

The View review

Following in the footsteps of GK Chesterton and Dwight D Eisenhower, Annie Bullen makes her way to Chilworth Manor



The dining room, splendid yet comfortable

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Full marks to Chilworth Manor for responding to the credit crunch with a comprehensive new menu which gives cash-strapped diners a full three courses for just £20 a head. In fact, there are three new *table d'hôte* menus designed by head chef Chris Keel and his team. They rotate during the week so that guests staying for more than a day or so have a choice of 12 main courses and desserts, and nine starters. And, if you don't eat your way through three courses, you'll pay correspondingly less.

Chilworth Manor has an interesting history. The long, winding drive from the thatched beehive-shaped entrance lodges dates from its days as a country home for the Fleming family just over a hundred years ago when the present building was completed. It's large and well-proportioned, the architecture a blend of Victorian Gothic and Art Deco. It has long been known as a hotel superbly equipped for conferences and meetings. That dates from its university days – it became a hall of residence for Southampton University in the 1960s and a residential conference and training centre 31 years later.

It's now privately owned and, while still one of the best-regarded conference centres in the area, attracts private diners and people using the leisure club with its swimming pool, fitness and relaxation classes and beauty treatments. Part of the credit for this must go

to head chef Chris, who has devised a range of menus based on modern European cooking, with an emphasis on fresh local produce and herbs from the hotel's garden.

The welcome we received on a wet, chilly evening warmed us as we sat with gins and tonic in the large Art Deco lounge and bar, deciding what to eat, while Tom Coates, the hotel's food and beverages manager, talked us through the new menus. The dining room is splendid – not too large, and comfortably furnished. We settled at a window table for our starters. Smoked mackerel fillet with horseradish cream and an orange dressing for Roy and prosciutto, artichoke and sweet pepper salad for me. Both came with baby salad leaves, and mine's light sesame-oil dressing was neatly mopped up with a crusty brown roll.


The wine list is comprehensive with a selection of New World wines and some traditional favourites, with plenty of reasonably priced wines by the glass. We each had a large glass of French merlot. Roy chose his to go with his tasty sirloin steak, which came with smoked-bacon and red-onion jus and a selection of baby vegetables – leeks, carrots and a tiny turnip. A couple of roast potatoes were enjoyed.

My colourful plateful of gnocchi was sautéed with baby peppers. I've never eaten gnocchi cooked in this way before and the

finished dish was full of interesting and robust flavours.

We could have chosen sea bass or pan-cooked chicken with wild mushrooms and tarragon.

Time for pudding. We were pleased to see good cheese on the menu, without any supplement. It's all local – from Loosehanger Cheese at Redlynch – and Roy's generous plateful had a delicious blue, a tangy hard cheese and another with a smoky flavour.

I enjoyed a vanilla pannacotta with a raspberry compote and fresh raspberries. There are also local ice-creams and a fruit pavlova on this menu. 

The other two table d'hôte menus include roasted pork belly with sweet plum and apple jus, natural smoked haddock, vegetarian tart, wild-mushroom risotto for mains. Starters include crayfish and mango salad, glazed goat's cheese crottin and asparagus, Cambazola and walnut salad, while chocolate and marshmallow cheesecake and fresh-fruit tartlet are on the pudding list.

Many of the rooms and public areas at Chilworth Manor are named after distinguished men and women. The Dorothy L Sayers room is so-called because the upper-crust crime writer, creator of Lord Peter Wimsey, was related to one-time owners of the Manor, which may have been the setting for one of her country-house murder mysteries. GK Chesterton was a visitor here as, it is thought, was his friend Hilaire Belloc. Dwight D Eisenhower has his room, too – it is said he stayed at Chilworth Manor while planning Operation Overlord in 1944.



Prosciutto, artichoke and sweet pepper salad



A plate of excellent local cheeses