

FOOD & DRINK

Fill your boots at the boozer

This week: *Joseph Connolly* celebrates the gastropub's 25th anniversary at the Magdalen Arms, Oxford

On the train to Oxford, I was seated in the "Quiet Coach" – a boon to those around me, who were able to conduct all their phone calls in peace. Through all the yak about spreadsheets and *Strictly Come Dancing*, I summoned up memories of the city of dreaming spires. I attended a boarding school nearby; at that tender age I knew nothing much about anything, but particularly little about Oxford.

It must, I assumed, be a place where everybody wore Oxford shoes. Lace-ups with a toecap; but if that toecap is punched, then it is a half brogue, which isn't to be confused with an Oxford accent.

Brideshead Revisited was still riding high as the romantic ideal, though I'd never heard of it. Even later, when asked what I thought of the latest Waugh, I simply said I was unaware that one had been declared. Nor did I know about *The Eagle & Child*, a lovely old pub where CS Lewis, Tolkien and others used to congregate: I had no inkling of the Inklings – so really rather dim, I think we can all agree.

I have been to Oxford many times since – sometimes as a performing flea at the annual literary festival – but never before expressly to have lunch.

As I traipsed up the High, past shops selling Oxford University sweatshirts to people who could barely spell, I clocked the Mitre – a splendid 17th-century coaching inn which, in the Sixties, became a Berni Inn. And now? A Beefeater. How are the mighty fallen. The Magdalen Arms (note to American tourists: this is pronounced "maudlin") was "just up the road", I was told. Yeah – about a hundred miles up the road, mate. Took years. I traipsed past a sign that said that on this very spot Sir Roger Bannister had broken the four-minute mile – yes, but look: he was wearing better shoes (though probably not Oxfords).

The Magdalen Arms is one of a select group of five award-winning... well, I suppose we just must call them "gastropubs" – a term that has now been appropriated by Marks & Sparks's ready meals and even Young's frozen fish, but with which we seem to be more or less stuck. The original "gastropub", The Eagle, in London EC1, this month celebrates its 25th birthday; they loathe the coinage too, so don't blame them. Another notable specimen is Great Queen Street in Covent Garden – the darkest restaurant I have ever eaten in: people use smartphones and cigarette lighters to read the menu, and often look quite startled when they discover exactly who they are lunching with.



243 Iffley Road, Oxford OX4 1SJ
01865 243159; magdalenarms.co.uk. Dinner or a good lunch about £40 per head

dinner knife and then laying it down on a slightly sticky table. Service is young and breezy. Are you getting the picture? This place is so determinedly laid back as to be just this side of collapse.

My guest started with crab soup with rouille and cheese toast, while I had twice-baked Tymsboro soufflé with walnut and pear salad, Tymsboro being a silky goat's cheese. The latter was feathery and smoky, deeply cheesy, and the salad dressing was frankly gorgeous. Pear and endive were just crunchily enough – the look of walnuts always putting me in mind of Winnie-the-Pooh (very little brain). The soup was properly crabby, the toasts piled with shredded cheese rather moreish.

Then came bavette steak with chips for my guest – brown without, red within, good taste. But it's bavette, right? So chewy. This is skirt or flank, and it really ought to be slow-cooked, whatever the trendy bistros say. Thick chips were good – a pot-roasted sort of texture.

I had ribbon pasta and hare ragù with Parmesan. The ragù was rich, though too brothlike and not clingy enough; the pasta was overdone and gloopy. And hare... well he's a tough little devil, because when not attending tea parties with dormice or being made to look a fool by the occasional tortoise, he is just haring about energetically – hence all the sinew. After a few forkfuls I fell victim to what I call Risotto Boredom: it's nice, it's OK – but why go on?

A gluggable Veneto red, a well-made pear sorbet... and then the mammoth trek back to the High, and the station beyond, in rather heavier rain. And it's not true, you know, that Oxfords are the only footwear named after a famous place: I know because my Chelsea boots were letting in water.

Joseph Connolly's A-Z of Eating Out (Thames & Hudson) is available from Telegraph Books.

10 OF A KIND GASTRO-PUBS



In tomorrow's Living section Diana Henry examines the enduring appeal of an unlikely hybrid; and the Telegraph Food team pick their favourites

The exterior of the Oxford outpost is very pubby, and grubby. Ah, but inside... inside it is even worse. All these people who grouse about chichi and ponced-up interiors will have a field day: a vast hard-edged space with walls the shade of a subdural haematoma, dim lights, utility furniture and standard lamps, as last laughed at in your grandma's parlour. I was tempted to lunch instead in the Gents: brighter, with mirrors, fresh flowers and walls of a shade less redolent of a Hammer horror film.

To our bare and slightly sticky table was brought a red plastic basket – the sort of thing you keep the Brillo in on the kitchen drainer – charged with sourdough. The menu is printed daily on a scrap of paper: seven hefty starters and six mains, including roast rare hare and faggots (note to American tourists... oh, never mind). Napkins are of the cheapest paper kind – and it's no fun buttering bread with your

OUR RATING 7/10

It's so laid back as to be just this side of collapse



Pint to pint

Our guide to the best British pubs. This week: *The Queen's Arms*, Derbyshire

The man standing sentinel at the bar was a valuable witness. He had been drinking in the Queen's Arms for 55 years and had seen it go from Bents and Gartsides (a local Ashton/Liverpool brewery) to Bass, to a pubco, to near dereliction, to a buy-out by a couple of locals and – finally – to salvation and resurrection.

It's getting to be a familiar pattern in the pub world, and the happy ending, if there is one, is usually achieved through active local interest. The unhappy ending is closure.

Nowadays the Queen's looks fresh, bright, tidy, comfortable and much loved. There are two rooms, one with a full-on sight of the bar, the other with a crick-in-the-neck sideways view. Both have fine old photographs of Old Glossop, complete with trams, horses, prams and bicycles. The pub actually predates photography – it first opened in 1825, then became the Queen's Arms in 1837, by way of celebration of the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne.

The veteran was still drinking lager after all those years, but I was interested, as always, in the cask beers on offer. Today, we have Holt's bitter from Manchester, Robinsons' Unicorn from Stockport, and a trio of beers from local microbreweries. In my apprentice drinking days, Holt's was considered a test of manhood, a bitter drinker's bitter. A beer writer described it as "taking no prisoners". Today, it seemed like

a fine drink with a substantial kick at the finish. Have I got tougher over the years, or has the beer got softer?

Until recently, there was a popular curry house, the Coriander, upstairs, but the owners moved on and the place is awaiting new management. In the meantime, the Queen's does perfectly fine pub food. We went for the Ramblers' Platter, which arrived on a plank and included ham, beef, two cheeses, two slices of a delicious pork pie, mushroom pâté, mustard and pickle, not to mention brown and white bread, cheese crackers and a small salad, £8.95 the lot. They get ramblers here



because Glossop is on the edge of the Peak District National Park. (The pub offers a walker's guide service, if you give them a bit of notice.) If you want a bed for the night, they have comfortable rooms upstairs at reasonable prices.

They have a quiz night on Thursdays, and Saturday is occasionally music night. One corner of the main lounge has a notice that says: "This area is reserved for acoustic musicians. Thank you." I see I just missed Quick Draw McGraw and the Biscuit Spitters. Never mind, perhaps next time.

Arthur Taylor
1 Shepley Street, Old Glossop, Derbyshire SK13 7RZ (01457 853005; queens-arms-hotel-old-glossop.co.uk)



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