cabernet sauvignon and shallot dressing (£1.50 each or £7.50 for half a dozen).

I'm not a huge seafood fan normally but the strong flavour of the dressing combined with the icy-cool meat on these oysters was a

great treat. Of the whole meal they were the dish that has stayed in my mind – I cannot wait to go back for more.

My colleague had smoked pigeon breast with beetroot, walnuts and chicory salad (£5.50). For a starter the dish was a decent size and the meat of the pigeon was dark, gamey and substantial.

Although the menu changes daily, there are a couple of stock dishes the pub regards as specialities. Of these I opted for the shepherd's pie with celeriac and potato mash and green beans (£9.50), while my colleague enjoyed the rump-steak cheeseburger on a sourdough bun with mayonnaise and hand-cut chips (£9.50).

The pie is made with spicy merguez sausage meat from Morocco and as such it has a texture of nice burger-esque lumps in the meat sauce beneath the mash and a seriously zingy kick that takes you slightly by surprise. The mash mixes beautifully to give a juicy, oily finish.

Not many restaurants ask how guests would like their burgers cooked these days but at this pub it is a point of honour, and my colleague's medium to well done cheeseburger did not disappoint.

Too full to manage a dessert on this occasion we contemplated the delights on offer, including Valrhona chocolate truffle cake with raspberries (£6) and passion fruit cheese cake with custard (£4.50), and resolved to sample them next time around.

TAN PARSONS