

EXACTLY one year ago, the Ham&High carried my review of the Holly Bush. Some of you might have noticed it: the then proprietors most certainly did – angry accusations of all sorts of distortions in letters to the paper, none of them true: I simply reported what I had found.

Ken Pyne, our great cartoonist, had been the other victim of this very dispiriting evening, and he agreed with me that the meal had been dire – dreadful scalding non-pies and various other best forgotten things, compounded by unjustifiably high prices and a remarkably cavalier approach to service: i.e, they declined to provide any.

But since those dark days, this beautiful pub – because it does remain truly beautiful and unbuggered about in every way – now is under new ownership, and so I considered a return to the scene of the crime was in order. And who better to drag along and inflict upon a repeat of this experience than good old Ken Pyne? “You mean ...” he barely stuttered, “you want me to go there again? To eat ...?” I told him to pull himself together and be a man about it: “It can’t be as bad as last time,” I told him, “It just can’t”. Fortunately he too is a great fan of the interior, as well as their ales – Harvey’s and Seafarers are the two he most favours – and so eventually, though with great foreboding, he was reluctantly persuaded.

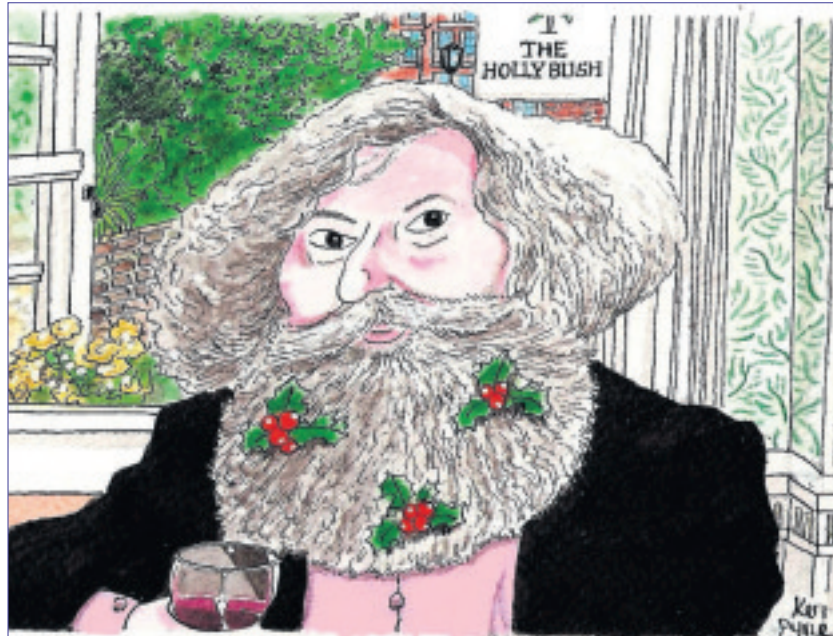
By the way – the independent magazine Hampstead Village Voice has just named Ken Best Hampstead Cartoonist. “I won’t let it go to my head,” he said quite dryly. “I’m the only Hampstead cartoonist ...”

One change immediately apparent was the welcome: the man behind the bar was smiling, and eager to take our order. Before, if they saw fit to notice you at all, they glared – and a long and silent wait was one’s inevitable due. So we sat in one of the wondrous nooks that this place has to offer – dark panelling, converted gas lights and nothing garish or intrusive at all – with a manly pint of Seafarers for Ken and a girly glass of good pinot grigio rose for me – and a waitress brought us a menu. But get this – she was smiling too! Blimey, I thought – two smiles already: things are looking up.

