

Old school ties

RESTAURANT REVIEW: HOWTOWN HOTEL, ULLSWATER

After 46 years sharing the helm of Sharrow Bay, Colin Akrigg has moved down the lake to a kitchen where our reviewers Keith Sutton and Stephanie Thompson find pitch-perfect flavours and good old-fashioned values

PHOTOGRAPHY PHIL RIGBY



New role: Colin Akrigg at Howtown

From the moment the dinner gong bongs at 7pm, you know that you are being time-travelled to somewhere safe and sound and home-sweet-homely. Soon diners are settled at tables with their smiles, some with semi-filled bottles of left-over wine (for this is a hotel and most have stayed at least the previous lunch or dinner time); the waitresses arrive decorated with their fetching white Upstairs Downstairs aprons – carrying not a canapé, nor an amuse bouche but a simple starter. No liquid nitrogen, no razor clam shells are in sight: we are embarked on a delightful return to Betjeman's Britain, to the AA man's salute, to John Arlott's cricket. Nothin' 'arty-farty', in the words of the old-school chef conducting the kitchen.

We are at Howtown Hotel, low down in the lakes at Ullswater, floating on nostalgia. We remember that this was once a kind of second home for those celebrated hospitality wizards up the road at Sharrow Bay Hotel, then Cumbria's

grandest and for much of the last half of the 20th century the epitome of the country house hotel. Sharrow led the way with location, location, location, sticky toffee puddings, endless fresh-baked bread rolls, a wine cellar to sigh for and a welcome to match.

Meanwhile Howtown was their bolt hole, not just for the Sharrow chiefs, Francis Coulson and Brian Sack, but also for their staff. And now an amazing thing has happened: one of their top chefs, who for 46 years played a major role in obtaining and holding on to their Michelin star, has jumped ship and alighted at the Howtown kitchens. Colin Akrigg, man and boy a senior member of the Sharrow team under the guidance of Coulson, is now working his magic in the very place he and his colleagues used for respite during the hectic years of celebrity and success.

Akrigg has in no sense been put out to pasture. He is not exactly coming home either, since as a Tirril lad born and bred just round the corner he has never really left home. But he has come to a place that



Best end of lamb with aubergine gratin



Venison striploin with braised red cabbage, port and redcurrant sauce; below: fillet of sea bass on wild mushroom risotto



has always lived successfully in the shadows of its illustrious neighbour and is now more than ever able to reproduce what was special at Sharrow.

Homeliness is the Howtown Hotel's most powerful appeal, a familiarity whatever time of year you visit. The house sits among a few hundred acres. Soft-lit lamps throw antieque shadows across the reds and browns in the panelled bar as we browse the menu. Brass and clocks adorn the William Morris wallpaper. The windows frame one of the Lake District's epic landscapes around nearby Martindale.

We are hosted by the Baldry family, whose home this is. They have been doing it impeccably for years - indeed Jacquie Baldry received a special award for lifetime service and achievement at the 2015 Cumbria Life Food and Drink Awards. ●

'The only help Akrigg gets comes from the waiting staff and one other young helper in the kitchen'



perfect and a positive invitation to an inexpensive glass of simple southern French red.

We had begun with a starter of twice-baked cheese soufflé with roasted onion and spinach for one of us, and fillet of sea bass with wild mushroom sauce for the other - exquisitely presented and delivered. Our cup runneth over. Neither too rich nor too poor. And then came the one element of embroidery on the menu - the choice of apple sorbet or carrot and orange soup. Ever since our arrival in Cumbria we have never fully understood why anyone would want soup to follow the kind of full-on starter we had already experienced. But a sorbet is a different matter - a delightful palate cleaner that set us up perfectly for our lamb and venison.

Through the windows a sinking summer sun closes off an evening of memories with a suitable finale of long-remembered desserts to choose from: blackcurrant crumble, cold apple pie and above all, a heaven-sent sherry trifle with a calorie count from hell which makes even the proffered alternative of cheese and biscuits seem like a health option.

But then again this is Howtown and these fells are made for walking.

KEITH AND STEPH'S SCORE

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|------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| FOOD | Formidable | ★★★★★ |
| SERVICE | Smiles all round | ★★★★★ |
| VALUE | Excellent | ★★★★★ |
| OVERALL VERDICT | Quiet satisfaction | ★★★★★ |

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Blackcurrant crumble; below: sherry trifle



We face the very simple challenge of choosing from a plain-speaking dinner menu costing just £30 (£99 if it is part of an overnight stay deal with bed and breakfast) with four courses that are all familiar and undemanding and include the old-fashioned Seventies option of soup or sorbet at 'half time' - after the first course.

The menu reminds us of a wise chef who once said that a plate should have no more than five ingredients. At Howtown we suspect this is not just the choice of the chef but the practical imperative. There is only so much a sole chef can do after all with 20-odd diners waiting for starters, mains and pud. The only help

Akrigg gets comes from the waiting staff and one other young helper in the kitchen.

But interestingly, apart from pragmatic considerations, it underlines the essence of Akrigg's cooking - top quality ingredients simply prepared, expertly cooked. This was nowhere better illustrated than in a main course with a near-perfect rack of lamb trimmed to within an inch of its life, pink without being too rare, served neatly with a rectangle of potatoes dauphinoise and a gratin of aubergine. Up against it on the other side of our table, a striploin of venison with braised red cabbage and parsnip purée underlined the principle of less is more. Flavour was pitch