Old pal King William has lost none of his well-worn charms

The King William isn’t exactly new. I mean the golden Bath stone frontage and splendid duck egg blue bow windows must date back to Georgian times when this would have been a watering hole for weary travellers on the old London Road.

Current custodians Charlie and Amanda Digney took over in 2004, which is itself an impressive tenure when so many pubs are closing every week.

In those 15 years, they have also opened two other places - The Garrick’s Head next to Bath Theatre Royal and The Oakhill Inn at Oakhill near Radstock – which makes for an impressive trio of gastropubs all worthy of investigation.

But it’s the King William that remains a personal favourite of mine, having been eating there on and off since the month it opened. In fact, for a brief spell, it felt as though I was spending more time in there than my own local – quite an achievement when I live in Bristol not Bath. I once spent an entire afternoon in there with a bunch of beer-loving food writers, although memories of that are hazy to say the least. We may well have even carried on through to dinner, who really knows?

Returning last weekend for a far less gregarious Saturday lunch on my own, I was relieved to find that barely anything has changed.

OK, the teal and aubergine-coloured paintwork is a bit more scuffed and peeling than it was, but the furniture is still mismatched, the cutlery vintage/car boot and the brass chandeliers in need of a buff.

The Digneys took over the pub three years before the smoking ban, and I was relieved to find that none of his well-worn charms had been lost.

At one point, most of the people dining upstairs – mainly a group of hungover students and their parents with more than a whiff of Withnail and I about them – were huddled on the chilly pavement outside the entrance, piling away on their roll-ups.

More importantly, it was still packed on a Saturday lunchtime, with all tables booked downstairs and the upstairs dining room packed.

Of course, food may be the main draw now but this is still very much a pub where locals can squeeze into the bar and quaff pints of Palmers Dorset Gold and Cheddar Ales Velvet Bottom as they munch their way through pork scratchings or posher bar snacks of Bath chaps with Granny Smith apple puree.

There’s a blackboard bar menu packed full of pub favourites – fish and chips, beef burger, rib-eye steak and a pie of the day (chicken and ham hock on this occasion) – as well as an equally affordable set lunch menu at £15 for two courses or £19.95 for three.

There are three choices per course on the set menu, plus a few extra pubbier dishes, including a steak sandwich with red onion chutney, confit garlic mayo and fries for a wallet-friendly £7.50.

A fillet of “torched” Cornish mackerel with white crab, apple mayo and sesame was a well crafted starter that relied on the freshest seafood and delivered the proper sweetness of the crab and clean richness of the mackerel. The crunchy matchsticks of apple, fruity mayo and scattering of sesame seeds provided additional texture and flavour to the dish.

For mains I had the hanger steak, delivered the proper sweetness of the meat with sharp nips of zesty, citrus flavours pervading every mouthful, it was a well executed finale with plenty of zip.

Just under £20 for three quality courses before drinks and service is still a rarity, especially when delivered with minimal fuss by such jolly and friendly staff.

As I settled the bill, a couple on a nearby table had decided to carry on drinking after their lunch by ordering espresso Martinis just as the clock struck 2pm.

Having had such a pleasant return visit to the King William after far too long away, I was sorely tempted to take off my coat, sit back down and join them.

RATING 4/5

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