

Poet's pub on track for fast and simple culinary success

Novelist **Joseph Connolly** is pleasantly surprised by the food in St Pancras station

NOT at all usual to name a pub in honour of a recent Poet laureate (Hughes' Booze? Motion's Potions? I hardly think so) but in The Betjeman Arms we have a noble exception. A rather surprising place, this, and not least for its location – in St Pancras Station on the upper level devoted to the comings and goings of Eurostar. I had clocked it earlier in the year – and it had seemed so much more appealing than the place downstairs called Des Vins (whoever he may be) – when I gaddied off to Paris for an all-boys birthday lunch in honour of my chum Noel Botham, author and owner of the legendary French House pub in Soho: 20 of us, there were, a very fair number making it back home again. And isn't it great not having to traipse over to Waterloo any more? The French are delighted too, St Pancras not being notable as a pivotal Napoleonic defeat.

There is much to distract one along the length of this rather wonderful concourse, this perfect restoration of rosy brick, pale stone and blood-coloured granite setting off so splendidly the vaulted and dove grey ironwork of the quite magnificent arch that encloses it all. For a start there is the 'longest champagne bar in Europe' – which is actually something of a disappointment. Just a cubic kiosk with lit vitrines showing off the finest, rarest and generally most tear-makingly expensive champagnes, and then a long thin mahogany table and booths where one or two people somewhat self-consciously are sipping a glass of the cheapest.

The next thing you stumble upon is the gigglingly fabulous Martin Jennings bronze of the lad himself: Sir John Betjeman, larger than life in flapping mac, too-short trousers and clutching a carrier bag – holding on to his hat as he gazes up with an undimmed schoolboy wonder at the miracle of railway engineering soaring above him. For it was he, in the 1960s, who almost single-handedly rescued this station and the adjoining fairy tale hotel from the wrecker's ball. They did this in the 1960s, I'm afraid – destroyed the unique and irreplaceable (Covent Garden and Soho only just scraped through, even Betjeman failing with the Euston Arch) and put up in their place the sort of hideous, stained and discredited hulks that now we are demolishing in turn (those, at least, which have not fallen over of their own accord). Soon to go,



I am pleased to say, is the glass and clapboard slum that ruins the fine façade of King's Cross Station, just around the corner. So anyway – next to this statue ... surely The Betjeman Arms? Well no ... there's a first class lounge ... and there's the Camden Food Co (couldn't ever go there because the fell word Camden always makes me think of paying the rates and wondering why) ... and then a little way on, another statue, massive and gross. Here is meant to be a pair of lovers taking a fond farewell, though peering up at the horrible thing (his trousers – in contrast to Betjeman's – are way too long, her kick-pleat skirt unfathomable, and stilettos the size of a gondola) one sees only a burly transvestite and a salivating vampire on the verge of transfusion. Oh look! There's The Betjeman Arms, and very welcome too. (On the Paris trip, a Frenchman couldn't understand the 'Arms' bit and so I translated

it as Betjeman bras, but I confess that it didn't seem right).

This pub is one of about 20 in a fairly young chain called Geronimo Inns (The Queens on Primrose Hill is another) and they really do seem to know what they're doing. My wife and I were there at lunchtime, but apparently in the evenings they get up to all sorts: Tuesday is Piano Night and on Friday there's live jazz. Every other night, they say, "is for kicking back and feeling groovy", which would have gratified Betjeman no end. The jazz takes place where we were sitting, on the 'terrace', as they call it – tricked out like a stylish patio garden with large umbrellas (to protect you from neither the sun nor rain) and fine fake topiary in cubes and urns. There is a very cool bar inside and three large dining rooms of varying formality, one with a Victorian fireplace and buttoned leather armchairs. But from the terrace you can smugly gaze upon

Eurostar arrivals – the insatiable crew of London slurping up yet more trainloads of weary travellers laden with luggage and care ... while all that's on your plate is lunch!

The menu is short and to the point – just as, in a place of transit, it should be; service is correspondingly prompt. So the wife – who has a soft spot for old Betj and particularly those marvellous LPs he made in the 1980s reciting his poetry in awe to a brilliantly coordinated musical backing – was thinking decidedly English: so beer battered coley, chips and crushed peas ("I remember coley," she said. "My mother used to get it for the cat"). She liked it a lot – stronger flavour than cod (a relation) though not so fine as haddock. She could have done with more crushed peas (mushy by another name) and the chips were quite sensational: thick, hot, crunchy, golden and exploding within ... there is more? I know

this because I had them too with what was billed as a roast ham, potato and red pepper omelette but was in fact a good thick chunk of a cold frittata: loved it. Might have been better warm, I concede, but the dressed salad and tomato chutney were very good indeed. Then, over a muted loudspeaker, came a station announcement: "Her murgan faw-faw. Will all mun gunurgle

FACTFILE

- ❑ **THE BETJEMAN ARMS**, St Pancras International Station, Pancras Road, NW1. Tel 020 7923 5440
- ❑ Open 12 noon – 11pm daily. Last food orders 9.30 pm.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: About £50 for two courses for two, with drink

plurs unga-unga blur to splurg. Lup tup blop. Dan Dare." Well ... okay, then...

I had a large glass of French rose, La Grande Cinsault – very good for £5.20 – and my wife, sticking with the English thing, had a half pint of ... guess what? Betjeman Ale. Yes indeed – a proper malty cask ale, brewed in Cornwall and served in a dimpled mug. Ah, England ...! And the pudding menu was oh-so-eager to pursue the theme, I am sure ironically – though they missed a trick in not including some or other concoction called Betjeman's Banana Blush, the title of one of those beatific LPs. But you could have instead 'Aunt Sally's cup o'tea and a slice of cake' followed by 'Lots of yummy drinks made with love!'. I had to ask the smiling waiter about these: "Oh – you know," he said. "Muscadet, things like that." "Oh right: pudding wine." "Yes." "So not made here, then? With love?" "No," he sadly admitted. "But," he said, visibly brightening, "they are yummy!". She had an apple crumble with custard and one huge strawberry – much enjoyed, but not enough custard – and I a plum tarte tatin with vanilla ice cream. This was freshly made – I was warned of a 10-minute wait – and more or less proper, if rather thin on the pastry side. This is a professional set-up that gets it very largely right – we had a good time, a good lunch and a total bill of just over £40.

Then came another station announcement: "Will aflamblah. When yarden excom-winniturd der-der-der-der ram up nappy flagrlung. Angel clam phलग. Van clog boomy-boomy girdle. Tin ya." Well ... okay, then...

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest book is **Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design** (Faber and Faber; £25). www.josephconnolly.co.uk*

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