

CHECKING IN

THE CROWN INN, AMERSHAM

16 High Street, Old Amersham,
Bucks (01494 721541; www.thecrownamersham.co.uk)

People hadn't taken to sending Christmas cards in the 16th century, but if they had, they might well have chosen one depicting the Crown Inn at Amersham. It is the sort of coaching inn just made for greetings cards: an Elizabethan half-timbered frontage gives on to a classic coach yard ringed by crooked buildings, bay windows twinkling with candles and firelight, and dominated by a huge Christmas tree wreathed in lights.

Although just 26 miles from London, until the 18th century Amersham was a day's journey from the capital and an essential overnight stop for coaches on their way to Oxford or the Midlands. Things go a little faster these days: by car we're in Amersham in less than an hour from our home in north-east London, and the town is also on the Tube, at the far end of the Metropolitan Line.

It is this olde worlde country setting combined with easy access to the metropolis and Heathrow that the Crown is now promoting. It is also keen to stress that it is an inn, not a hotel; as well as offering dinner, bed and breakfast it is open to non-residents for anything from breakfast to boiled egg and soldiers for your child's tea, or a pint and some bread and butter (I kid you not – it's £2, but the bread's fantastic) in the bar.

Now part of a (small) chain, the Crown was recently refurbished and relaunched with menus by Rosie Sykes (formerly the *Guardian's* Kitchen Doctor) and interiors by designer Ilse Crawford. Given 16th-century architecture, any furnishing scheme is bound to be anachronistic, but the Crown's simple modern design, particularly the clean lines of the lovely oak tables and chairs throughout, is less jarring than plump sofas and fancy fittings.

One wall of our room (room 12 – ask for it) has an original painted decoration from the 1500s, discovered behind some 1970s plasterboard during the refurb. Bolted to the wall next to it is the obligatory flat-screen TV – a leap of 500 years in just a few centimetres.

Bathroom arrangements, I'm glad to say, have very little of Elizabethan England about them. The shower enclosure is almost as big as our daughter's bedroom back home. The bathrobes, however, while huge and snuggly, are the precise shade of muddy brown commonly found on the smocks of 16th-century swineherds.

The Crown offers regular live music in the bar. The evening we are there, Tinlin, a local "progressive folk" duo, are playing music ranging over even more centuries than our bedroom: from Vivaldi to their



The Crown dates from the 16th century, but boasts 21st-century comforts.

own 21st-century songs, via Mozart, the Beatles and Crowded House. It's hugely convivial, and we tear ourselves away from our table by the log fire in the bar to one near the fire in the dining room. (It is a very cold night.)

Your 16th-century inn-goer would feel right at home here. Yes, there is one veggie and one fish dish on the menu, but this place is about animal protein: meat and more meat, with perhaps some cheese to follow. And there are none of those foreign tastes favoured in the 21st century: no pesto or parmesan, no Thai-style broth. We start with whisky prawns (me) and celery and Stilton soup (him), then move on to pheasant with wild mushrooms and red cabbage, and slow-cooked shoulder of lamb with spuds, carrots and "green sauce". It's all delicious, as such simple dishes can only be when cooked skilfully with great ingredients. We keep the cholesterol count up with a platter of English cheeses and a quince Eton mess.

American tourists must love the authentic feel of this place. In fact, one (fictional) Yank famously did: the Crown at Amersham is where Andie MacDowell was bedded by Hugh Grant in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. But manager Iain Murray doesn't make much of the connection – that was 1994, and things have moved forwards, and backwards, an awful lot since then.

The cost: dinner, bed and breakfast from £159 for two people.

Liz Boulter