

Mrs Beeton would be proud

LAST week, if an alien from outer space – simply because he happened to be passing – had maybe decided to drop into the newly refurbished St Pancras Renaissance Hotel, he might well and easily have assumed that in 1873, when first the place opened as The Midland Grand, human beings in England must all have been fifteen feet tall, minimum. How else to explain the quite staggering and (for once, it's the right word) awesome scale of this red brick, marble and terracotta London landmark? The interior gothic arches a mile above your head, the massive and gleaming granite columns ... it all makes you gasp, and also rather thrill to the tremendous swagger and confidence of the High Victorians, never in the slightest doubt as to exactly which nation ruled not only the waves, but the world. Sir George Gilbert Scott is the man we have to thank for this exceptional edifice, while we also owe great gratitude to Sir John Betjeman who led the campaign in the 60s to rescue it from demolition. Seems unthinkable, doesn't it? But so much was destroyed in those days, seemingly because it was simply perceived to be out of keeping with the new and vibrant Swinging London.

Gilbert Scott was a very hardworking and prolific architect who, in addition to the Albert Memorial and a lot of church work, also banged out a fair few lunatic asylums; this hotel, though, he regarded as his finest work. His grandson, Giles Gilbert Scott, also made his mark on London with Battersea Power Station, which itself has often come within a whisker of demolition: they still haven't actually done anything with it, though. He also designed the red telephone box – an internationally recognised and much-loved symbol of the Capital, such fame and affection virtually guaranteeing that everything possible has been done to eradicate it from our streets, along with the Routemaster bus: they both proliferate only in miniature, in tacky souvenir shops. I am daily astounded that they have not yet uprooted all of our pillar boxes – or at least determined that they now must be painted beige because the existing bright red could very well easily cause

With dishes such as Dorset jugged steak and Kentish pigeon in a pot, Marcus Wareing's new restaurant at the restored St Pancras Renaissance Hotel is a celebration of all things English, discovers **Joseph Connolly**



A great British menu ... Joseph with Marcus Wareing at Gilbert Scott.

offence to any minority factions who are not really that partial to bright red.

The restaurant Gilbert Scott opened a week ago today, and last Saturday, there I was for dinner. Marcus Wareing is the eminence here, although characteristically his name is nowhere to be found. They could have called the place Mrs Beeton: certainly, along with Eliza Acton, she is an abiding influence. "This restaurant is not about a chef," says Marcus. "It's about Englishness and the customer". This is one of the most cheering manifestos I ever have heard. In charge of the kitchen is Oliver Wilson, late of Richard Caring's Scott's, and for the first few weeks of Gilbert Scott, Marcus will be generally around – as you can see from the photo – but is, I feel, rather eager to be back and cooking, safely out of sight, in his eponymous restaurant in the Berkeley Hotel. This is a two Michelin star fine dining establishment where I have enjoyed very many exquisitely prepared, executed and presented dishes. Gilbert Scott is – perfectly intentionally – a very different creature: a brasserie, open for breakfast, lunch and dinner...

and it's English! You'll search the menu in vain for steak frites, moules mariniere, eggs Benedict or any other familiar staples. What we have instead is a long and utterly glorious menu of such strangenesses as Dorset jugged steak, Kentish pigeon in a pot, Suffolk stew (mutton meatballs!), Tweed Kettle (crested sea trout) and Mrs Peckham's lobster (who she? Dunno: maybe Del Boy's old mum – the world was her lobster). But this is one of the most fresh and exciting menus I have seen in years. Sides include pea pudding, chips with Sarson's mayonnaise, Yorkshire pud, roast potatoes (in beef dripping) ... and sage and onion Paxo stuffing. Oh to be in England now that tuck is here!

So ... just before we feast, let's have a jolly good look at this extraordinary room: the deeply coffered ceiling is alive with very ornate plasterwork upheld by corbels and deep cream Corinthian capitals atop the alternating rose and gunmetal alabaster columns. The vast iron and opaque glass chandeliers are reminiscent of those in The Wolseley, as is the whole general feel of the place, actually. Jeremy

King and Chris Corbin have long been the masters at all this sort of thing, but clearly the word is spreading. Buttermilk walls, vast and lofty windows, immense windows, smart white napery with burgundy leather banquettes and chairs. Sound all right? It's more than all right: a truly splendid space. The service is extremely attentive and efficient, and just