The menu read well ... but the menu last time had read well too. “I’m not going to have fish pie again,” said Ken, quite stoutly – while visibly quailing at the very memory. “That was the

Holly Bush is not as prickly, so I’ll be back

After a disappointing last visit, **Joseph Connolly** gave this another go – and enjoyed it



Drawn back ... Cartoonist Ken Pyne captured Joseph’s relief at what The Holly Bush had to offer this time around.

worst fish pie ever”. But still he thought a pie of some description would form a decent test of the place, so ordered the organic beef and ale variety with mustard mash and seasonal vegetables – this to be preceded by white rabbit terrine with pickled grapes and brioche. “White rabbit ...” he was musing. “Does that mean it was somebody’s pet? If it comes with the whiskers, I can floss after I’ve eaten it”. Cartoonists, eh? They’re paid to be weird.

I went for a starter I haven’t before encountered (damn brave of me in context, I considered) a pea and mint mousse with truffle croutons. And then lamb rump with pommes puree, Swiss chard and a pea and cider jus – that sounds good, doesn’t it? “Yes,” said Ken quite mournfully, “but will it actually be edible? That is

the question”.

The set-up last time had been that if on a weekday you rashly elected to dine upstairs (in what is, after all, billed as the dining room) then you had to order at the bar and set about locating your own cutlery while resigning yourself to never seeing a waiter for the duration of your very woeful meal. And although the weekday thing is technically still the rule (this due to change in September) the waitress entered into the spirit of helpfulness with gusto. She told us when the first course was ready, escorted us upstairs, brought us cutlery and napkins (normal elsewhere, I know – but it seemed like a pile of Christmas presents here) and still she was smiling delightedly as if this was truly the very best day of her entire life on earth.

This upstairs room is a fine one – dual aspect, with lovely views of trees and old Hampstead rooftops – and I was mightily relieved to see that the horrible old dirty and sticky tables have now been booted out in favour of very smart chunky new ones in brown leather – legs as well as tops: all brown leather. Tres chic. And the ugly and uncomfortable chairs have given way to deep buttoned limey-sagey green sofas in velvet, with matching tub chairs.

They’ve retained the squiggly wallpaper, which looks so much better now that everything else is both toned, and clean. My starter turned out to be exactly the same colour as that upholstery, actually – a fluffy crescent of mousse on a slice of slate with a wisp of leaves and crunchy little flavourful

FACTFILE

- **THE HOLLY BUSH**
22 Holly Mount, NW3.
Tel 020-7436 2892.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: A three course dinner for two, with wine – about £70.

croutons.

Light, fresh, cool – the good pea flavour rather brilliantly lit up by the mint: a perfect summer starter. And Ken’s white cylinder of terrine was tightly packed, tasting properly earthy and not, as it can do, blandly of chicken. “It’s very slightly cold,” he said, “but you get that with dead bunny”. “Well yes,” I agreed. “And the White Rabbit, of course, is famous for being late ...”

Great fresh bread was on a hunk of wood, and as we sipped a very good if – at £30 – rather pricey Chianti Classico, we gazed at each other in wonder as it slowly dawned that we were actually very much enjoying ourselves, eating a dinner in the Holly Bush. Yikes!

But the mains ... would they measure up? Well Ken’s pie was very handsome – a real pie with sides and a base, unlike last time when we both endured a soggy pastry-lidded bowl containing a liquid volcano of molten heat and nothingness. The deep golden edges of this pie were pointedly crenellated like a crown, and the whole damn thing was pretty much wolfed down with plenty of positive comment: good lean beef in a just aley enough sauce – mustard mash bang on.

My lamb came as a chunkily-sliced crescent of good and tender pink meat (as requested) next to a swoop of melting pureed potato and fresh and deep green al dente chard and peas: this was very superior gastropub food. And here’s the smiling waitress

again – who maybe, I don’t know, has just been told that she’s won twenty-odd million on the Lottery Rollover. So ... pudding? God yes: don’t want to leave. So for Ken, a coconut pannacotta served on a wafer thin slice of pineapple and alongside a sorbet with a kick of Malibu. If only he’d brought along that colourful grass skirt of his, a lei and maybe even a ukulele, the picture would have been perfect.

