

Welsh
BorderLife

REVIEW

THE HAND AT LLANARMON

For a taste of classic country-inn hospitality, you'll find the Ceiriog Valley has a surprise in store

Words: Catherine Waterfall

MANY COUNTRY INNS BOAST ALL the right ingredients for success – an open fire, beamed ceilings, good food, real ales and cosy bedrooms. But it takes something extra special to bring customers back time and again, and The Hand – in the picturesque village of Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog – 20 mins across the Border from the north Shropshire market town of Oswestry, offers huge potential.

Walking in for the first time, you're greeted with a welcoming, friendly atmosphere and a warmth that's hard to put into words. Maybe it's the locals laughing around the bar, some with their dogs obediently at their feet. Maybe it's the smell of award-winning food on the go, the blazing open fire that's more than just an after-thought, or the stunning views of the village and the Ceiriog Valley beyond. But much can also be attributed to the hard work of owners Jonathan and Jackie Greatorex, who took over last winter and have breathed new life into this 16th-century former farmhouse.

It's a cheerful Jonathan who checks us in with a broad smile. There are 13 bedrooms in total, including four 'superiors' in the main building, with the other nine in the former stables and barns overlooking fields and the hillside beyond. With our seven-month-old puppy, Genie, in tow, Jonathan shows us to one of the three dog-friendly, south-facing ground-floor bedrooms – again, no after-thought. Occasionally hoteliers will give dog owners a below-standard, tiled room round the back of the hotel, but this dog-loving couple (Jonathan and Jackie have three adorable whippets of their own) treat us all equally and the room doesn't disappoint. The double aspect windows and white, French rustic-style furniture give the space a bright and airy feel, and it's spacious enough for all three of us.

As well as re-decorating the bedrooms, Jonathan and Jackie have added a small spa for tired walkers to indulge in before dinner, and after settling in, then a short walk down the country lanes, I take advantage of this new service and book in for a back massage and mini facial. The treatment room doubles as the comfortable guest lounge, with open fire, squashy sofas and bay window. But when the spa is in use, the door is locked for complete privacy. And you're in expert hands. Therapist Shelley is well-trained and has many years' experience and I quickly escape into a world of relaxation.

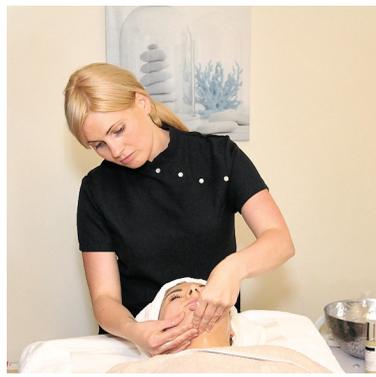
Interestingly, The Hand have eschewed the obvious big-brand spa products such as Decléor and Aromatherapy Associates, and opted instead for a small boutique brand from Bath – the Natural Spa



Factory – which only uses natural ingredients, reflecting The Hand's rustic charm. It's a wise choice which sets them apart from the larger hotel chains. The exfoliator, mask and creams have a wonderful aroma, like a herb meadow, while at the same time the products deliver a deep treatment, and afterwards my skin feels smoother and clearer. Plus Shelley clearly knows what she's doing; the massage leaves me feeling sleepy and ready for a relaxing evening in the restaurant.

Dining is one of the biggest draws here, thanks in no small part to talented and passionate chef Grant Mulholland. Since taking over the kitchen 11 years ago, he's built an enviable reputation and has been awarded an AA Rosette for 'culinary excellence' and an AA egg-cup for 'outstanding breakfasts'. The Hand can also be found in the Michelin Guide. Earlier in the day we bumped into Grant and he offered to create a unique four-course meal after a quick discussion about our tastes. It's something he offers guests on request and all the dishes are created specially for each diner. That may seem a risky option, but it's actually a refreshing change to have the menu choices taken out of our hands, and we settle in for an evening of culinary surprises.

The starter of mackerel with cheese mousse and beetroot is a light, tasty way to begin and the warm flesh of the fish and crispy skin is a



ABOVE LEFT New owners Jonathan and Jackie Greatorex have breathed new life into The Hand at Llanarmon since purchasing the 16th-century former farmhouse last winter, including the introduction of a new Spa service (ABOVE RIGHT)

LEFT & FAR LEFT Award-winning food is one of the biggest attractions, making an extended stay in the Ceiriog Valley all the better



wonderful contrast with the cool mousse. There's also a delicious sorbet to cleanse the palate before a fabulous main course of breast of duck with beef cheek risotto that's surprisingly light but tasty for such a meat-lover's dish. Finally, the lemon and thyme brûlée with poached pears is another curious contrast of flavours and textures and the wow factor is provided by a delicious tall glass of Bailey's Sabayon.

Grant is clearly an ambitious chef who loves to try new things and he's only too happy to offer the surprise 'taster' menu to diners if they pre-book. Depending on what you choose, at £40 per head it's slightly more expensive than eating off the menu, but ours was a triumph and real foodies will appreciate the care and attention given.

Of course, there's no pleasing everyone, and just as our main courses arrived, Genie decided to have a barking fit, at which point Jackie and Jonathan stepped in as temporary dog sitters to allow us (and everyone around us!) to enjoy our food in peace. It just goes to illustrate how laid back and relaxed The Hand is, and how much the owners care about their customers enjoying themselves.

After a short evening's walk around the peaceful village, we enjoy a good night's sleep and wake to the glorious July sunshine. The hard-working Shelley, having swapped her beauty therapist title for that of

waitress, serves us a delicious breakfast of smoked salmon and scrambled eggs in the restaurant, and we're well set for the day.

Everyone who works here seems to go the extra mile and it shows. Often hotels can let themselves down with one or two minor oversights, but The Hand delivers the whole package. Add to this one of the most idyllic settings in Wales and the result is the ultimate retreat. 🍷

More information

Welsh Border Life stayed in a Country Room, priced at £107.50 per night, including breakfast, plus a charge for dogs of £5 each. The surprise taster menu costs £40 per person.

From the restaurant menu, starters are from £4.50, mains from £9.50 and desserts £5.75. The mini facial is priced at £29 while the massage is £30.

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