

Pub's staff spend too much time beating around Bush

Novelist **Joseph Connolly** was very impressed when he first entered the Hampstead institution that is the Holly Bush pub. Then he tried ordering a meal and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited

WHAT'S his name . . . ? It's on the tip of my . . . oh God – what's he called? You know the chap I mean – that television cook. A combination of David Niven and Prince Charles, he always strikes me. Oh yes yes yes – I've got it now: Jamie Oliver, that's the man.

In the days when he briefly lived opposite the Holly Bush, drinkers kept banging on his door and shouting through the letterbox for bacon sandwiches. His chummy charm and chirpy humour having quickly deserted him, he soon got rid of the place and moved to Primrose Hill, where he continues to live happily ever after, periodically buying the house next door. I hear that once he has secured the whole of the street he intends to bid for the Hill itself so that his little ones can have more space to romp. Now what are their names again? Coco-Pops Lumpfish? Pat-a-Cake Poo-Poo? Raspberry Mivvi? Something of that order.

So anyway, I was standing in the bar of the Holly Bush chattering about this and other nonsenses to a great man of this parish: Ken Pyne, the cartoonist



Self service? Joseph Connolly enjoys a glass of Boogle (or should that be Bogle) as he waits in vain for a waiter to arrive.

you all know and love from the Letters page in this very journal, and who also contributes to Private Eye, among many other organs, because were he to depend solely upon the munificence of the Ham&High, he would long ago have succumbed to a creeping delirium, prior to expiring from malnutrition.

We were eager for dinner – but first, a drink or so at the bar. Ken wanted a pint of Harvey's, and I thought blimey – that's a fair bit of sherry, you know... but look,

the man's old enough to know his own mind. Turned out to be ale, and he's something of a connoisseur ('beer snob' in his words). I drank the house red – Italian, pretty good – and looked about me at just about the most perfect pub interior you could imagine. Low ceiling, mellow panelling, proper pub furniture and mirrors, real brass and ebony beer pumps. You could film a scene here set anywhere from 1890 to 1950 and you wouldn't have to change a single thing.

And, of course – as with first class travel – it's what you don't get that also counts: so no music, no machines, no gaudy hand-drawn posters nor packets of peanuts stapled to a card. There were kiddies, it's true – but because they were upper-middle class kiddies they had been taught not to behave like kiddies at all, so that was okay. Bar meals, if you want them: 'Sausage roll with Holy [sic] Bush brown sauce' – at the very weird price of £2.56 – or something called 'Marmite and cheddar shortbread' (one of those things you either loathe or loathe, I can only imagine).

But we were headed upstairs to do the thing justice. It's a large and pleasant room with lovely Old Hampstead views through the 12-bar sashes, though made dingy by the lowering green of the William Morris wallpaper and two crystal drop chandeliers as dim as you can make chandeliers without actually switching them off. The napkins are paper, the table bare and off-puttingly sticky. I started to dig into the

gunge with a thumbnail while we waited for a waiter with a menu. We waited. And waited... Then I went to find someone. Couldn't. Then I did: he gave me menus. Mmm, I thought: we'll be all right here – plenty of enticing things. We quickly decided and waited for a waiter. And then, chatting idly, we waited a little longer. Then I went to find someone. Couldn't. Then I did – halfway up the stairs. He explained to me slowly – amazed that I had failed to divine this – how I had to go back down to the bar to order (this a first, in my experience). But, I bartered, as you are now halfway upstairs, could you maybe take the order for me...? He considered this, and then said magnanimously "Well I suppose so – I've got a bit of time on my hands". I searched his face for humour or irony, and found not a jot.

Ken had ordered a pint of prawns. "Do you think," I asked him, "you have to peel them?" "I think," he replied, "you have to catch them". We waited. And waited... "Do you think," I asked him, "you have to go down to get them?" "I think," he replied, "you have to go down to eat them". They eventually arrived – along with my 'Brixham crab and avocado cocktail Bloody Mary'. Not a drink, no, but a good little cake of chopped crab and avocado topped with a livid rusty froth of tomato that may or may not have owed something to vodka: whether a true Bloody Mary I doubt... but Bloody Cold, I can tell you that – as were Ken's huge and good langoustes: just

out of the fridge. It took me a while to get to my starter, though: no cutlery. I thought I wouldn't wait for a waiter. Traipsed out of the room for the third bloody time, craning my neck and hollering 'Hallo-o-o?' like a damned fool, but totally ineffectually. Slammed back down to the sodding bar and pulled out a knife and fork from a binful and banged my way up again.

To follow we were going the 'Traditional Pie' route, Ken with fish and parsley, I with chicken and wild mushroom. The waiter had pointed to a Californian red called Boogle. Turned out to be Bogle (they just can't spell in this place) – a Syrah, nice and black-peppery, though hardly worth £26. Ken's pie looked the part – browned mash on top – while mine was more of a shallow flan. The chicken was shredded into unappetising strings, and while the accompanying broccoli, carrots and gravy were pretty good, the pie itself was stodge. As was the mashed potato – claggy

FACTFILE

- **HOLLY BUSH**, 22 Holly Mount, Hampstead NW3 020-7435 2892
- Meals Monday – Friday 12noon-4pm, 6-10pm. Saturday 12noon – 10pm, Sunday 12noon – 9.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Service: ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
- Cost: £60+ for two with wine. More if inflation deepens in the time it takes for your food to arrive.

and utterly flavourless. Ken's fish pie – as searingly hot as mine, both having been rendered near radioactive by a recent microwave zapping – was just a few bits of flabby salmon, acres of boring mash and nothing else at all. The menu's 'Note on Suppliers' states "We do not use cod or the 'at risk' species". Nor any of the others, it would seem. We could do here with rather less piety and a good deal more of everything else, particularly service.

Talking of which... no one cleared the plates. "Do you think," I said, "we have to take them down?" "I think," said Ken, "we have to wash them up". Well I wasn't going to wait for the bill, was I? Christ – I'd still be sitting there. So back down to the bar, where I asked to pay. The man just blinked. "What did you have to eat?" he said. I told him to look it up and give me the bill. We waited. And waited... Someone else wandered over. "You want to pay, I hear. What did you have to eat?" Jesus. Then the first bloke returned: "Where were you sitting?" I know: beyond belief. Paid eventually – a rather ridiculous £64 (to which I added zero tip – by rights, they should have given me one).

Didn't order another drink because by the time it arrived we would have been way past closing. Look: this pub is beautiful – go there for a pint if, as the man said, you've got a bit of time on your hands. Food? Well, in its favour, the sheer business of getting hold of it burns off the calories before you've even had a forkful. Shall I be back there to eat? Wait for it.

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest book is **Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design** (Faber and Faber, £25). www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*



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