

Trip to ghost town leads to culinary let-down

» Primrose Hill Road is a fine and bustling avenue – cool and trendy, to be sure, but still with an authentic and villagey feel to it, the adjacent proximity of the Hill itself verily a wonder to behold. But when you venture further, something rather eerie is going on. Maybe one or two kiddy-widdies will be playing in the garden of Chalcot Square ... but any childish chortling is the final sound of humanity you are destined to hear. Beyond this point, all is deathly silence.

You could walk down the middle of the road – there is no car to trouble you. The pavements are yours, and yours alone. Whenever I am around this part of the borough, I always feel that the residents must have received urgent notification during the night of a lethal contamination borne upon the air, and they have all of them fled of an instant, taking only what they could carry.

Deadly dose

And here am I, like a lemming – nobody told me, and I'm wandering about in search of lunch, when all I might glean is a deadly dose of radioactivity, or maybe even a plague of boils.

On this occasion, the goal of my quest was The Engineer, an attractive corner pub, whose name is in honour of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and I am very pleased to see that on his monochrome portrait on the swing sign there is not just the trademark stovepipe hat but also the cigar jammed between his teeth. In his impression of Brunel, Kenneth Branagh, during the Olympics' opening ceremony, also had the cigar, rather astonishingly – but it's perfectly pathetic and predictable how many times a photograph is



■ Joseph at The Engineer in Primrose Hill

Picture: Polly Hancock

printed with the stogie air-brushed out. Because to depict a heroic Victorian gentleman smoking would surely corrupt the young – and, as we are all of us aware, the young are wholly incorrupt in every possible way, and so must things remain.

I was last here about 15 months ago, when there was a considerable to-do because the owners, Mitchells & Butlers, had decided to evict the celebrity landlady, Tamsin Olivier, in favour of new management. This went down badly with the pub's quite impossibly glittering cast of regulars – John McCririck, Christopher Biggins, Lisa Snowdon (who isn't, I'm pretty sure, married to the lord of the same name) and the girly one from The Mighty Boosh. But behemoths such as Mitchells & Butlers can do whatever they please. Their reach is great-

er than you think – apart from the Harvester, Toby Carvery, O'Neill's and All Bar One chains, they own an amazing number of often famous individual pubs. In our area alone there is The Bull & Bush, the Freemasons, The Garden Gate, the Spaniards Inn ... and The Washington, which I reviewed a couple of weeks ago. The Washington is in England's Lane, though I can't remember whether I even troubled to mention that *England's Lane* also happens to be the title of my brand-new novel...

As soon as the new mob was installed at the Engineer, I received a press release saying how much better it was going to be. In my first review, I was heavily critical of the pricing – everything was far too expensive, the final bill a considerable shock. Well, the good

news is that the very pleasing interior – largely original Victorian – has not changed at all. And nor has the attractive garden, where my wife and I were sitting. On the most damned uncomfortable chairs ever designed – they haven't changed either, which is a right bloody shame: Mitchells & Butlers have either to burn them gloriously on November 5 or else buy cushions, pronto.

And yes, the prices have been tamed. A bit. Pricing at the moment is a very sensitive topic in the restaurant world – in these parlous times, everywhere is desperate not to raise prices, despite the higher cost of raw ingredients, but instead find new ways of preserving the profit margin. The ideal mark-up on food is seen to be 75 per cent – which is not as outrageous as it sounds, as this has to cover all over-

heads. Restaurants love things, therefore, that incorporate lots of leaves that fill up the plate, slices of pie, pâté and soup – all very economical to prepare, the mark-up on luxury food such as lobster or fillet steak being proportionately far lower. So my £9 starter of smoked duck was extremely heavy on what was billed as "frizze" – actually frisée, a form of endive – and pretty light on duck. Which was a mercy, actually, because it was rather horrible – icy cold, virtually raw, tasting of absolutely nothing and really quite comically chewy. My wife had rabbit and pork terrine – at £7.50, another quite nice little earner for the kitchen. Terrine, of course, can be packed with wonderful things ... but this was packed with lumps of cold fat, in between the pinker though turgid bits of meat. She didn't finish it.

Misshapen leavings

It's a nice place to sit, though, the garden, and it was, on a Thursday lunchtime, pretty full of regulars. On most tables stood an empty Lyle's Golden Syrup tin. Maybe they later put a flower in it. Or filled it up with Golden Syrup, who's to say? My wife had a decent enough Caesar salad with smoked chicken, bacon and soft-boiled egg, in addition to the anchovy. The soft-boiled egg was hard, but the rest was all right – with the exceptions of the greasy fatty bacon and the croutons. A crouton should be a nice big cube of thick white bread, speedily deep fried – here we had offcuts of rye crust and misshapen leavings, merely hard and oily. I had "Camden Town battered haddock" with chips, tartare and crushed minted peas. Well these days, you don't have to

go to Camden Town to get battered, of course, it can happen just anywhere. Anyway, the batter was OK, but not forming that wonderful crispy carapace, well away from the fish and sealing it in with steam. The haddock was good, though with a lot of the skin left on: shoddy, that. The mushy peas formed less than a small spoonful, and the chips were half cooked. The open kitchen really looks good here, and I did expect so much better.

As to drink, I had said: "Do you have maybe a chilled Beaujolais?" and the waitress said: "Is that red wine ...?" and I said: "It is indeed," and she said: "Well, of course, we don't chill red wine," and I said: "Oh." So I had prosecco, and my wife had apple and elderflower with cold Silver Tip tea – which is Chinese, though no such flavour was detectable: a pleasant drink for all that. And then we emerged into the Primrose ghost town and had a wander, discussing the meal. In whispers.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk. Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *England's Lane* published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook.

FACTFILE

THE ENGINEER

65 Gloucester Avenue, NW1
Tel: 020-7483 1890

■ Open for lunch Monday-Friday noon-3pm, Saturday noon-3.30pm, Sunday noon-4pm. Bar menu noon-10pm every day.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: Less expensive than it used to be, but still £65 for a two-course meal for two with a couple of drinks.



44 Belsize Lane, NW3 5AR ♦ 0207 433 1147 ♦ 0207 433 1139 ♦ www.hazararestaurant.com



Hazara is an Authentic Indian Restaurant using the freshest of ingredients with only the finest of herbs and spices.

Due to the varied dietary backgrounds of all our patrons we use separate cooking utensils for all our white fish, seafood, game, poultry, meat and vegetables with individual labelling and storage.

We have carefully brought together a selection of indigenous dishes from all the culinary regions of India, so whether you prefer the pungent aromas of the Northwest Frontier, the luscious blends of Awad, the cuisine befitting the Maharajas of Rajasthan or the sweet and spicy flavours of Goa we are sure you'll find your taste.