

Reassuringly historic in hi-tech modern world



I've just got a brand new SmartPhone. My last one was mentally defective. I've had others that were merely societally erratic, though there's one I still recoil from which was diagnosed as clinically insane. But this new SmartPhone ... oh my God, 'smart', it's just too small a word for it. Here is the equivalent of Bertrand Russell, plus a QWERTY keyboard: it renders Einstein no more than a superficial dilettante. So when, on an impulse, I decided upon a solitary march across Hampstead Heath, I remembered with a rush that on this spanking new device I could in an instant whistle up a weather report so that I'd know just what I should be wearing. Yes well ... the trouble with a SmartPhone is that so often it is compelled to sighingly deal with a perfectly moronic operator, who can but approach it with the nervousness of a girl. I Googled, I giggled ... I giggled and I Googled, and still all I could come up with was warning of an imminent tornado over the Indian Ocean. I finally did track down the forecast for North West London, though. Chilly, it said: fair risk of rain, heavy at times. Well as this instant bulletin had taken up the better part of the morning, I was more or less committed to the thing - so I bunged on the Burberry, the hat and the sort of boots that are allegedly resistant to all under-

foot squelch.

Well what can I say? Half way to Highgate, and the sun was beating down on me: I was carrying the hat, trailing the coat, cursing the bloody Met Office ... and in urgent need of cooling shelter, food and drink. Now the Spaniards Inn is not the first place I would have thought of as a summery arbour, but it was alluringly close ... and I hadn't crossed the threshold in maybe ten years or more. It used to be quite a regular port of call in the days when I bestirred myself rather more, and made great use of the Heath: what can I tell you? These days, I'm just too idle for my own good.

Calming

The thing about the Spaniards is that of course it is just the same as I remembered it. Well naturally it is: they don't go in much for change around here, and I can't tell you what a bloody good thing that is. Dating back to 1585, it's what all the London guides call 'dripping with history' - which sounds rather more than faintly disgusting to me: as if our forebears had been very messy indeed, and it's down to us to manfully cope with all the sticky residue. The interior is perfectly wonderful - low ceilings, dark oak panelling, and intriguing little rooms off other rooms - a marvellous tiny snug hard by the main entrance, and all just worn and lived-in enough to be calming, comfortable, and not quite shabby. The decent garden, of course - though what might still be the aviary was boarded up and covered in adverts for Pimm's. The Inn is referred to in quite a few novels - most notably *The Pickwick Papers* and *Dracula* - and you can take your pick as to why it's called the Spaniards: either be-



■ The wonderful interior of the Spaniards Inn with its dark oak panelling

Picture: Polly Hancock

cause it used to be the country bolthole of the Spanish Ambassador to the Court of James I ... or because there was a pair of early landlords who were Spanish (and hence Spaniards, without the apostrophe). And they say that dear old Dick Turpin's dad was the sometime gov'nor in the eighteenth century, and that in this very building dear old Dick Turpin's mum gave birth to the legendary highwayman himself (although at that time such a career choice had yet to be made). A place in Essex also makes this claim: it is called Hempstead.

There was but a smattering of tables taken on this Monday lunchtime ... though an impressive twenty dishes were on offer: the cheapest was soup of the day (courgette and something - can't remember) with bread at £5.50, and the most expensive a really very reasonable £16.75 for a 10oz rib eye steak with tomato confit (whatev-

er that is) and chips. So ... while enjoying the no music, enjoying the no machines, enjoying the no red-faced men at the bar going Har Har Har - I settled into my settle and studied the very faint menu ("I've got no ink in my printer," the barman helpfully explained). And don't think it's easy to settle into a settle: they're absolute murder, if you've got bones and joints and things.

There were wild salmon fishcakes with lemon and chive crème fraiche ... there was beer battered haddock and chips - and that was what the three people at a table nearby were having. The fish was enormous - like a bubbly orange shark - but did appear to be a bit overdone, looking at the white of it: the punters seemed very happy, though. More intriguing was smoked haddock with bubble and squeak and a poached egg in a white wine cream sauce ... and then, rather more wintry, there was a slow-cooked beef

and red wine pie with crushed pea mash. And that is what I was having, I decided. So don't ask me why, when the barman came over, I ordered half a Shropshire chicken with herb butter, red wine gravy, frites and that 'confit tomato' again: I acted on a whim, and no one was more surprised than myself. As I waited for that, I sipped a Cote du Rhone rose, and had a further look about me. There's a nice copper-canopied fireplace which is always comfortingly ablaze in winter. I remember that a regular presence was Barry Gibb - now, alas, the only Bee Gee who still may be said to be stayin' alive. The barman would say to him "All right Barry, mate?" and Barry would say "Yeh: you all right, mate?" and the barman said "Yeh Barry mate - you?" and Barry said "Fine yeh, mate. Fine." Which was nice.

It wasn't half a roast chicken: it was two portions of leg and thigh conjoined. Quite

tender, though just a little greasy, I'm afraid. Frites were nice, as was one large Portobello mushroom. 'Tomato confit' turns out to be a slice of grilled tomato ... though the red wine gravy, in its own little jug, was really quite superb: rich and glossy: the chicken would have been lost without it. I left by the main door because I wanted to have a squint at the Toll House opposite - newly restored, thanks to the Heath & Hampstead Society. But leaving from that door actually means just standing there forever, wild-eyed and cowering - peeping with terror around the blind spot corner to see what new thundering thing now is hurtling in your direction. At last I chanced it when I saw an ambulance approaching: I reckoned that if it hit me, at least it would save some time. And then although I well knew the way home, I thought I'd do that SatNav type thing on my new and wonderful gizmo, though I managed to locate only a little-known passage through the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. And that's one of the troubles with modern life: SmartPhone ... DumbBloke.

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

FACTFILE

- **SPANIARDS INN**
Spaniards Road, NW3
Tel: 020-8731 8406
- Open for food all day: Mon-Sat noon-11pm. Sun noon-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆ (better on Sundays)
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: Pretty reasonable: about £50 for two course meal for two with drink.



HAZARA

44 Belsize Lane, NW3 5AR ♦ 0207 433 1147 ♦ 0207 433 1139 ♦ www.hazararestaurant.com



Hazara is an Authentic Indian Restaurant using the freshest of ingredients with only the finest of herbs and spices.

Due to the varied dietary backgrounds of all our patrons we use separate cooking utensils for all our white fish, seafood, game, poultry, meat and vegetables with individual labelling and storage.

We have carefully brought together a selection of indigenous dishes from all the culinary regions of India, so whether you prefer the pungent aromas of the Northwest Frontier, the luscious blends of Awad, the cuisine befitting the Maharajas of Rajasthan or the sweet and spicy flavours of Goa we are sure you'll find your taste.