

Food makes a very late entrance on theatre date

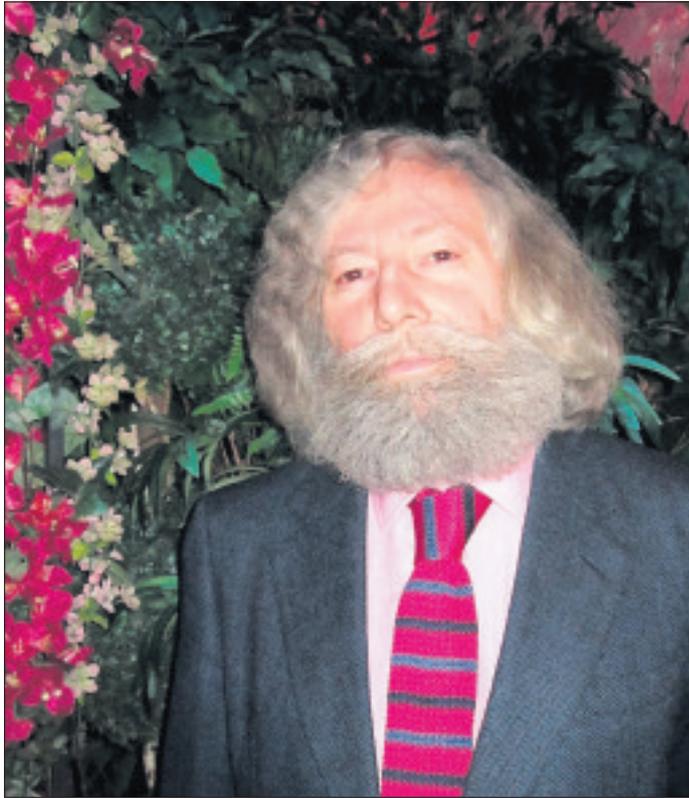
IT'S extraordinary, really, that the journey from Hampstead to Highgate without a car should always be such a bloody interminable slog. Fine if you are based around Whitestone Pond – squatting in the boarded-up £20million mansion Heath House, say, or gaily cruising around what used to be Jack Straw's Castle car park – but for those of us who live in the lower reaches of the village, there's a decent chunk of Fitzjohn's Avenue and then the entire length of Heath Street to be dealt with: one hell of a gradient and an absolute age before the 210 bus stop looms into sight. I am told that the two villages have been experimentally linked by the 603 which stops outside Waterstone's, but its timetable would suggest that it stops there just once in the spring, generally on the first Tuesday, and then again during the autumn, the weekend the clocks go back.

So anyway, off we traipsed, my wife and I, one recent Sunday lunchtime. We had tickets for Rodney Bewes's one-man show of Three Men In A Boat at The Gatehouse for four o'clock, and I had thought this a good opportunity to check out the much-vaunted Rose and Crown in Highgate High Street. God but it's such a dispiriting walk up Heath Street, though. It does not bespeak of boom-time Hampstead. The clusters of shops selling, or not selling, esoteric bitsys, jostling for breath amid the estate agents – and then all those that have given up the ghost. The cavernous old Maxwell's, seemingly derelict forever. The once so very chic Chic, barred and for sale, one of its windows kicked in. The conundrum that is Tinseltown, this apparently compulsory hangout for moneyed teenagers, mainlining on milkshakes ... and then a truly hideous string of masked and spooky 'clinics', their windows painted out and as dead as a blind man's eye.

The contrast with Highgate is always marked. Highgate isn't in London, the way Hampstead is – and this is good and bad. Good for the authentic village high street, most things gently dated – bad for the constant snarling ribbon of cars that typify a choked-up outpost in need of a ring road. Good for the smattering of independent shops – bad for the lack of the more useful chains which elsewhere are taken for granted. All this passed through my mind as we sat at our window table in the Rose and Crown, bang opposite the Highgate Pantry, with its charming paper-doled multi-tiered cake stands brimming with colourful fancies – these only briefly glimpsed when very seldom there was a break in the nose-to-tail traffic, grumbling ceaselessly in both directions: where do all these cars come from? And where on earth can they all be going?

The trouble was, we were a bit early – so how to pad out a modest lunch to fill in the two hours and 10 minutes till

Two hours and 10 minutes seemed plenty of time to leave for a meal before watching a show at The Gatehouse. But **Joseph Connolly** hadn't bargained on the very tardy service at the Rose and Crown



Curtain call Joseph Connolly.

showtime? Oh well ... think of something. The Rose and Crown, though, is not at all what I had expected. Maybe it's the name ... yes, it is the name, of course it's the name: the Rose and Crown was Andy Capp's habitual haunt in Reg Smythe's wonderful old cartoon strip. A real old boozier (as was Andy, of course) – but the Highgate version couldn't be more different. Not a pub at all any more – just a modestly sized and quite pleasingly tricked out split level dining room: dark wooden floorboards (that bounce fairly jarringly when the charming and helpful waitresses skitter down the steps that divide the two sections), a sweet little colonnade of fluted Corinthian pilarettes featuring one spilt poissettia left over from Christmas ... and that's about it.

