

The Black Inn, Consall Forge: Alan Cookman restaurant review

Friday, October 31, 2008, 09:20

Alan Cookman
visits The Black Lion, Consall Forge.

THE clocks had gone back and by mid-morning the black dog of depression was gnawing at my ankles.

Recognising this as the onset of SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder – I knew from experience that only an exhilarating adventure would lift me out of the slough of despond. Hence our impromptu expedition to the untamed Churnet Valley and Consall Forge, where The Black Lion inn stands in romantic isolation.

Eschewing assistance from Miss Bossyboots (Sandra, the hectoring voice of our satnav apparatus), we arrived at Consall Forge having made only three or four false turns, costing us no more than 30 minutes in total.

But actually finding Consall Forge is only half the fun – at least it was last Sunday.

We then had to park up and negotiate a muddy, puddled, potholed track, a swollen river, an overflowing canal and a railway line, in that order. And all on foot.

Admittedly, this was rendered somewhat more dramatic than usual by torrential overnight rain, but conquering these obstacles took my mind off SAD, as well as making me feel that I'd earned my dinner.

The place was buzzing, as befits a pub that's a magnet for walkers, boat people and anglers, as well as townies enjoying a trip to this hidden beauty-spot.

The old pub, which has a terrace and beer garden with terrific views, is situated 100 yards from Consall station on the Churnet Valley Line.

When the sun came out, setting aglow the gold and scarlet autumn leaves, it was easy to imagine what an idyllic place this must be in spring and summer.

Inside, The Black Lion is a no-nonsense real ale and wholesome grub pub, its plain tiled floors impervious to the tread of mud-caked wellies.

Considering the number of customers milling around both inside and out, you had to admire the solitary barmaid, who took orders for meals as well as serving drinks, and the youth who single-handedly brought all the meals to the tables. Under that kind of pressure, I think I'd have struggled to maintain their good humour.

We sat down under a shelf with a severed arm on it (one of a number of grisly acknowledgements of the approach of Halloween) and, as the only customers not dressed for fell walking, tried not to feel too conspicuous.

At other times, The Red Lion does a range of grills (a 10oz rump steak, for example, is £8.95), and dishes such as traditional fish and chips (£7.95), lasagne (£7.25) and chilli con carne (£6.95), as well as the pie of the day (£7.25).

The Sunday lunch menu is £6.95 for adults and £4.95 for children, and there's a choice of roast beef, pork or turkey with all the trimmings.

It's hearty, rather than arty, designed to nourish hungry outdoor types rather than amass Michelin stars.

Herself chose the roast beef, and felt that the meat was far superior to the trimmings, although the Yorkshire puddings were grand specimens and the gravy was rich and tasty.

I realised what she meant about the trimmings, when I was served my red wine and rosemary lamb shank (£8.95) from the specials board.

The peas and sprouts were disappointing, however, the sweet and juicy lamb was the kind that's in such a hurry to part company with the bone you fear they were never the best of friends. The sauce was good too.

We'd both started with soup (£3) – she had the tasty tomato and basil, I chose the thick farmhouse vegetable – there being no other starters on offer.

There's a selection of puddings calculated to take you back to the school canteen, all priced at £2.95, but it was time to retrace our steps across the railway line, the canal and the river.

By the way, about that swollen river. In case you were wondering, there is a bridge over it.

My spirit of adventure does have its limits.