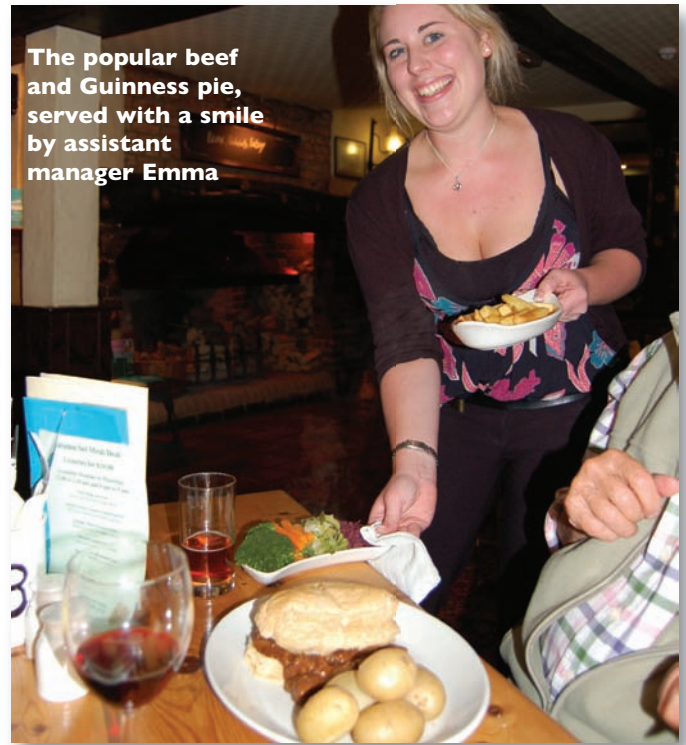


# The View review

Annie Bullen *finds that tasty, genuine home cooking hits the spot*



The popular beef and Guinness pie, served with a smile by assistant manager Emma

**The Bear & Ragged Staff • Stonymarsh • Michelmersh • Romsey • Hants • SO51 0LB**  
**01794 368602 • [www.thebearandraggedstaff.net](http://www.thebearandraggedstaff.net)**

Years ago, I remember seeing an exhibition of cartoon versions of British pub signs. There was the Bear & Ragged Staff – the chained bear getting its own back by chasing a slightly mauled and distinctly ragged pair of bar staff up a tree. No such disorder exists, I'm happy to report, at the real Bear & Ragged Staff at Michelmersh, just outside Romsey, where owners John and Vicky Salmon have gone to lengths to create the kind of pub they would like to visit themselves, with good home-cooked food, comfortable surroundings and pleasant (un-ragged) staff.

The building itself dates from the 16th century and is pleasantly roomy inside with plenty of space for diners and drinkers alike. The formula adopted by the Salmons here and at their other unpretentious pub, The Fish Inn at Ringwood, is a winning one.

Chef Scott Clarke and his team in the kitchen cook virtually everything from scratch. Not gastro-pub food, but mainly delicious traditional dishes such as beef and Guinness pie, braised lamb shank, liver and bacon with onion gravy, steaks, gammon and chicken curry. Fish dishes include cod in a homemade

batter or cooked with cheese and tomato, tuna with plum sauce, fresh plaice fillets.

There's an all-day menu, too, with sandwiches, ploughman's, sharing platters, small platters of prawns, smoked salmon, avocado and melon in varying combinations and filled ciabatta.

'We want people to be able to come in and eat as little or as much as they want. If they just want a drink, that's fine too,' says John. 'We thought about what we like to see when we go out to a pub, and put that into place.'

After a gin and tonic and small bitter it was time to test the home cooking. Chicken and sweet corn soup, for me, was a winner, almost like a stew, thick with meat and vegetables and served with a huge chunk of brown bread. A good freshly made prawn cocktail with a tasty sauce, juicy prawns and crisp lettuce was our other starter and that went down well, too.

Choices included pâté, smoked mackerel, spicy chicken wings and whitebait. The other two homemade soups that day were pea and ham, and broccoli and blue cheese.

We had been told that one of the pub's top dishes in terms of popularity was the homemade beef and Guinness pie, so my friend decided that was for him. It came with a choice of chips, spicy or new potatoes, salad or vegetables – he chose new potatoes and vegetables, which included red and green cabbage, broccoli and carrots.

My goats' cheese fritters, soft and melting on the inside and coated in a thin and crispy batter, were served with a huge salad. So I felt a few chips might be just the thing and jolly nice they were, too. A sweet chilli sauce

provided bite and flavour and married the whole dish together. I was tempted by salmon baked in a pastry crust, which a lady at the next table polished off in record time, saying it was very good.

There wasn't a lot of room for pudding, so we used the two spoons brought by Emma, the assistant manager, and shared a seasonal apple and blackberry pie served with a couple of scoops of vanilla ice cream. ▼

**Our meal, without drinks, came to a very reasonable £31.35**

A recession-busting meal offer runs at the Bear and Ragged Staff until the last week in November – two courses for £10 available Monday to Thursday at lunchtime and in the evening on a set range of dishes, like fish and chips and sausage and mash, fruit crumble and profiteroles.

The heraldic device of the Bear and Ragged Staff traditionally belongs to the Earl of Warwick and has been used by that family for around 900 years. Legend has it that an early Warwick bravely broke a branch from a tree (the 'staff') to kill a marauding giant and this, linked with the bear, who signified strength, became their emblem.



Good advice over the fireplace