



STROLLING THROUGH THE CENTURIES

SET WITHIN THE NORTH WESSEX DOWNS AREA OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY, THE DUNDAS ARMS AND THE YEW TREE INN HAIL FROM DIFFERENT CENTURIES, YET THEY SHARE MUCH IN COMMON. GISELLE WHITEAKER EXPLORES THESE COUNTRYSIDE RETREATS.

Perched on a spit of land between the Kennet and Avon Canal and the River Avon in West Berkshire, moments from Kintbury train station, the Dundas Arms is akin to a cool drink of water. The eight-room, 18th-century, Grade II Listed inn, named after Charles Dundas, the first chairman of the Kennet and Avon Canal Company, has recently had a £500,000 makeover, which has served to enhance its ample charms.

My mother Judy gives a sigh of satisfaction as we check in to our lovely room overlooking the canal. The colours hint at autumn, with moss, beige and bronze, a teal wardrobe on one side adding a splash of colour. Regal, leather-framed headboards hang from brass hooks on the wood-panelled back wall and a duck-footed freestanding mirror adds a dash of personality. "This will do quite nicely," Judy says, popping the kettle on for a cup of tea before we head outside to make the most of the sunshine.

"We were thinking about going for a wander," I explain to the receptionist, who hands us a leaflet for a two-hour circular walk. Not once have Judy and I managed to follow

ABOVE
A narrowboat moored in front of the Dundas Arms.

LEFT
Along the Kennet and Avon Canal.



walking directions, so it is with some trepidation that we set off along the left bank of the towpath. We walk past a sign offering horse-drawn canal boat trips, the boat moored further down the path. Dragonflies flutter past and ducks forage in the reeds on the edge of the murky green water. Time slows down to match the flow of the canal, fish sending ripples across the surface as they feed.

We cross an old stone bridge arching across the canal and hike up Irish Hill, turning to admire the far-reaching view of the Kennet Valley. We stroll through fields and over stiles, past farmhouses and wooded copses. Two hours later, we find ourselves approaching the Dundas Arms, not a footstep misplaced, courtesy of the well-written landmarks included in the flyer. We have just enough time to freshen up before dinner.

It's a balmy evening, allowing us to make the most of the riverside terrace, already dotted with punters in the know. The food here is superb. We feast on a River Kennet crayfish cocktail with a creamy home-made Marie Rose sauce; rare roasted beef with gem salad, Parmesan crisps and salsa verde; pressed ham hock, chicken and parsley terrine; and pan-fried duck breast with saffron risotto, runner beans and sautéed yellow courgette. For dessert, we indulge with vanilla cream, summer fruit compote and crumbled shortbread; and Valrhona dark chocolate mousse and honeycomb, topped with a handful of halved raspberries. It is a deeply satisfying meal.

The next day, post-breakfast, we meet up with a friend from Newbury who guides us to Heaven's Gate, a folly on the hill above Highclere Castle that offers superb views of Highclere's 1,000 acres of sweeping parkland. The sprawling Jacobethan property is the residence of Lord and Lady Carnarvon and was the primary filming location for *Downton Abbey*, now drawing visitors from across the globe.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT
A garden table at the Dundas Arms; regal headboards adorn the bed; pressed ham hock, chicken and parsley terrine; rare roasted beef with gem salad, Parmesan crisps and salsa verde; a view of Highclere Castle from Heaven's Gate.



LEFT FROM TOP

Crab on toast with pickled cucumbers at the Yew Tree Inn; black pudding Scotch eggs; a cosy corner in the restaurant at the Yew Tree Inn.

Like Highclere Castle, the Yew Tree Inn was built in the 17th century, although it is a more modest affair, a few short miles down the road. We check in to one of the eight cottage-style guest rooms, each of which is named after trees found in the surrounding forests and woodlands. The back wall is dressed in fabulous, floral William Morris wallpaper, the bed wears a tartan throw and a deep burgundy headboard, and the window is framed by attic-style sloping walls. It screams cosy comfort and we kick off our shoes and settle in.

Just as the rooms exude character, so does the two AA-rosette restaurant, with artfully mismatched tables and chairs and cosy nooks designed for two. Inspired by Hampshire's rich tradition of farming, fishing and shooting, the undeniably British menu features fresh fish, game, meat, fruit and vegetables sourced from surrounding fields and streams. We dine on black pudding Scotch eggs; crab on toast with pickled cucumbers; and a fishermen's board, with prawns, smoked mackerel, bruschetta, mussels and a delightfully crunchy-coated crab arancini. Unable to decide on dessert, the chef offers us a taster plate of everything: vanilla crème brûlée with boozy peaches and shortbread; treacle tart; a vegan chocolate brownie; and white chocolate mousse with peanut butter lollipops, honeycomb, chocolate soil and cherry glaze. It looks so good the table next to us orders the same.

The Yew Tree Inn may be from a different century than the Dundas Arms, and in a different county - we have slipped from West Berkshire into Hampshire - but the inns share much in what they offer: a welcoming countryside retreat and food worth travelling for.



The Dundas Arms and the Yew Tree Inn are part of the Epicurean Collection, a group of award-winning independent inns dedicated to the finest in British food, comfort and culture, set in idyllic countryside or traditional village locations. See www.epicurean.club for more information.