

Client: Merchant Inns
Source: Metro (London) (Main)
Date: 01 July 2009
Page: 40
Circulation: 734488
Size: 385cm2
AVE: 10610.6

Taking a trip back in time



Hotel Review BY KIERAN MEEKE

Name: The Talbot Inn
Where: Ripley, near Woking, Surrey
Official rating: Unrated
Cost: From £99 B&B weekdays, £89 at weekends.
Contact: Tel: 01483 225188, www.thetalbotinn.com

Why go there? To sleep in a 15th century coaching inn, possibly in Lady Hamilton or Lord Nelson's bedroom. Halfway between Portsmouth and London, it's said to be where the duo's affair 'blossomed' in 1798.

Highlights: Stuck by the side of the main street in Ripley – believe it or not (sorry), this former coaching inn dates to 1453. Expect low beams, madly tilted floor, four-poster beds and antique shop decor. What you don't expect is a Michelin-starred chef.

What's so good about it? I guess we all imagine stumbling on a half-timbered English country inn where we can spend the night in a four-poster and sup on ale. The reality is often far from the fantasy, involving rude staff, unhygienic facilities and food straight from the microwave.

The Talbot Inn restores the faith, as a near perfect example of how it should be. Add in top tucker and you're on to something good.

Rob Clayton, the Michelin-starred executive chef of [Merchant Inns](#), and head chef Ian Richard have put a mild spin on the standard gastropub, with some lovely contemporary touches on a solid English menu based on local produce. Naturally, the breakfast is especially good. Who was it who said 'you can eat well in England if you have breakfast three times day'? A temptation here, where the usual bacon eggs and cornflakes are augmented with treats ranging from home-made yoghurts to poached fish. The restaurant itself,

with copper ceiling and conservatory wall, is deliberately a studied contrast to the rest of the hotel. Manager Paul Dixon has stepped down from some big name hotels to bring five-star efficiency and service to the country charm and the staff ooze warmth. My room had a laughably uneven floor, low beams that would make a health and safety inspector freak out and a tacked-on bathroom that you could only use the word quaint for. All providing an atmosphere no modern hotel designer could ever create.

And the things we didn't rate: With what was once no doubt a quiet highway frequented by the odd horseman or stagecoach now the busy former A3, noise is bound to be an issue in such an old building. My room, quaint though it was, wasn't fitted with double-glazing (quite rightly). Even if it had been, the creaky old walls are far from impervious to sound. So traffic noise rather than the tweeting of the dawn chorus disturbed my Sunday morning. There are more modern – and very quiet – rooms in an annexe to the rear which might more suit those who prefer a lie-in to the romantic image of sleeping in a bedroom shared by two of the most noted adulterers in English history.

What else can you do in the region? You're two miles (3km) away from Junction 10 of the M25, so London and the whole south of England are your oyster. Nearby

attractions range from The Royal Horticultural Society Garden, Wisley, and Hampton Court Palace to Thorpe Park and Chessington World of Adventures.

Bed quality: ★★★★★☆

Staff: ★★★★★



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