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FACTFILE

- **GILBERT SCOTT**
St Pancras Renaissance Hotel,
Euston Road, NW1
Tel: 020-7278 3888
- Open all day for breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: About £120 for three course meal for two, with wine. Many cheaper options.

exactly friendly enough. The provenance of the staff I spoke to is also encouraging: the maitre d' was formerly with Helene Darroze at The Connaught, one waitress was from The Wolseley, while another had been deputy manager of Delia's restaurants at Norwich Football Ground. Whenever I enter a new restaurant, I am always wondering where all the highly trained staff can suddenly come from: it appears to be an eternal carousel. Here they wear black trousers, white shirt with bow, and black braces – these last evidently causing problems for some of the females who clearly have had to decide whether they go over or around, as it were: I don't think they'd mind if the braces were ditched.

My wife and I took ages to order: really, you want to try everything. Eventually she went for Queen Anne's artichoke tart, and I was having Dorset crab. The tart ("absolutely delicious", she said) was a lovely crisp circle of puff pastry, the wedges of artichoke fresh and flavoursome with a well judged tarragon dressing. My crab was billed as being both brown and white meat, but when it arrived very prettily on an arrangement of little leaves, it was all white (which was perfectly all white with me). The addition of a scattering of halved hazelnuts and slivers of pear was actually inspired. As we awaited our mains, a party of four rumbustiously rolled up at the next table. The two dressed-up gels wanted, like, a cuppa droy woyt woynes, okay? While the two dressed-down lads

were well up for a noyce bolla reb. And in no time at all, one of said lads had managed to knock over a glassful of it, which just went everywhere. In literally seconds, smiling staff had added a fresh tablecloth, eradicated all trace of spillage on the floor, and discreetly asked me about the state of my jacket (virtually unscathed, mercifully): all very impressive.

My wife had one of their signature dishes: soles in coffins. This is fillets of lemon sole on a bed of puree potato (the original 'coffin' was the interior of a whole baked potato, but this version is regarded as more refined). At first she thought this a little mulchy – food for a convalescent. But as she delved, she came to love the texture, and the very fine flavours. I had The Queen's Potage, which was a breast of chicken topped by a crunchy coating of mushroom and pistachio, and surrounded by an intense consommé (rather than potage as I understand it) with a trio of yummy pork dumplings; we were sharing proper roast potatoes and top rate new season asparagus. The waitress said we just had to have pudding, and I couldn't disagree. So I ordered the egg custard (which famously Marcus Wareing prepared for the Queen's 80th birthday dinner) and my wife had a Manchester tart. Odd, really, that in King's Cross they had to travel so very far to find one. Here was banana, custard, jam and rum cream. I know it was good because it was mistakenly presented to me: we then swapped – and the custard, I must say, was sublime, and made even better by the glass of Australian riesling: nectar, utter nectar.

So should our alien from outer space indeed be passing any time soon, I urge him to eat in what must be England's best restaurant to be associated with a railway station: he then should linger – it's worth much more than a brief encounter.

□ **JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY** (Faber and Faber, £8.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

National Wine Month



was "the most difficult harvest in the region in 50 years".

Just a stroll from Iberica, at the other (Oxford Circus) end of Great Portland Street, is Deگو', the degustation restaurant/bar opened last October by former Hakkasan sommelier Massimo Mioli, with a 220-strong list particularly emphasising organic and biodynamic wines. It's one of 90-plus restaurants in London promoting Natural Wine

Fortnight, a separate initiative which happens to fall within National Wine Month. It runs for another 10 days, with the Natural Wine Fair at Borough Market the highlight (the fair's public day is Sunday 10am-6pm, tickets £18, see www.thenaturalwinefair.com for more details of all that's going on and the full list of restaurants involved).

Deگو' has gone beyond the minimum one red, one white

offer, with four Italian choices, £6.70-£9 a glass on their own or with food.

More conventional activity includes plenty of retail offers. Tesco's spring festival (until May 17) gives chances to try lots of the generally reliable Finest* wines at reduced prices: these newcomers are very drinkable: vinho verde £5, picpoul de pinet £5.25, Barossa Block 19 shiraz-cabernet £6. And Spar, whose range is looking up, has good reductions in its second wine festival (until June 8) – the Sancerre Chene St Louis 2009, £9.70, is decent value.

But there is loads more going on, including some good learning opportunities. Log on to www.maketimeforwine.org to find out.



An ambassador for Spanish wines ..Bruno Murciano.

Pictures by Nigel Sutton