There was no offer to whisk away one's coat: everyone seemed to have slung theirs behind them, so I did that too – which was just as well as it helped to muffle the clonk every time the service door behind me swung open and thudded into the back of my chair. Also, to the side of us was a radiator that was really doing the business ... so in order to avoid being charred I moved out the table and chairs, but as my wife was then rammed into a fire extinguisher and I was getting clonked so very badly – and as regular as clonkwork – I quite

FACTFILE

- ROSE AND CROWN** (or, according to their card, *Rose 'n Crown, begging the question Where is Guildenstern?*) 86 High Street, Highgate. Tel: 020-8340 0770
- Open for lunch and dinner Monday to Saturday noon-6pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆ (friendly, but far too slow)
- Cost: about £75 for two courses for two with wine

hurriedly shuffled all the furniture back to where it had been, and settled down to roasting. And in this I was not alone – Scottish beef and pork belly were, as I simmered, undergoing similar treatment. My wife quite fancied pork, she said, so I bagged the beef. Before that she had smoked salmon terrine – it looked less like a terrine than thickish slices compressed together and seamed with butter, all tasting a whole lot better than its rather raw and slimy appearance suggested: she enjoyed it very much, along with the soft boiled quail's egg (which might have been softer, just as the herb salad could have been more of a salad and less of a garnish). My crab tagliatelle with mushroom duxelles was just

warm and just less than okay: claggy, and the taste had not so much the cleanliness of crab as something altogether more disagreeably fishy. The accompanying foam was professed to owe something to Cognac, though I'm blessed if I'd have known it. The point is, these very elementary starters had taken 45 minutes to get here. I know. And there was another lengthy wait before the mains came – eventually chugging along nearly one-and-a-half hours after we had walked through the door. It was rapidly becoming a case of not how to fill in the time, but whether or not we could choke it all down us and then hare across the road before curtain-up. Still, though – the place was full and happy, the noise overpowering. "God, it's loud in here," I said, but my wife didn't hear me so I said it again. I couldn't quite catch her reply. "I said ..." she now was roaring into my face, "it's not that loud in here ...!"

The beef was good and lean and tender – the two slices modest, though, and I could have done with a third. My wife was very keen on her confit of roast pork belly (a nice little crusty cube of it) – and the veg and gravy were common to both: fresh al dente broccoli, carrots and beans, very yummy crunchy roast potatoes and a Yorkshire pudding that was what it was. The

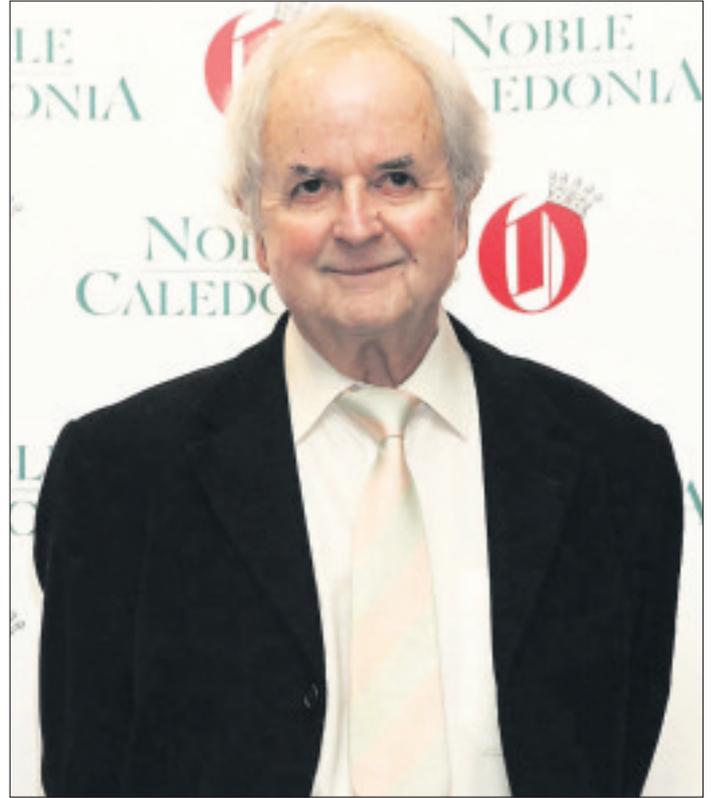
red wine jus was glossy and well done – a damn sight better, actually, than the red wine we were drinking: a £19.50 generic French Gamay of no origin or vintage: thin, nothing, and not at all "bursting with cherry fruit" as the list had promised. Odd to have roasts on the menu and no clarets, no burgundies. Ah well.

And then we had to leg it. Five to four! Lord this meal had taken an age – and there is a serious difference between dawdling over Sunday lunch and waiting for it to arrive. So not a moment for pud, not a moment for coffee – though while waiting for the bill, I just managed to squeeze in the time to be clonked in the back another dozen bloody times before relinquishing that particular sensation with relief, and for ever. Rodney's show was a joy – unlike the Gatehouse bar: a total throwback to the 1970s, a

roadhouse with lit-up machines and all. Unbelievably cheap, though – a Sunday roast here was on offer for £6.99, including a drink, whereas our doubtless very superior but only two-course lunch across the road had come to more than £70: you pay your money, you take your choice.

All that was left was the nightmare of getting back home. A bus sailed on past us when we were moments from the stop. Here's an idea: why don't we all get together and create a Rowland Emett steam railway to border the Heath and link the two villages? Complete with Pullman carriages and Stephenson's Rocket to haul them. Good, eh? And listen – we could call it The Hampstead & Highgate Express.

All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.



A joy ... Rodney Bewes.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

Want to know where to put a dado rail? They were originally there to protect the wall from chairs – so they should generally be fixed at the height of the back of a chair.

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