

John Westlake samples some of the places in our area where good food and good ale go hand in hand



Nestling in a lovely, semi-wooded valley just to the south of Blidworth where, according to legend, the outlaw Will Scarlet lies buried in the local churchyard of St Mary of the Purification, the Fox and Hounds is an attractive, cream painted hostelry standing opposite a narrow lane that leads directly to Papplewick Pumping Station, Britain's finest, steam-powered Victorian Water Works. Enjoying the splendid address of Blidworth Bottoms, the Fox and Hounds is a family run affair dedicated to serving good value food alongside a selection of well kept beers although in its early days, it is believed that the business also doubled up as a nail maker's shop. There is ample parking, a nice big, grassy beer garden and a dining extension to the rear, added in 2004 and furnished in traditional pubby fashion. This used to be a Kimberley Brewery house so, not surprisingly, most of the cask-conditioned beers come from the Greene King portfolio, including Hardys & Hansons Best Bitter, now sadly brewed many miles away in Bury St Edmunds although, for old time's sake, mine hosts have gone to the trouble to source one of the original Kimberley pump clips. More importantly, they are also permitted to stock a guest beer and on this occasion it is an excellent drop of Exmoor Ale, a golden, fruity brew that is sure to go well with almost any food selection.

The book-like, formal menu is divided into separate pages for chicken dishes; fish dishes; chef's recommendation; vegetarian dishes and the like, whilst the daily specials are chalked on a blackboard adjacent to the kitchen doorway. Baby baked Camembert scudded with rosemary and garlic and served with crusty bread for dipping (£5.95) sounds like a good way to kick off but feeling like something a little more spicy, I plump for one of the blackboard starters: Thai king prawns in a spicy tempura batter, presented with a green salad and sweet chilli dip (£6.95).

Although the pub is surprisingly busy for a mid-week, fairly late lunchtime, I do not have long to wait before I am eyeing five good sized prawns beside a really fresh salad that includes chopped tomato, red onion and cucumber, together with a small dish of thick chilli sauce, a little too sweet for my liking but with quite a kick to it nonetheless. The prawns have been cooked to a tee, beautifully succulent and full flavoured within the lightest of crispy, golden coatings, the delicacy of which does great credit to the kitchen.

Oriental inspired dishes feature quite widely on both menus and the four red chilli symbols next to the piri-piri chicken, served with herby potatoes, peas and a salad garnish (£9.75) are challengingly tempting, but it is the specials board that lures me back as I cannot resist trying another seafood dish in the shape of Chinese five spice salmon with noodles, stir fry vegetables and prawn crackers (£12.95).

Once again service is prompt and a large, white, soup bowl of a plate is soon set before me bearing a Moby Dick sized slab of spice-blackened salmon sitting atop a more than generous helping of perfectly cooked egg noodles, themselves enveloped in a tasty

mixture of stir fried veg, with a large wedge of lemon and twist of orange on the side. Pink and flaky inside if, perhaps, not quite as moist as it might be, the flavours of the fish shine through without being overwhelmed by its spicy coating, subtly infused with hints of aniseed and cloves. Equally enjoyable are the crunchy baby sweetcorn, chopped peppers and straw mushrooms lurking below. However, the imaginative inclusion of diced aubergines does not entirely work for me, as I believe they are a vegetable best cooked to perfect softness in dishes such as moussaka, rather than served al dente, as in the case here. It is a rare exception to my normal veggie cooking preferences but nevertheless, the meal has been a thoroughly satisfying experience, even if I am totally defeated by the sheer size of the helping. One thing is for sure, no customer is likely to leave the Fox and Hounds still feeling hungry!

Desserts also have a menu page to themselves and include such gooey treats as Dime Bar crunch, comprising layers of caramel on a chocolate biscuit base with a creamy filling, topped with Dime Bar flakes and chocolate (£4.75) or, perhaps, a similarly priced strawberry clotted cream Pavlova topped off with a choice of cream or ice cream.



Diane and David Cole have been at the helm of the Fox and Hounds for the last ten years and obviously know what running a pub is all about. Despite their somewhat isolated location, a visit here is heartily recommended. And bring a hearty appetite too!