

Hawkhurst itself is two villages – the Moor brims with picture-postcard cottages which are clustered around a village green; a little further up the road is Highgate, with its pretty Georgian colonnade of independent traditional shops – a butcher, a baker, florist, pharmacy, and a couple of boutiques.

It's a typical English village, a parish, and a sub-district of Tunbridge Wells, within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It has over 1,000-years of recorded history and played a significant role in the Wealden fabric industry, which gave way to the iron industry from Roman times to the Industrial revolution, when coal became the preferred method of heating. Then an influx of Flemish weavers brought with them a preference for beer, and the accompanying beer-making skills which resulted in farmers cultivating hops, which in turn led to a proliferation of distinctive oast houses, whose rooflines still punctuate the horizon.

In the 1700s the village was the headquarters of the infamous 'Hawkhurst Gang', the most notorious gang of smugglers along the south coast. Several inns and local houses claim associations with the

Simon Found, a man who truly appreciates good, local produce. It's no wonder they hold two AA rosettes.

The serving staff are way above average, guiding you in your menu and wine pairing choices. Best of all there's no rush, and they always have time for a chat – which leads onto important things like selection of a dessert.

Heading back to the bar with my dessert wine, I pull up a chair beside the fireplace. One of the locals saunters over, claiming local legend has smuggling links to the Queens Inn. We sit quietly for a moment, contemplating the flames. He then pipes up that from time-to-time the ghostly legs of a smuggler are seen hanging just inside the chimney. Apparently, he'd decided to hide up the chimney from the local customs officials, only to suffocate.

Deciding to stay over for the night I'm led upstairs, along a crooked corridor which takes me to one of their eight quirky rooms. Mine for the night is No 4, which is somewhat eclectic with walls in Farrow and Ball's French Grey, carpets in a taupe shade called 'Flint', a green retro dial phone, an old-style View Quest radio, a couple of vintage travel trunks at the end of the bed, rustic painted furniture with groovy

The Queen's Inn, Hawkhurst Tradition, with a twist

gang: high taxation on luxury goods in the early 18th century had led to an upsurge in smuggling, so the gang brought in brandy, silk and tobacco from the coastal towns of Rye and Hastings to be stowed away in hidden cellars and passages, before being sold off to the local gentry.

The wisteria-festooned Georgian façade of The Queens Inn, a 16th century Grade II listed inn, conceals an elegant, beamed interior. It's been revived with panache after years of decline and has restored its reputation as a place to eat, drink and spend the night. As soon as I walked in and saw a crackling fire with a sleeping dog lying beside it, I knew this was going to be a treat; and I wasn't wrong.

The bar is spacious, modern and rustic. It's been spruced up without blighting the Inn's character. Expect to find contemporary print wallpaper, gilded mirrors, champagne-cork tables and velvet armchairs in colourful fabrics, sheepskin throws, wine-barrel tables, upcycled steel-framed swivel chairs and funky objets d'art. Apart from the blazing wood-burner in the inglenook fireplace, with its sought-after wing chairs, there are exposed brick walls, high ceilings with wood beams, chunky radiators and ancient wood and tiled floors, there's a hidden chill-out corner with deep sofas and comfortable armchairs.

There are two restaurants – one inside the bar and the Charcoal Kitchen in an adjoining room which has large bifold doors opening to the front courtyard, and where I tuck into a plate of croquets individually made of Chorizo, spinach, Iberico ham and seafood. This is followed by Plaice, dressed in a subtle jus, with shrimps, leeks, cobnuts, roasted salsify and Romanesque greens – the taste is so delicate you feel the need to be gentle in its consumption. There's nothing pretentious or over complex about it, it's just quality produce prepared by chef

fabrics, and a crazy lampshade atop a wooden tripod stand. The bed is the best: a large comfy Hypnos dressed in luxury Egyptian cotton, deep pillows and a goose down duvet. Essentially the room contains all the required 21st century mod-cons – wi-fi, television, a bureau containing a cafetière for fresh coffee, plus a glass jar containing just-made chocolate brownies! The beamed and marbled en suite is elegant with an illuminated mirror, a beautiful roll-top bath, Burlington taps, a pebbled floor, and indulgent Orla Kiely bathroom products. It's just tricky to sleep in a quirky old buildings when every creak conjures up visions of one of the chaps from the Hawkhurst Gang doing his midnight round!

The breakfast room is a bejewelled affair with funky crown-motif wallpaper, low beams, brick and timber walls, wooden floors and a fireplace. The tables are neat, and void of containers filled with plastic-wrapped condiments. As is customary, I do my chef 'scrambled egg' test. Most breakfast chefs get this wrong and present something that is tasteless, overcooked and rubbery. This time though my nose immediately detected I was in for a treat. Thin slivers of salmon with silk-like lightly scrambled eggs prepared with cream and cooked in salted butter.

I can understand why my fireside friend had bought a house in the village based on this rambling old Inn, which is way more than a gastro pub with rooms. 

www.innplaces.co.uk

Written and photographed by Cindy-Lou Dale

