

THE OLD VOLUNTEER AT CAYTHORPE

Howard Clemmow

There are some restaurants that, despite being located on a country lane with little passing traffic, always seem to thrive and prosper. The Old Volunteer is just such a place. Located between Lowdham and Caythorpe, it could easily have vanished into obscurity and joined the growing ranks of pubs that become housing developments. Instead, a decade ago it was bought by a chain of gastropubs, given a thorough refurbishment and a young and enthusiastic new management team installed. It was a runaway success and packed to the gunnels every night.

Sadly, the pub chain ran into trouble and the Old Volunteer was sold on. It changed hands a few times before it was taken over by the current owners in 2019. Now history has repeated itself, the pub has undergone another major refurbishment including a state of the art new kitchen and emerged, blinking, into the new normal of post lockdown dining out. Will it founder on the rocks of social distancing, can it repeat that earlier success, or will it be even better than before? We went along to find out.

Even from the outside, it's obvious that the refurbishment has indeed been major and that serious money has been spent. There's a big outdoor seating area to the front and side of the pub with some fantastic furniture and plenty of planting. Go inside and where once it was rustic country kitchen, now it is sleekly modern. There's a beautifully crafted oak floor, cleanly finished walls in a uniform pale yellow, some sleek statement light fittings and distinctly high-end furniture. The finish is exemplary; clearly the interior designer has



been given a free hand and a large cheque. The dining area lies to the back of the pub and we were led to our table by our highly efficient and unfailingly helpful waitress, Sara.

We're all aware that the virus hasn't gone away and precautions must be taken and, I have to say, if you are concerned about Covid, then this is the place for you. The hand sanitiser is prominently displayed and you're zapped on the wrist with a temperature gun when you arrive. Fortunately, the process isn't too intrusive; there are contact forms on the tables for test and trace, rather than a register being shoved under your nose when you walk through the door, and your cutlery arrives in a rather stylish paper bag.

The Old Volunteer is still very much a gastropub and this is reflected in the menu, which features a good range of contemporary British and European dishes. I should point out that if you want something a bit more casual, tapas are available along with pizza and barbecue menus. We, of course, went for the a la carte.

The list of starters is bolstered by several sharing platters but, with just myself and Penny dining, we wanted to sample as broad a range as possible. Before I say anything else, I must talk about the presentation which was impeccable throughout, with lovely plates and a beguiling arrangement of the dishes that made the food taste even better than it was. I chose *Venison Carpaccio, Pickled Heritage Carrots with a Parmesan Dressing*. This was sublime; I'm a huge fan of venison and this was perfectly marinated with just the right amount of salad so the main event wasn't overwhelmed. Penny went for *Bang Bang Chicken with Asian Slaw &*



Peanut Dressing. There was plenty of flavour in this dish and she particularly loved the exotic coleslaw.

On to main courses and with eleven dishes on offer there was something for everyone, even some tasty looking vegan options (I bet you never thought you'd hear that from me!). We were both in a mood for fish, so it was handy that there were three seafood dishes to choose from. I had *Grilled Whole Lemon Sole with Maitre d'Hotel Butter, New Potatoes & Green Salad*. Lemon sole is always a special treat. The key is to keep it simple and let the subtle flavour and texture of the fish shine through. This is exactly what the chef did – perfect! Penny opted for *Fillet of Sea Bass, Crushed New Potatoes, Tender Stem Broccoli with a Buerre Noisette & Dukkah*. Once again, the fish was perfectly cooked with a crispy skin and meltingly tender flesh. And no, I am still none the wiser as to what Dukkah is.

Thanks to the sensible portion sizes, we were both up for desserts, *Lemon Parfait with Dressed Raspberries and Raspberry Coulis* for Penny and a couple of scoops of homemade ice cream for me. I'm happy to report that the desserts are up to the same standard as the rest of the food, which is saying something.



The wine list is pretty decent without being overly extravagant. I spent £19 on a very palatable Australian chardonnay which hit the spot nicely. Now, here's the big news. The Old Volunteer offers remarkable value for money. For food of this quality I would expect to pay at least 50% more at most gastropubs in the area. That is well worth noting in these uncertain times.

Like all restaurants right now, the Old Volunteer is feeling its way in a strange new world, trying to find the right balance between ensuring the safety of its customers and providing a relaxing dining experience. I'd say it's doing a pretty good job of it. As for restoring its former glory as the "in" eatery, the ingredients are all there – that sleek interior, the excellent food and the young and keen team. Keep up the good work.

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With thanks to the team for some wonderful food and a stylish evening.

