

Cock Sure!

This month's review

Right, let's get this clear up front. The Cock O' Barton (on the left just past the Carden Park entrance) is no longer a pub. Having been one since the 14th Century it has now, at some considerable expense, been transformed into, in its own words, a Bar Restaurant. Their website claims it is now a "country venue combining a contemporary feel but with traditional values; serving superb, locally produced food in a warm, laid-back and stylish environment."

Getting the 'philosophical' debate out of the way, we don't believe a pub should stay a pub for its own sake. The main purpose of such establishments, in our eyes, is to provide an enjoyable venue (for both drinking & dining) for as many people as possible. We'd never visited the Cock O' Barton before (which may be comment in itself!) but from some of the postings on the reliable Chester@Large message board it would seem it had become rather run down and mostly empty. If the old Cock was a little tired, therefore, we thought we'd pay a visit and see if the new Cock has more to crow about?

We got no further than the car park before the popularity question was answered. It was early on a Tuesday evening, yet the large parking area was already heaving. If the 'punters' can be said to be voting with their feet (or should that be wheels!) then this new establishment has quickly built itself a strong following. Once inside, the clientele also proved to be nicely varied, including the table of 'senior' diners next to us who had great fun deciphering their "new fangled" menu.

Running late, as usual, we had no time to browse the menu in the pleasant, separate, bar area (which it is nice to see has been maintained) but this looked well furnished and welcoming to any visitors who just want a drink, with a nice outside courtyard area for those summer afternoons and evenings. While being ushered through to our table, however, by a very helpful front of house 'greeter', there was still the opportunity to check out the beer range. You can take it for granted in a 'makeover' like this, that the wine list will be comprehensive and well selected (which indeed it was), but can never be quite so sure that the beer will receive equal consideration. Very pleasing, therefore, to see four real ales on handpump, with three local favourites: Special Ale & Old Wavertonian from Spitting Feathers and Weetwood's Cheshire Cat complemented by a rarer Pendle's Witches Brew from Moorhouses. Having later sampled three of these (and escaped the driving yet again!) their quality can also be recommended.

We've no idea how the Cock O' Barton was laid out previously, but think it's safe to assume that both the refurbishment and the new extension will have altered

COCK O BARTON

BAR RESTAURANT

its look fundamentally. However, we felt that their stated aim to deliver a design which is "cool but sophisticated and sumptuous all at the same time" had been fairly well conceived. Particularly nice was the feeling we got of many different (and differently furnished) dining areas, rather than a homogenous whole, with a good mix of both formal and informal.

Ultimately though, there is only one way to judge a new establishment like the Cock O' Barton and that's on the quality of food arriving on your plate. For those readers who are more culinary connoisseurs than ourselves, the website promises us "award-winning Head Chef, Robert Kisby", with an impressive previous CV in quality Manchester restaurants (and beyond), whose aim is to deliver "a Gourmet's dream restaurant in a modern Pub". Judging by our experience such superlatives are not out of place.

We started with a Prawn & Avocado dish, served with cucumber, grapefruit and a leaf salad, whose mixed flavours complemented each other wonderfully and a Gratin Normande which (once we'd translated it) was the tastiest French onion soup we'd ever experienced. For our main dishes we had a Pumpkin & Ginger risotto, which scored top marks on both its taste and its texture and a truly marvellous, self styled, Cock O' Barton "Pub Plate" which really deserves an article all of its own! In essence this is a single dish which constitutes mini versions of all those 'pub grub' favourites; Steak & Kidney, Cottage Pie, Hot Pot, Sausages and Steak & Chips. It all arrived cooked to perfection and made for a fantastic combination. The "Pub Plate" having ensured there was only room for one dessert, a Poached Cornice pear, this proved just as satisfying as everything else we'd eaten.

Throughout the menu there was strong evidence that the Cock is proving true to its 'local produce' ethos and it's nice to know that not only is the food arriving in front of you beautifully cooked but it's also not had to travel too far to get there. As stated earlier, we're more accustomed to reviewing pubs & beers than we are 'fancy' restaurants but even relative food novices know when they've been delivered up a real treat and the Cock O' Barton gave us just that. It all came at a fair price too, our full bill for the above, including drinks, was just £68, representing great value for money. If we were you, we'd make sure we were early birds and would strut on down to the Cock some time very soon.

