



FOOD IS SERVED
 MONDAY TO THURSDAY
 Noon - 2.30pm & 6pm - 9pm
 FRIDAY & SATURDAY
 Noon - 9pm
 SUNDAY
 Noon - 6pm



JEWEL INN THE CROWN

Country pubs seem to be changing hands these days faster than £20 notes and it's always a bit of a gamble as to how it will turn out for customers. **Richard Moore** revisits one of his old haunts that has new owners

Driving back home from Tunbridge Wells, the Wife and I happen to pass the Crown Inn at Groombridge. It's lunchtime, the sun is shining and the tables outside give you a great view of the countryside, the church opposite and Groombridge Green.

Only problem is the fact we had been fairly regular visitors to the 16th century inn until a few years ago when the inside became pretty, how shall we say, tired; it was somewhat dusty with curtains hanging off the rail and light bulbs broken. Should we chance it today? Yeah.

Up the steps then and into another world. The small, cosy bar with its low beams and inglenook fireplace remind us of all the good things about this place along with its wealth of history.

Dating back to 1585 the inn has attracted some notable characters. During the 18th century it was the headquarters of the Groombridge Gang, ruthless smugglers who terrorised the countryside between the village and the south coast. Using pack ponies they smuggled tea from Pevensey beaches and hid it in secret passages between the cellar and nearby Groombridge Place. Naturally, today the inn has a 'Smugglers Room' which can seat up to 10 people.

Another interesting visitor was Sir Arthur

Conan Doyle, creator of detective Sherlock Holmes. He lived in Crowborough and was known to pop in for a tippie in the late 1800's.

So, an interesting place that certainly appears brighter and fresher than memories suggest but what about the food? We order brie and red onion marmalade baguettes (£6.75) and take our drinks to a table outside. It's not long before the warm baguettes arrive, complete with salad garnish and fries. And they're impressive. Indeed, the food is so good the Wife and I decide to come back at the weekend...

It's Saturday night and we turn up on the off chance of getting a table in the dining area. We're in luck, take our seats and drink in the ambience created by candles and another fine fireplace.



Sipping glasses of house sauvignon (£4.50) we enjoy warm bread with dipping oil and balsamic (£1.95) followed by chicken, ham and leek pie with mash and veg (£11.95), plus baked brie and red onion tart with dressed rocket leaves and baby potatoes (£10.25). (Yes, I know I had brie and red onion baguette but it was so good.) The dishes do not disappoint.

There's little doubt this place has benefited from the arrival in November of new owners Steve and Louise (Harmes) who hail from Crowborough. It's their first venture into the hospitality business (he used to be a plumber) and it's a brave move considering the financial climate. They've obviously worked hard to create the welcoming feel of a village pub that offers traditional cuisine through a set menu and daily specials board. There's also a children's menu which is vital these days if you hope to attract young families.

The food is freshly cooked, reasonably priced and comes with good service and a smile. All of which means the place is back on our radar and well worth a visit...

www.thecrowngroombridge.com
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