
Shakespeare's Inspiration

As Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, so the Howard Arms in Ilmington was built. Michael Reed visits the Cotswolds.



The beautiful Cotswolds is on the doorstep of the Howard Arms



Unwind where countryfolk have for centuries

The Howard Arms, Ilmington, holds steadfast like a bright light at the end of a tunnel of winter gloom, as I drive through Surrey under a sky that looks like the mother of a wet weekend. I muse that William Turner might have grabbed his easel, brushes and paints and created a masterpiece, which would now fetch a king's ransom. Perspective over tunnel vision, I remind myself, just avoiding an imperious pheasant as he struts to the other side of the road.

I look forward to marrying my new inner peace, courtesy of the happy fowl, to the Howard Arms' distant glow, now anchored steadfast in my mind as a welcome sanctuary for the night. I stable my Honda at the old Cotswolds coaching inn, noting that the Howard Arms carries a torch for pubs everywhere.

Former Brewer and owner Mr Flower keeps an eye on things, after his sign was dug from obscurity during renovations whose sympathetic yet vibrant design was orchestrated by the wives of two of the major shareholders, both local farmers.

Under his beady eye, I choose a starter which leaps off the page like a shoal of mackerel evading a predator, only to end up in a delicate pie on my plate. It yields to my knife, emitting a fresh zesty fragrance, the smoky mackerel, spinach, ratte salad, horseradish and chive mayonnaise elevating my palate.

This is followed by roast pork fillet in Parma ham with sharp cherry apples that has my taste buds jumping like novice Morris dancers.

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Greeted by Rob, the General Manager, who uncomplainingly carries my heavy bag up to The Summer Room, one of eight, I am as happy now as my pheasant friend. Lemon yellow stripes are dashed here and there amongst a crèche of cushions and on a sumptuous bed, all enveloped by soft dove grey walls, providing a zing that matches the Temple Spas' jojoba, orange, wild mint and grapefruit soaps and gels in the bathroom. Toes toasted by underfloor bathroom heating, I head to the bar, where the quirky decorative tang defining the bedrooms also runs through the flagstone watering holes. They boast a couple of magnificent fireplaces, lit most of the year round, and eggshell sea blue walls hold up the ceiling, through which oaken beams run like the keels of an ancient craft.

The sticky toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce is the perfect finale by AA-Rosette-winning Chef Gareth Rufus, awarded along with Five Stars after a surprise visit, two days after the re-launch in Feb 2016.

My night is complete with a dance at the Pittville Pump Rooms in Cheltenham and on returning over Dover Hill, I am lucky enough to avoid a herd of rabbits and a fox. I also see the demise of an asteroid burning crayon thick across Turner's sky.

I devour my breakfast porridge drizzled with local honey as politely as possible, unlike the voracious wind and rain that gnaw at the honeyed

Cotswold stone of pubs, church and gravestones alike, sanctity being no refuge as evidenced by fluted gouges and weathering everywhere. It's time for a stroll along the high street, past the local stocks and pound and a mini dairy, before visiting a church rescued by local families to house the local Shoppe and alfresco cafe after the village shop folded.

Horse riding, fishing, cycling quad biking and shooting, along with the remaining 4,999 miles 1,460 yards of country walks are available to me, but I am content admiring the local scene.

Outside the Howard Arms, my inner schoolboy salutes the splendid Horse Chestnut tree for its service to the game of conkers. It bursts from the 10th-Century postage stamp village green, through seven bands of iron on which I sit reflecting on what gives this place its charm.

Sheep graze nearby on a hillside like fallen clouds pushed out of the sky. This really is a place to remember your dreams. I feel I have permission to leave my electronic cares behind for a day, as if nature, a forgotten familiar, is knocking at the door of my soul asking if I'd like to come out and play, like a childhood friend.

I then point my steed in the direction of Shakespeare's home, 10 miles to the north in Stratford-upon-Avon. The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, celebrating 400 years of the Bard, doesn't miss a trick in educating young and old alike. At the gates of his new home, the door attendant confides that the Tudor farmer's lad frequented the nearby Garrick pub, quite

possibly on his way home from school, and the recent appraisal of a stained glass window in nearby Alcester shows him to be a fan of drinking contests there.

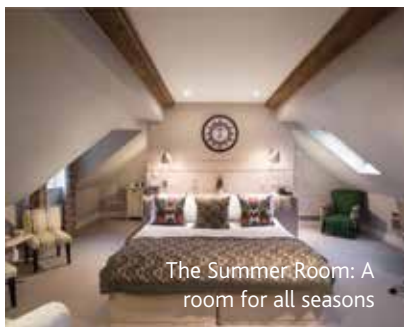
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Farm folk converge on the Howard Arms every Friday night and stand on worn flags that bore the weight of their forefathers, perhaps even Shakespeare himself. "The Midwife should rub a newborn's tongue with honey to ensure that he will speak sweetly and soon," advises an old wives tale. Perhaps the honey of the Cotswolds shaped Shakespeare's ends more than all the kingdom's ales.

"Therein," perhaps, "lies the rub." (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, misquoted).



Shakespeare's birthplace



The Summer Room: A room for all seasons



The menu at the Howard Arms tempts and the dishes tantalise

For more information about the Howard Arms, see www.howardarms.com



A happy pheasant