Joseph Connolly is safely cocooned above the milling crowds with one of the directors

Up with the gods in the British Museum

Ah yes! Makes you proud to be British …! I think that the reason the BM strikes us as London's most imposing museum is in large part down to the expansive generosity of the forecourt. All the other museums and galleries are slap bang on the pavement – and so if you step back the necessary good long way in order to fully absorb and appreciate all of their architectural grandeur, you tend to get hit by a bus. Here, though, the monumental façade shimmers in the distance like the mirage to end them all. To foreign visitors, loafing on the forecourt seems to be something of a tradition: you buy an unspeakable sausage in horrid clothy bread from a van on the kerb, and then take a million pictures of the British Museum. And gaggles of young and eager Japanese people were all around me, and excitedly gabbling: "Golly gosh – what a fine architect Robert Smirke was, to be sure – and how perfectly spiffing that those 44 Greek Revivalist fluted columns are exactly 45 feet tall and that the sculptures on the pediment somewhat ironically come to echo those controversially held fragments of the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon, and now the very epicentre of the galleries within …!". Actually, they were saying nothing of the sort. They did though seem thoroughly consumed by Burberry, Louis Vuitton, Lady Gaga and Hello Kitty, but there you go.

School outing

I have two outstanding memories of the BM: a school outing in the 1960s when I was convinced that all museums were as dull as hell and a boring waste of space, and where's the souvenir shop? Which were always dire in those days – pencils, rubbers and novelty keyrings in the 'pocket money' section, squarely aimed at juveniles who not only had pencils and rubbers coming out of their ears, but also, of course, carried no keys. You should see the shop now: as slick as you like, and selling everything from glossy silk scarves to chocolate chip biscuits by way of rather splendid plaster casts of notable ancient sculptures and busts, though admittedly for the sort of money I'd expect to be paying for the originals.

The other memory is of a Booker Prize presentation dinner held some years ago in the Great Court – which is where last week I once again found myself, in quest of lunch. This Great Court, of course, used to be an outside space whose centre was occupied by the famed Round Reading Room in the days when the BM was this country's absolute depository for books. When they all were shipped off to the new British Library at St Pancras, Norman Foster was called in to create a glass roof in order to internalise this immense space. The result, unveiled in 2000, was and is awesome: 1656 triangular glass panels (I know this because I got a severely cricked neck looking up and counting them all) forming the largest covered square in Europe. On that Booker evening, the acoustics of the square were such that those at the back could hear but not see, while for those at the front the reverse was true: everyone agreed that they'd had half a great time.

■ Joseph with Joanna Mackle, who used to be a director of publisher Faber and Faber

Sparkling glass

The Court Restaurant is on the third floor – the very summit of what used to be said Reading Room: you find yourself seemingly not that far beneath the sparkling glass overlay, and on eye level with enormous Ionic capitals and pediments. And why should I be lunching in the BM in the first place? Because my guest was Joanna Mackle, who used to be a highly esteemed director of the publisher Faber and Faber, and now is the Museum's Director of Public Engagement, and has been for the past eight years. 'Public Engagement' apparently takes in all aspects of events, marketing, programming and liaisons with sister foreign institutions – and, as ever, she runs her four departments with the unflappability that she has always demonstrated. I remember at Faber – when Joanna had wonderful friendships and working relationships with such as Ted Hughes, William Golding and Seamus Heaney – she was in sole command of the prestigious annual summer party, where in the gardens of Queen Square she would welcome those honoured with an invitation, while deftly repulsing the opportunistic. And always she wore the most beautiful and extraordinary hats, which rather became her trademark: she was in fascinators back in the day when still they were fascinating.

At first, this is a fairly weird place to find oneself sitting: there is a constant drone of people milling about and murmuring, though none of them is visible because they're all a mile below you: it's not unlike being safe within the Oyster Bar, cocooned from the throb of Grand Central Station. It's a white and open space, studded by black, and a chef in a toque happily copes behind a stainless steel counter. The menu, in common with the place, is cool, civilised and adaptable (you could have, say, a red pepper risotto at a not-too-cheap £13.25, or add salmon to the mix for an extra £3.75). I kicked off with asparagus with Parmesan shavings and prosciutto. The surprise and very welcome component was a trio of warm new potatoes, crisped and infused with rosemary. This I teamed with a glass of rose just exactly the colour of dentist spit-drink, though mercifully a good deal chillier. Joanna had a king crab and Scottish salmon roll – a plumply pleasant sausage served with a quail egg and a ladleful of avocado salsa: this she enjoyed very much, and I suspect she orders it regularly. She followed with grilled squid and spring herb salad in a lemon miso dressing. I'm not a great fan of squid, though this looked eminently more enticing than most. My roast Suffolk chicken breast was twice slashed across the grain to reveal a livid green herb stuffing that was good, fresh and zingy, even if the chicken itself was slightly overdone. The grilled black olives and red peppers were Tuscanly perfect. Then coffee, and nostalgic chit-chat.

As I left I noticed a huge glass tank in the foyer crammed with notes and coins of all denominations, a sign above it inviting you to donate £4. A German dropped in a twenty Euro note, an American a $20 bill. Nearby, an Englishman was snarling to his wife: "No chance! I pay tax – they want my four quid they can get it off of George bloody Osborne". Ah yes! Makes you proud to be British …!

FACT FILE

■ **Court Restaurant at the British Museum**
Great Russell Street, WC1
Tel: 020-7323 8990
■ Open for lunch and tea every day: noon-3pm, 3pm-5.30pm. Friday: exhibition menu 5.30pm-8pm.
■ Food: ★★★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
■ Cost: About £100 for three course meal for two, with wine.

■ **LOVE IS STRANGE (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.**

Food bites **Tom Barnes**

Fish dishes offered on a seasonal basis – with an ethical approach to how it's caught

Sitting alongside the past watering hole of some of Britain's best-loved writers, Pescatori restaurant in Charlotte Street offers a feast of seafood gastronomy.

Within classic novel lobbing distance of the Fitzroy Tavern, the boozer of choice for literary big hitters like George Orwell and Dylan Thomas, this charming little eatery has a variety of seasonal offerings designed to tickle the palate of even the most reluctant seafood eaters.

Pescatori serves Italian cuisine and fresh seafood on a seasonally changing menu. It also has an ethical approach to the seas which will delight greenies and foodies alike.

Highlights

Highlights include the sea bream, arriving fresh daily from a family outlet in Cornwall, and the sea bass.

Even though the fish is fresh and extremely tasty, my advice would be to make room for dessert because the summer pudding, peach and red wine and gelato selection is also extensive.

Service was near flawless and the post-dinner coffee, a chocolate speciality, was a delight.

The surroundings were a confusing mix of modern and traditional motifs. A gilded chimney breast and wood panels offset by tiled floors and stripey T-shirted staff does come off a little like an upmarket version of chain restaurant Strada.

Still, friendly staff and good affordable food take your mind off the decor.

■ **Pescatori is at 57 Charlotte Street, Fitzrovia. For details, visit www.pescatori.co.uk.**

■ Service is flawless and the staff are friendly at Pescatori in Charlotte Street