



Chewing it over ... Joseph Connolly and Hunter Davies go through the menu at the Market, in Parkway.

Picture by Polly Hancock

Autograph writer

Books, Beatles, beef, collecting and the spelling of sponge were discussed jovially when novelist **Joseph Connolly** met writer Hunter Davies for lunch in the Market, noted for its Englishness

I WAS still at school when Hunter Davies's seminal book was published – the first proper grown-up hardback about The Beatles, and of course I most desperately wanted it ... though at thirty shillings, my mother demurred. It was either the book or the Fab Four's latest LP: I had to choose. Well sorry, Hunt – the Lads won hands down. Some time after I picked up the paperback though, and thoroughly consumed it. Hunter has revealed in the various updates since that because this biography was authorised, a lot of fascinating detail, insights and uncomfortable truths had to be suppressed, but at the time the book was gospel, and still among the fans it is regarded as totemic. Later still I acquired a mint copy of the first edition, and although Hunter and I have met quite a few times since, it was only a couple of weeks ago that I slid it across the table towards him. He regarded the multi-coloured and groovy Alan Aldridge jacket with fondness. "I got him the job to do that cover," said Hunter. "He was a neighbour. I would have liked the original artwork, but he wanted a hundred quid for it. I said to him: a hundred quid! You must be joking. Months later I relented – but he'd already sold it to a Japanese collector by then. For a thousand."

It would fetch a lot more today: I know this because I'm a bit of a Beatles collector myself. Not in Hunter's league, though – my God no. Because he was actually there. He knew them all intimately (and he still sees Paul and Ringo). In his latest book, *Confessions of a Collector*, he dangles all manner of desirabilia before our eyes – not just Beatles stuff but football (his other great passion), stamps, the autographs of every single Prime Minister, first issues of newspapers, comics and magazines ... oh, just all sorts of the most glorious junk

– which now, of course, isn't junk at all. The cream of his Beatles collection is a sheaf of song lyrics and notes handwritten by John and Paul in Abbey Road Studio. Hunter asked permission to pick them up off the floor: they are now on permanent loan to the British Library, and valued at literally millions.

We were lunching in Market, in Parkway. I'd heard good things about it – and as it prides itself on its Englishness and is not too far from Hunter's London home (his other is in the Lake District, where he hails from) I thought it might be ideal. "I looked at the scruffy outside of the place," said Hunter – his wit is dry and his manner can be bluff – "and I thought why has this man invited me to a shabby old Camden Town caff?" I took his point – from the street, it doesn't look promising. It's painted matt black, and the word 'Market' in off-white appears to be crumbling and peeling away ... looks rather like a Soho Adult Book Store, as they used to call them. But the flaking of the lettering, it turns out, is deliberate – repeated in all its patchiness at the head



My pie... oh God, my pie, it is a revelation: the best chicken and ham pie imaginable

FACTFILE

MARKET
43 Parkway, Camden Town
Tel: 020-7267 9700
Open: Monday to Saturday noon to 2.30pm, 6pm to 10.30pm. Sunday 1pm to 3.30pm.
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Cost: Amazing two-course set lunch deal at £10. Otherwise, about £70 for three courses for two, with wine

of the menu. There's an awful lot of competition around: I counted 24 places in Parkway where you can eat and drink – including Palmers, which used to be the pet shop and now is a rum sort of tearoom filled with old furniture where blank-eyed men and chatty elderly ladies were sitting in the window under the original fascias announcing the availability of 'Monkeys' and 'Talking Parrots'. It's edgy, Parkway, and very mixed. The legendary live music pub, the Dublin Castle, opposite cooler and more affluent bars in chrome and elephant grey. Dodgy-looking dives as well. I'm not saying that Camden Town is necessarily a more risky place to loiter than elsewhere, but the flower stall on the corner is the only one I have ever seen that offers a selection of ready-made wreaths.