Anyway – he loved the pannacotta, though because it was served on another slab of slate, it was a bit of a race to lap up the sorbet before it melted into a pallid pool that spread across the table. My chocolate mousse came in a Kilner jar, and was simply gorgeous: I felt like Bunter, illicitly in a pantry, scooping it out in gooey goblets. Delicious, too, was a trio of little round biscotti on a zigzag of cherry coulis.

So there, then, we have it: one of the most glorious old pubs in London, in an unrivalled setting, can now and finally boast a restaurant of quite serious quality, with service to match: let joy be unconfined. And who would have thought it ...?

But we must be clear here: one year ago, it gave me no pleasure at all to write about the failings of what I well knew to be a much-loved Hampstead institution – though I nonetheless was not ‘giving’ the Holly Bush a bad review, just as now I am not ‘giving’ it a good one: on both occasions, the review was earned by the restaurant.

As, of course, is always the way – it’s just that it takes some establishments rather longer to get this than others. So, the good news is (as an ex-Terminator might so very easily conclude): I’ll be back.

□ *POOR SOULS* is the title of Joseph Connolly’s very first novel (Faber and Faber £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

Happy birthday Virgin, thanks for the presents

BIRTHDAYS are fun, especially when the happy celebrant is giving away the presents rather than receiving them. That’s the case with on-line seller Virgin Wines, which is currently holding a year-long tenth birthday party.

So far, ten lucky customers have each won a bottle of Roederer Cristal champagne, another – fortunately, quite a stocky-looking fellow – has received his weight in wine, the winner of a birthday draw will be off on a balloon ride, and other prizes from bottles to books have been handed out.

There’s plenty more celebratory activity planned before the end of December, including a national tasting day

involving more than a thousand customers, plus further prize offers and a range of party cases.

My own birthday box from Virgin was a selection of six wines which have found particular favour with customers, scoring four-plus out of a maximum five on the ratings table. It was a very acceptable suggestion from the press officer when I had to offer my apologies for the most recent press tasting date. Three pairs of friends were happy to experience the Virgins, and on a lovely summer evening we toured the world with them, from Australasia to Chile, stopping off in Europe on the way and encountering most of the classic grape varieties.

They were individual wines,

all of very decent quality. For me, the star was Clos Du Gaimont vouvray sec 2008 (£11). It has that lovely apples-and-honey edge which marries so well with the acidity of good Loire chenin blanc, and we all agreed it made a perfect summer aperitif. But it had a strong rival in the Anaru Marlborough sauvignon blanc 2008 (£10), crisp, with elderflower as well as gooseberry character and none of the sweaty character which can be hard to love in Kiwi sauvignon.

Of the reds, Perez Cruz cabernet sauvignon reserva 2007 (£10) was the highlight, showing how Chile can challenge old world classics at very sensible prices: lovely cassis richness, sweet oak, real style and value.

Some statistics: since its launch, Virgin Wines has sold more than 35 million bottles. They come from small, independent winemakers worldwide – not a big-brand wine in sight. In the last year, customers have ordered 7.8m bottles, enough to fill 2.5 Olympic swimming pools.

And looking to the future, managing director Jay Wright predicts continued growth: “More and more people will enjoy the fact that wine can be so much more than just an anonymous fancy label. For the same price as they could spend on a bottle in a supermarket, consumers online will be able to connect directly with the passionate people who make these delicious

wines through video, community forums, and discussion groups.”

Since 2005, Virgin Wines has been a subsidiary of Direct Wines, the world’s largest mail-order wine merchant – think Laithwaites, the Sunday Times Wine Club and a whole lot more direct-sell names – though it’s run as a separate company.

But despite the high visibility wine web sales have these days, the youngest couple round our table – fitting perfectly into Virgin’s main age profile of early 30s to mid-50s – confessed that they didn’t know Virgin did wine. Maybe the birthday trumpet must be blown even louder.

LIZ SAGUES



Stars of the show ... Clos Du Gaimont and Perez Cruz.