



My Hogpits Voluntary ended on a bum note

This week: **The Bricklayers Arms, Herts**

CRATING 7/10

Hogpits Bottom,
Flaunden, Herts
HP3 0PH
01442 833322;
bricklayersarms.com
Three courses with wine
and coffee: about £50
per head



Even at this premature date, I feel emboldened to announce that we already have a winner in the prestigious Most Puerilely Sniggerworthy Restaurant Address competition for 2014: The Bricklayers Arms, Hogpits Bottom, Flaunden, Herts.

A vague memory hints that this was also the name of a cottage inhabited by Charles Hawtrey, Joan Sims and a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig in *Carry On Oinking*, though since no such film was ever made it is equally possible that I just made that up. Be that as it may, one's automatic assumption about any business situated on Hogpits Bottom would be that, under Equity rules, the only actors ever permitted to cross its threshold would be Sid James, Hattie Jacques, Kenneth Williams and other stalwarts of the franchise that made an art form of teasing to the surface the naughty seven-year-old lurking within us all.

However, it transpired when we arrived at a Grade II listed building, far prettier on the outside than within, that neither of the two actors boasting a recent connection with the place features in the *Carry On* corpus. One is the patrician-seeming Nigel Havers, who came here to record part of his episode of the celebrity genealogy show *Who Do You Think You Are?* and found a tale that was more *EastEnders* than *Downton Abbey*. To the other we shall come in due course.

If the secrets of his ancestors meant that Havers was less grand than he looked, by contrast the Bricklayers Arms seems determined to cloak the lordliness of its cooking in the naff disguise of a Seventies' suburban steakhouse. "I'm not sure what to make of it," sniffed my cousin Nick when we pitched up early one Saturday evening. "It's all a bit sub-Aberdeen Angus." With its cheap furniture and paintings, garish semi-tartan carpet, twee curtains and flashing fairy lights, not to mention the hideously chirpy music, this low-ceilinged room (in fact, several interconnecting rooms) comes as close to pioneering the retro concept of Berni Inn Chic as is decent.

Although it feels much pubbier than gastro, the entire area is devoted to dining; and the reason for this was explained by the starters. Admittedly, our expectations had been sufficiently lowered by the decor that we were ready to award a couple of unofficial Bib Gourmands to a well-pickled egg. Yet by any but the most stellar of standards, our food was outstanding.

Nick kicked off with carrot and celeriac soup, sprinkled with coriander, which at first drew a lukewarm "perfectly pleasant" but which grew on him by the spoonful, as a

godly broth will, until he was smitten with its delicacy and "perfect velvety texture". More creative was my salad of marinated artichoke hearts, crispy chorizo and quail eggs in a Thousand Island-ish, though obviously home-made, dressing.

The mild air of suppressed impudence we had detected on arrival finally bubbled up when we sent back glasses of a Chilean cabernet sauvignon, from a bottle palpably not opened that day as a waitress confirmed, and better suited to cleaning spark plugs than being drunk.

A cocky chap was overheard declaring that it smelt fine to him. Restaurant workers of Britain, how many times must I say this to you? If a punter believes the wine is off, replace it with a smile without arguing the toss. That apart, the service was attentive and competent in a clinical sort of a way.

There was nothing clinical about the main courses, however. Nick loved his braised leg of lamb shredded with sweet carrot purée, potatoes dauphinois and a rosemary jus. The meat was gorgeously tender and exploding with the huge, rich, luxurious flavour of well-fed, lovingly reared lamb, while it hinted at the imagination at work in the kitchen that

also present on the plate were strips of plantain (a less sugary cousin of the banana).

Better still, nay, memorably delicious, was ox cheek cooked in local Tring Ale and honey, served with champ, which had spectacular depth of flavour and left a glorious beery-beefy aftertaste. The clinching proof of unusually high standards came from a superb tomato and onion side salad in which the tomatoes tasted powerfully of tomato, a phenomenon that regular readers will know only occurs in the jobbing restaurant critic's life with vanishing rarity.

A sharp lemon tart came with panna cotta and the creamiest imaginable raspberry ice cream, and we left a little baffled that such serious, rigorous, technically adroit cooking should be served in an environment of such relentlessly facetious good cheer. "Great food," opined Nick as we settled up, elegantly summing up the mood of the meeting, "but I'm not sure I'd be desperate to come back."

Another diner who contented himself with a lone visit was the second of the dramatic giants alluded to above. "He sat over there," said one of the waitressing trio, "at that table by the fire." Did you gawp? "Certainly not. Much." Oddly, there is no plaque memorialising this event, if there were, it would feature an arrow pointing down to the relevant chair, and the legend "Brad Pitt's Bottom".

Your table is ready