Inside, Market looks good, in an artfully rustic sort of a way: an old, bare and pock-marked red brick wall, oak floor, zinc-topped square tables surrounded by almost-Aalto bent plywood chairs, each of which bears a stencilled number (they maybe have been salvaged from an asylum). Water is served in an enamelled tin jug, with sturdy Duralex tumblers. The welcome is warm and efficient – it speaks of

confidence – and the set lunch has to be the bargain of the century: £10 for two courses. "Yeh, but it'll be mingy ..." muttered Hunter, in the hearing of the waitress. "Not at all," she corrected him – smilingly, though the teeth were a bit gritted. He ordered it: rare roast beef with a salad, followed by a fillet of bream with fresh vegetables – though he could have gone for chicken breast, mash, bread sauce and mustard gravy ... which I very nearly did myself. But then I saw chicken and ham pie on the a la carte, and that sounded just perfect. Before this I happily dealt with Serrano ham and an excellent celeriac remoulade. And Hunter's beef – there was loads of it: tender, rare, and it vanished in no time.

It is difficult to calculate just how many books this man has written, but it must be north of fifty. He has been married to the highly esteemed novelist Margaret Forster since the 'sixties and their daughter Caitlin has already produced five books herself. Hunter is publishing another couple this summer. Makes me feel quite idle. Anyway – he said he enjoyed the bream a lot – but I hardly heard him because my pie ... my pie ... oh, God my pie, it was a revelation: the best chicken and ham pie imaginable – all the meat and leeks so very creamily unctuous and flavourful,

almost fragrant, and beneath its perfect canopy of puff pastry, this oval bowl was jammed. There was crunchy kale on the side: all quite sublime.

To say that Hunter is a creature of habit is to understate the case: he renders creatures of habit no more than will o' the wisps, dilettantes, capricious fly-by-nights who might turn on a whim. He buys 48 bottles of Beaujolais from Morrisons. Always the same wine, to the exclusion of all else, always 48, and always from Morrisons. He only ever watches football on TV. Nothing else. "I have never seen a film on television," he says – and he means it. He never reads novels (Margaret Forster, by contrast, reads one a day). He appreciates permanence and longevity – justly proud that *A Life in the Day*, the feature he inaugurated at the Sunday Times Magazine when he was its editor in the 'seventies, still goes strong. And he does like a bargain: if Margaret wants two cartons of blueberries, Hunter will negotiate the purchase of four for the price of three. "Then she goes mad because she has to throw out the two that've gone mouldy".

There are some fine-sounding puddings at Market, and I was jotting them down. "You hold your pen very clumsily," he said. "Not artistically. Not like a normal person?" "Um – right ..." I said. "Pudding, Hunter? Treacle tart ...?" "No – I would have the steamed jam sponge, but they've spelt sponge wrongly". I looked at the menu: it read 'Steamed jam sponge'. "But ... that's right – that's the right spelling..." "Get away! That's not how you spell sponge." "Yes, it is." "No, it isn't. I'll have the pear and ginger crumble." This looked – and apparently was – a first-rate crumble. We drank the last of a very fair Italian red, new to me: Thesaurum – unusually heavy on the Cabernet, and good for £20 – while Hunter reminisced on how John – unlike the other Beatles – was always too grumpy to sign autographs, so Hunter would often do them for him. "There must be quite a few of my fakes out there ... and I tell you one thing – that's never how you're spelling sponge." And then he picked up a pen and inscribed his Beatles biography for me. Not clumsily. So artistically. Just like a normal person.

Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary* (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

A CONFESSION

LAST Thursday, not long after the Ham&High hit the news stands, I received an irate email via the "Contact" page on my website. My correspondent had telephoned the restaurant Blitz, which I reviewed last week, in order to make a booking, but the number was not recognised. Several similar emails followed. The number I gave was 5001 1410 – or, if you squint a bit, FOOL 1.4.10. Because the whole thing was an April Fool's Day spoof – which, I am sure, most of you spotted. Yes? No? I tried to make Blitz sound as crazy and unappealing as possible, but the lure of dinner at ten bob, no matter how awful, was apparently, for some, irresistible. Tee hee.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

☐ Dripping taps can cause a stain on the bath or sink enamel. Try rubbing the mark with a cut lemon to get rid of it – then call a plumber to stop those dripping taps.

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