

The Spotgate Inn, Stone



There can be no question, no debate. The Spotgate Inn undoubtedly offers a First Class dining experience.

And a Third Class one for that matter. This column has taken me to some very interesting places: curious theme pubs, an old toll house, Edward VIII's local.

But I can safely say this is the first time I have gone out for an evening meal in an old railway carriage.

I decided to give the Spotgate a try after a recommendation from Express & Star reader Vivien Heenan, who says it is well worth venturing off the beaten track for this unique experience.

Just outside the village of Hilderstone, and 11 miles from Stafford, it is two and a half miles from the nearest railway station, and the only realistic way for most people to get there is by road. Indeed, the car park was quite full when we arrived. The immaculate frontage is distinctive, even if the eye-catching signs are the only indication of the railway theme.

The main building is pretty much like any other country pub, albeit one with a very tidy beer garden, although an extension to the side does look rather like a railway shed.

The main building houses a function room for private parties, and there is also a cosy but chic bar area for people just wanting a quiet drink.

A gabled porch provides the entrance to the Pullman Restaurant, where there is a small candlelit lounge for people to relax before their meal, or indeed to dine at if they prefer conventional surroundings. Diners certainly get a warm welcome. On arrival we were courteously greeted by a smiling lady, who gently asked us how she could help us.



Helpful without being pushy, cheerful but still courteous, she led us up a set of steps to our table in the Third Class dining car.

The two carriages, which are set side by side to each other, are built into the pub in a way that makes for a seamless entry, almost like crossing the bridge on to an aeroplane. At the opposite end, another extension links the two coaches together.

Both carriages entered service on the same day in 1928, and remained in service for nearly half a century before they were sold by British Rail and installed at the Spotgate.

"I think it was seen as a cheap way to extend the restaurant," said a waitress. Apparently, they fell into a state of disrepair during the 1990s, but were lovingly restored to their Edwardian splendour when present owners Mike and Janis Cullen took over around seven years ago."

The First Class car is named Ursula, and features two enclosed dining compartments for those wanting a little privacy. We were sat in the Third Class section, the main difference being it has bench seats rather than individual armchairs.

Nevertheless, it should be quite plush enough for most people, with the immaculate dark wood panelling, tied-back curtains and vases creating an ambience of the sort taking you back to the days of Agatha Christie, while on the wall is a detailed history of the carriage.

The outer seats overlook platform-style terraces, whereas the inner seats overlook the neighbouring carriage. To add to the feel, occasional train noises are played over the sound system, although I'm not sure the 1980s pop music was really in keeping with it. And while the unique surroundings might be something of a novelty, the Spotgate also has the substance to back up the style.

In the kitchen is Mike and Janis's son Richard, who was recently crowned top chef in the county's Master Chef competition, is a previous holder of the Young Chef title and has worked with Gordon Ramsay.

The menu is not huge, but the 13 main courses on offer should offer sufficient variety for most people, and the focus is on simple, traditional dishes with the chef's own personal touches.



For example, the minted braised lamb in red wine sounds an attractive option, and I was tempted by the peppered pork loin, char-grilled in a green peppercorn and cream sauce, but in the end I opted for a 10oz sirloin with pepper sauce, while my dining partner went for the Spotgate's speciality fish pie, made up of fresh chunks of white fish, salmon and tiger prawns cooked in creamy leek sauce and topped off with mash and cheddar cheese.

I couldn't fault my steak, which was well cooked, and my companion was delighted with her pie, which she said was filled to the brim with an array of top-notch fish. We were also provided with ample servings of perfectly vegetables and chips.

And while the mains were very good, the desserts were superb. I opted for the Baileys and butterscotch cheesecake, served with vanilla ice cream - excellent value for £3.95 - while my companion opted for the "luxury ice experience" - white chocolate chunks, honeycomb crunch and toffee fudge set in ice cream, layered with chocolate sauce and topped with cream. She said it was probably the best dessert she had experienced, and really did justify the £4.50 asking price.

There was a reasonable choice of beers, with two real ales as well as the usual John Smith's and lager, but my companion felt the rose was a little on the dark side.

This is a minor criticism in the scheme of things, though and the total bill (or should that be fare?) of £48.65 - including two large glasses of wine, a pint of beer and a coffee - was not excessive given the quality of the food and the generosity of the portions.

If I was a boss at British Rail, or whatever it is called these days, I would snap up the services of Mike and Janis Cullen.

Someone who can charge people to sit in a stationary railway carriage - and still manage to keep the customers happy - would be just the ticket.