

The Lambert Arms



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Must have been the Morse effect, acting like an SOS – See Our Spires, maybe – attracting me to Oxford.

It was almost by accident, because I was driving to the south coast from my home in the Pennines and needed to break the journey with an overnight stop somewhere comfortable and not too far from the motorway.

Anywhere around Oxford seemed to fit the bill, giving me chance to see again some of the wonderful college buildings that made the Morse and Lewis detective stories from author Colin Dexter such compulsive TV viewing.

It was fun to wander around the picturesque streets, catching glimpses of more glorious architecture through gated arches, and wandering around a bustling open market with a bewildering selection of foods and merchandise you could only find in a world-class campus like this, with students of all ages, tastes and backgrounds helping to create an inspiring, and awe-inspiring, spectacle. That gentle stroll and a pleasant, Morse-style interlude sipping a drink in a quiet, almost cloistered beer garden in the heart of the city, made the diversion into Oxford well worthwhile, before we headed off into the countryside.

It's been years since I visited that part of the world, so we arrived at **The Lambert Arms** in poetic Aston Rowant, Watlington, with no idea what to expect, except that it was an original Georgian coaching inn, a member of the prestige Bespoke Hotels family and had a 4* listing and an AA Rosette.



Check-in was in the historic half-timbered main building, which also houses nine bedrooms, while our room with a view over the fields and woodland was with 34 others in a much newer wing, enclosing a paved courtyard and extensive, mainly-lawned garden featuring a couple of huge ancient trees, one with a substantial, wedding-photo style garden swing that just begged to be tried out.

The first-floor room, reached by stairs or lift, was large and airy, complete with all mod cons like a large plasma TV and free WiFi; and with a huge en-suite bathroom featuring a walk in monsoon shower and a massive corner bath big enough for two if you felt like saving water.

Back to the comfortable bar in the old building, resplendent in traditional black and white on the outside, with original features like the sash windows retained, and refurbished inside by a team who know a good deal about atmosphere and how to hang on to it, making both visitor and local feel at ease.

After sitting outside in the sunshine to have a good look at the menu, we were shown into a dining room that managed to cope with having modern, practical furnishings and lighting alongside its huge period fireplace and still feel like an comfortable inn.

We opted for an early dinner (for us) and sat down to eat by 8 o'clock for what turned out to be a splendid meal, before heading back the bar/lounge. Many more people seemed to have the message, too, as it steadily got busier as the evening went on, with manager Craig Webb reporting that head chef Chris Coates and his team had happily produced a total of 65 covers, with 60 of them after the 8 o'clock mark. Not bad for a Thursday!



Not difficult, either, to understand why The Lambert Arms was a foodie hot-spot, because our meals were well worth writing home about.

One of our tasty starters, from the specials menu, was tian of salmon and cucumber, with dressed leaves and creme fraiche; the other from a wide choice on the main menu was a puff pastry tartlet with red onion, cherry tomatoes, mozzarella, charred baby gem, rocket and balsamic dressing.

Both mains were 'specials' and fully deserved the billing, well outside the usual parameters of 'pub food' and stylishly presented, while still being substantial and satisfying.

A sliced breast of chicken, with pave potato, parsnip and wild mushrooms looked super-appetizing and was judged to taste that way too; while I had a whole plaice on the bone, served with crushed herb new potatoes, wilted greens, samphire and a bean dressing – and very good it was, ably assisted by a familiar choice of a friendly Pinot Grigio rose.

Room for a pudding? Of course, with me going for an Eton mess with wonderfully-chewy meringue/honeycomb; and another sweet that was firmly in the 'best of' category: a light, plum and almond tart with stem ginger ice cream.

A fitting end to a genuinely splendid meal, served by friendly staff who didn't miss a thing and were bang on time with clearing away and delivering successive courses, especially aspiring music student Daniel, who at just 17 years old said he had grown up fast after being thrown in the deep end. And along with Stefan on the bar and Alex and Mel looking after reception, he was a credit to a stopping-off point that is now firmly fixed in my sat-nav.



The inn proudly boasts an AA Breakfast Award and that was never put in doubt the following morning before we set off on the next leg of our journey in glorious sunshine and with red kites wheeling overhead in an almost cloudless sky.

Fortified by the sort of brekkie that could make you book another night just to have an action replay, we took advantage of the Lambert Arms' location to spend a few hours just down the road in Henley-on-Thames, a day before the world-famous Regatta, when rowers from around the world work on practice and qualifying.

A rare treat to be shown to the best local pubs – like the Anchor – and be given an insight into one of the country's most iconic sporting and social occasions by a friend and Regatta veteran who had flown over specially from Northern Ireland for the umpteenth time. He was due to put on a unique blazer the following day and join an illustrious band of past competitors for some serious analysis, both of the rowing and as many real ales as possible, but took time out to help us relax by the water (ok, on the decking at the Angel on the Bridge!) while we watched the world, the rowers and the river flow gently by.

First time in Henley, first time at The Lambert Arms – but I don't think it will be the last.

The Lambert Arms

Aston Rowant, near Thame

Watlington

Oxfordshire

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