

REVIEW:

The Kingham Plough

TOBY HAMBLY



There's nothing small about the USA's small-town mentality. Their introductory smiles warp the space-time continuum while they regale you with stories about the bar down the road once frequented by Ronald Reagan's second cousin's dentist. Their pride will puff up beyond the relative mediocrity of it all – "This is the third-oldest gas station in the mid-west, built in 1959!" – but it'll be communal, sincere and magnanimous.

In the UK it's a different story. Village pride comes with committees and backstabbing. It comes with the pickled narcissism of paltry differences and decades-old garden-based grudges. There's a kind of unwritten hierarchy; a social standing offended by parking your car badly or making noise. Something as benign as the annual panto can become a tumultuous cradle of Machiavellian intrigue.

I'm generalising, and if you're on the local panto committee, please don't write in. It's only really in the south of England that this is prevalent, and then only really in the Cotswolds that it gets full-throated dedication. As such it's on my mind as I wend my way to Kingham. Judged to have been 'England's Favourite Village' by *Country Life* in 2004, it's also (sort of) home to Alex James of Blur/farming fame, and to two of the region's most lauded gastropubs – The Wild Rabbit and The Kingham Plough, on whose threshold I find myself.

I'd never been before, so if you're here hoping for a comparative review to the stewardship of Emily Watkins (you know, off the telly) then I'm afraid I'm not your guy. It's under the new management of Matt and Katie Beamish

and they come highly recommended. As does their pick for head chef, Jonny Pons, who's previously led the kitchen at The Slaughters Country Inn, worked under David Kelman at Ellenborough Park and with OX favourite, Kuba Winkowski, at The Feathered Nest.

I can only imagine the pressure. Not only is there the stress of a new venue, location and suppliers, but there's the protective cloak of pride from the locals. I've worked in a community-owned pub before and trust me, there is no end to the burden of expectation. Though The Plough's bricks aren't literally owned by the locals, a cockup here would still be a two-stroke affair. Thank God then, for everyone's sake, that it's exceptional.

We arrive and drop our bags in one of their six magnificently appointed en-suite rooms; I make a mental note to have a post-dinner bath. Back to the bar and there's a glorious pint of Moreton Mild in my hand quicker than you can say 'modern British with a twist'. We peruse the October menu and it reads like an ode to autumn. There's parsnip and ginger soup, fish pie, halibut and duck – there's not a single thing I wouldn't order. A couple leave and wish manager, JJ, ▶



good luck for the wedding. He thanks them with a knowing look. With an apprehensive smile he tells us he's getting married soon, with a big do in the Shard. I warm to him immediately.

Regular readers will know we're hardly stuck for centuries-old gastropub/inns in Oxfordshire. I reckon I could probably populate a mood board from memory, but despite my overfamiliarity with the format, I find The Plough's interior alarmingly tasteful. There's a fireplace to stare into as you solemnly swill a brandy and contemplate an affair. There's stone, slate, brass and wood, and little nooks and crannies from which to foment a coup. They've managed to perfectly hit the shabby-chic mismatch aesthetic without it feeling at all muddled. It's a comfortably luxuriant place to enjoy the offerings from Mr Pons' kitchen.

I have the special of chicken liver on brioche toast with a deep, satiating mustard cream sauce. I'm in heaven. The relationship between food and memory is a strong one providing that inexpressible extra joy of eating. I was taken right back to the crisp autumn evenings when I'd rush back home in the dwindling light with a sniffly nose and a few conkers in my pocket, to be welcomed by butternut squash soup, mushrooms on toast or shepherd's pie. I felt that cosy tranquillity of my mother's kitchen; the sense that all will be alright with the world. All the foams, smears, gels and tuiles in Paris couldn't procure that feeling.

The quality of the ingredients is second to none. Virtually everything is made in-house and Jonny is the type of chef that turns the season into a palette to paint with. I have Old Spot pork belly cooked so well it banishes all memory of having ever eaten dry chops. Harmony is provided by the sharp tang of apple relish sitting atop the most intensely flavoured bubble and squeak I've ever had. It's nothing like your usual mashed fried leftovers situation – it's a rich, meaty, salty puck of decadent deliciousness. He's taken something modestly familiar and elevated it to something truly memorable. It's up there with my favourite courses of the year.

My eyes are now semi-glazed, my posture slackened. We've been making our merry way through Bordeaux, with a sultry, sturdy bottle of 2014 Château La Croix de Cabut, one of a



particularly splendid cast of tipples on the wine list. Local breweries and distilleries are represented to the extent you'd expect of patrons so dedicated to their environs.

We drag our feet across the courtyard and fold ourselves into the plush quilted embrace of our room. I run that bath and submit to the bliss of it all. As I soak I feel an odd sense of national pride. I wonder why I've been so down on the British sensibility – probably because of the torrid time I had working in a tiny village. Americans show enthusiasm for practically everything, we show appreciation with sardonicism. One's American Pie, the other's Blackadder; one's a five dollar shake, the other's a pint of mild. The Kingham Plough reminds me that I'll take the latter, each and every time. I might even try my hand at panto.

As if you needed any more reason to go – The Kingham Plough has recently been awarded a 2020 Good Food Guide Gastro Pub Award. Congratulations to the team!

thekinghamplough.co.uk