

Inn with the Olde

WHAT MAKES AN ENGLISH ESTABLISHMENT? ALEX JAMES CHARTS THE CHANGING FACE OF THE FOOD AND DRINK BUSINESS, FROM HIGH-STREET CHIPPY TO BOUTIQUE BOOZER

Let's start our journey to the heart of the English countryside on the other side of the universe – in Walthamstow.

Until last Friday, it had been about 12 years since I was last in "the Stow" – E17. Occasionally, I used to go the dogs and to Charlie Chan's nightclub (always a good night), but Charlie Chan's is gone and the dog track is due to close in a few months.

As we punched our way around the ring road, it was hard to recall anywhere in the world more breathtakingly ugly than this neglected part of inner-city outer London, an apparently endless slump. While touring the last Blur record, as we trundled around the regenerating metropolitan centres on the Continent, it struck me that our city centres were easily the most dilapidated in all Europe. Where a brand new ice-hockey stadium might have been built in Rensselaer, or a state-of-the-art *Konzertsaal* in Düsseldorf, we were wallowing in rotting greyhound tracks and outdated red-brick terraces.

By the time we had parked, we were really hungry and so went immediately in search of food, wondering if we would be able to find anything at all. To my surprise and delight, the nearest parade of shops included a golden-fried chicken king, an Indian takeaway, a pie-and-mash shop, a Chinese, two kebab shops, a Romanian deli, an "English and Caribbean" bakery, a funky barbecue grill and a greengrocer – all in a 200yd stretch of road. There is nowhere else in the world that can compete for variety, and I suddenly remembered how much I like Walthamstow. Then a car whizzed past and someone screamed an obscenity at me. I screamed one back, getting into the swing of it.

I was with my new friend, Brad Cohen. New friends are the best kind, don't you think? He is conducting Verdi's *Il trovatore* at Holland Park this summer. "Chip shop!" he shouted, and we ran. It was a proper one, with the menu added to with misspellings in black marker pen. There was a healthy queue of unhealthy people. "Arm gwin' ome naa," announced one of the girls who was wrapping chips. She was quite saucy, and we all wanted her to do our order. The male owner protested on our

behalf, with a forlorn grimace, but there was no stopping her.

My word, they tasted good. We walked along the filthy pavement blowing hard, licking our fingers and squinting through the vinegar in ecstasies, joined at the chip. Dinner can't get any better than that.

Even so, there is no shortage of people trying to make dinner better for us. With their evangelical, righteous battle cry of "fresh, local, seasonal, high-quality" marketing blah-blah, legions of well-meaning foodies are decamping to build Jerusalem in the shires. And who can blame them?

While our city centres are in a spiral dive, a Krakatoa-scale, high-bang-creation-type event is happening in the countryside. Country pubs up and down the nation are undergoing a transformation to rival that of downtown Düsseldorf. Where there was a dartboard and a smelly old man, there is now a bar menu: where there was a radiator, there is a reinstated crackling fire; the Big D nuts and Mr Porky's have been replaced by Kettle Chips and home-made pork pies. Something has happened. Country pubs have, traditionally, been the bastion of locals, but now the doors are being flung wide open and you are more likely to be greeted by an automaton flashing a cheery smile than given the ice by a bunch of burly, bucolic alcoholics.

I suppose the most important thing about a brilliant country pub, really, is that it should be nearby. I don't really care how great a country pub is if it's miles away – I'm not going to go to it. I'd rather watch food on the telly. But I live in the country, and I suppose the idea of the tarted-down tavern is to provide a perfectly buttered slice of the rural idyll to city dwellers, without the oppressive formality of the dreaded country-house hotel or the spookiness of authentic old places.

Interesting, then, that the pub on the High Street in Walthamstow seemed to be the only place for miles around that didn't sell food. But going to the pub in the country is all about stuffing your face. If you don't live there, there is nothing to do in the country except eat. I spent Sunday night at the Olde Bell, in a dingy part of Berkshire. It's one of the new breed of "inns", all sheepskin throws, hessian and creaky floorboards, but very Wallpaper, very girly. Apart ▶



A knowle's take on the traditional country pub Berkshire booster the Olde Bell gets the Ise Crawford makeover

"WHERE THERE WAS A DARTBOARD AND A SMELLY OLD MAN, THERE IS NOW A BAR MENU; THE BIG D NUTS AND MR PORKY'S HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY KETTLE CHIPS"



▶ from the odd customer, there was not an ugly thing for miles around. The chef, Rosie, I liked instantly. She is a thoroughly good sort and fixed me a perfect supper of lunchtime leftovers. But the rub with all these out-of-town places is that an ambitious, talented chef can be let down by an unadventurous, yokelly, uncultured public. "Where are the chips?" they want to know. It's hard to get a pub right – and even harder to make money out of one.

I've thought about dabbling on numerous occasions, but the margins are tight and the investment that is necessary to turn an ageing property into the requisite all-natural haven of organic calm is substantial. So much muscle has been assembled to make a go of the Olde Bell – property tycoon, top designer (in this case, Ise Crawford), top chef, top staff – but although the property is transformed, getting the food just so is only half the battle, and many devoted, campaigning chefs are let down by lackadaisical front-of-house staff.

And after all that, will the chips be as good or the staff as unwittingly charming as they are in Walthamstow? Probably not, but I'm still glad we're trying. □

www.studiolise.com
The Olde Bell, High Street, Hurley, Berkshire, 01628 825881

Top Tuck into pub grub such as a pint of pawns. Top right and right The designer Ise Crawford makes over a classic British pub in her unique style. She designed the tables for the Olde Bell – the first in a group of coaching inns she is working on – then accessorised with chairs from designers such as Matthew Hilton (matthewhilton.com) and Gebrüder Thonet (thonet-vienna.com) in the dining areas and Ercol (ercol.com) by the fire. The settles were designed by her company, Studioise, and are covered in traditional Welsh blankets from labourandwool.co.uk. The sheepskins were sourced from almahome.co.uk. Find the Fold standard light, by Alexander Taylor, at scp.co.uk

