

Hotel Review: The Crown and Garter, Inkpen, Berkshire

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Irene Caswell enjoys a restful break in the English countryside.

The Crown and Garter pub and restaurant in the village of Inkpen in West Berkshire is surrounded by open countryside. The rural setting is perfect for a cosy short break any time of the year. Think long walks, an aperitif beside an open fire on chilly days and a home-cooked meal before tottering up the garden path to your room for a quiet night's sleep. Part of The Honesty Group, the pub is run in line with the independent group's values starting with real, seasonal food and ethical business practices.

Pub



This former coaching inn has a stylish and cosy atmosphere. Image credit: Irene Caswell

The country style pub was previously a 17th century coaching inn. The modest bar area incorporates the reception desk and the decoration is stylish and cosy with interesting contemporary art objects on the walls.

The 10 double rooms available are located in a purpose-built single-story building adjacent to the pub and arranged along two sides of a courtyard. The area is equipped with tables and chairs for relaxing with a good book for an hour or two, a pre-dinner drink or possibly breakfast in the summer. There is also a large garden at the rear of the pub.

An old barn on site was the original bakery that began the independent Honesty brand in 2014 which also incorporates a number of cafés and a farm shop. The bakery has since grown and moved to larger premises, and the barn is now home to an Honesty coffee shop. Outside is an old red telephone box which has been converted into a lending library.

Rooms



Accommodation at the Crown and Garter comprises of 10 cosy double rooms

The room I stayed in was a good size with a comfortable, high quality bed and bed linen. In addition to the standard desk, a plasma wall-mounted TV screen offered comprehensive programming. A complimentary tea-making tray was stocked with a good selection of coffee bags, teas and herbal brews, as well as British spring water in glass bottles, but there was no mini-bar or fridge in the room. Due to space the room lacked a seating area, with just one slipper chair provided, although the garden is a step away to sit out on warmer days.

The en-suite bathroom consisted of an effective, contemporary walk-in shower but no bath, with a heated towel rail and plenty of towels. Guest toiletries were organic by French company Apothicals, the shower cap and other items were packaged in recycled cardboard, but don't expect to find complimentary robes or slippers.

I would like to have seen a warm throw on the bed, while a hot water bottle and a few complimentary snacks would be welcome additional comforts.

Food



The restaurant serves a seasonal menu using fresh, local ingredients

The restaurant is overseen by French-trained head chef Steve Connolly who joined Honesty four months ago. His previous work locations include Wild Honey St James, FJB at Sandbanks in Poole and a year as executive chef in Bangkok.

Here, the three-course menu changes every four weeks or so depending upon what is in season, and available locally. While many restaurants claim to serve local produce, Steve confirmed that he cooks with herbs grown in the pub garden, lamb from a local farmer and honey from a neighbour's beehives. He also likes to forage and encourages apprentices to join him. The fruit in a damson fool might come from Honesty founder, Romilla Arber's, own garden. I enjoyed a fluffy cheese omelette for breakfast and was pleased to learn that the eggs came from a Newbury farm, while the breakfast coffee was of a high quality, a barista-style rich Americano.

Honesty began with a bakery making additive-free bread. They also produce their own butter and a tomato ketchup in the kitchens, which is also available at the group's farm shop. Steve says he has reduced kitchen waste by fifty per cent through initiatives such as using the whole plant to make a variety of dishes, producing breadcrumbs from any leftovers and so on. Honesty run trainee programmes alongside the professionals in butchery, bakery and in the kitchen.

Dinner



Confit Windsor pork belly, pomme puree, carrot and cider jus

With four items to select from in each of three courses I chose a Cornish crab cake with avocado and cucumber as a starter, which sadly turned out to be unremarkable. For dessert, a sharp and tangy lemon posset with a raspberry sorbet and tiny meringues was overly sweet. The star of the meal though was the confit Windsor pork belly served with a creamy pomme. A single, whole carrot looked rather lonely on the plate but tasted good, while the meat was succulent with crispy, naturally sweet crackling. This paired beautifully with a burnt apple and cider jus in the classic combination.

The wine list offered an interesting choice but disappointingly did not include any English wines. Instead, I enjoyed a Rioja Crianza Quasar which was peppery with fruity plum flavours and a hint of tobacco.

To do



Highclere Castle is the biggest local attraction

There are a range of attractions within a 20 to 30-minute drive from the pub, and the main attraction is the surrounding countryside. Take a walk to the top of the Gallow Down for the views and to see the 17th-century Coombe Gibbet built on top of the Inkpen Long Barrow which is a Scheduled Monument. It is also a popular spot for hand gliders and paragliders if you are feeling energetic.

The Grade I listed Highclere Castle is the biggest nearby attraction, but it is worth noting that it only opens to the public during the summer months.

Bombay Sapphire gin distillery offers tours and masterclasses to book in advance and you can stock up on bakery, meats and other goodies to take home from Saddleback Farm Shop, also part of the Honesty Group.

Inkpen village is scattered and there is no 'centre' as you might expect. The pub is the only one so it is popular with the locals, with live music on Friday evenings. Nearby towns include Newbury (and the eponymous racecourse) and Kingsclere. Also close by is Hungerford, known for its antique shops. Sadly, like many high streets in the UK the town has become rather run down but if you like antique hunting it is worth a visit.

Getting there



The rural setting is perfect for a cosy short break any time of the year

The Crown and Garter is in a rural area so there is no or limited public transport. London Waterloo to Newbury rail station takes just over an hour, with a further 20 minutes by taxi, or around 45 minutes by bicycle for enthusiasts. It is easily reachable by car, sitting about 20 minutes south of the M4.

In a nutshell

A stay at the Crown and Garter offers a peaceful break exploring the countryside and enjoying good food in comfortable accommodation.

Factbox

Rooms can be booked from £130 for a double on a bed and breakfast basis.

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