

The View review

Dia Newland *enjoys a walk with lunch at its heart*



Bear & Ragged Staff • Stonymarsh • Michelmersh • Romsey • SO51 0LB
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The beginning of February is an excellent time to forget recent demoralising promises and diets and step out into 2012 with a weathered eye on the spring to come. One of my favourite long walks in Hampshire has the added advantage of a rather good watering hole slap bang in the middle. This means that my constitutional can be interrupted once, twice or even three times, making a day that is particularly leisurely.

The Bear & Ragged Staff is easily located on the A3057 between Stockbridge and Romsey. Staff, used to walkers parking their cars, are happy to prepare a fresh coffee before explorers head off to enjoy views of rivers, historical Mottisfont and chalk downs. Split by the road, it is possible to halve the walk and stop for lunch (in the summer taken in the garden) then – some British staying power required here – continue the walk on the other side of the A3057, returning later for some further well-earned light refreshment.

The interior of the restaurant was revamped last May and feels fresh and more contemporary, although the 16th-century character of the property has been retained. Jonathan Salmon, who has been in situ since 2002, has created a comfortable

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atmosphere welcoming locals, travellers and walkers alike to enjoy the homemade food cooked on the premises, or just have a pint. The original building on this site was a priory, founded by William Briwere in 1201, who was a trusted advisor to Richard the Lionheart, King John and Henry III.

The Bear & Ragged Staff has an *à la carte* menu and daily specials available at lunchtime and in the evening, as well as snacks and a light-bite menu available from 12 noon. We both decided to start simply and continue with a robust main course. My starter of field mushrooms arrived promptly, and was honest, hot and flavoursome. John chose breaded brie with salad garnish, which he reported to be just right. Other choices were potato skins filled with cheese and bacon and served with a tomato salsa dip, whitebait with brown bread and butter and tartare sauce, or maybe homemade soup of the day.

Lamb shank, sticky with tomato and herb sauce, was warming and tasty and matched well with the dish of vegetables served separately. My partner’s layer pie – a generous portion filled with chicken, stuffing, bacon, sausage meat and spinach – was a delicious meal in itself and for the hungry walker (or so he insisted) the addition of new potatoes and fresh vegetables was essential. There were many other choices on the menu as well as on the specials board (which I tend to favour) and, indeed, this is from where I chose my main course. However, I could just as easily have been tempted by rack of ribs (pork ribs cooked long and slow until tender, covered in barbecue sauce), or perhaps whole local trout topped with toasted almonds.

Scott Clark, the enthusiastic young

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chef, uses a variety of layer pies during the course of the changing seasons to showcase the fresh local produce sourced whenever possible. That includes fresh Kimbridge trout, ice cream from New Forest Ice Cream, water from New Forest Water, free-range eggs from Claytons of Romsey, cheeses from Lyburn and Loosehanger, and game in season from local shoots. It’s great that in Hampshire we have a rich, diverse choice of local produce, and splendid that a small, locally based company like Marine Taverns Limited, which operates the Bear & Ragged Staff, is able to offer us this within their menu. I understand there is another pub in the company’s stable, The Fish Inn at Ringwood, which I am sure we will be investigating when our travels take us that way.

And so to pudding. Sticking to a fairly traditional theme we decided to finish on a light note with crème brûlée. It came with the best caramelized topping we’ve sampled in a long time, and was thoroughly enjoyed. There were many other choices for those with a sweet tooth and the space to indulge. No wonder this pub is notching up awards. ▼

Our meal, without drinks, came to £42.30