

## travelmail

His mission:  
To test hotel  
hospitality  
to the limit

# AN INSPECTOR CALLS



**T**HE CROWN is part of the expanding Dhillon Hotels group, which is making much of its association with the designer Ilse Crawford, whose big break was Soho House in New York. This is their latest

collaborative project and it's not too many miles from its chic sister inn, The Olde Bell, in Hurley, Berkshire.

What strikes me is how affluent Old Amersham in Buckinghamshire has become. Perhaps it always was. There seems to be a run on silver Mercedes saloons, and they all have personalised number plates.

The High Street is cheerful, with well-kept Georgian houses fronted by clipped privet hedges and shiny doors. There's an abundance of Christmas decorations, and the town seems determined to cock a snook at the prevailing doom and gloom.

The Crown, overlooking the church, has had lots of money spent on it. Through the courtyard, past the fountain, is the car park, where there are extra rooms, all named after kings and queens.

Reception is in a large, rush-matted hallway, where there's an oak bar stacked with home-made pickles and spreads laid out for sale.

A large jar of cookies is almost as diverting as the pretty receptionist, who tells me the hotel has gone from being a 'swirly-carpeted, old-fashioned' pub to what it is today: calm, low-key and sophisticated.

In addition to the key, she suggests I take a dinner menu up with me. Good idea – but it needs more than a key to get into the room because the new paint has glued it shut. Rather than shoulder-charge the door myself, I get reinforcements in the form of a muscular young man who breaks and enters, no questions asked.

My room is small. It has pale grey walls, wood-stained floors, sea-grass rugs and a hall chair covered in sheepskin. No bath, sadly.

A pile of colour-coordinated Penguin books stands to attention – more of a design feature than an invitation for contemplative reading.

It's all so fresh that the stickers haven't been removed from the tea cups. I like the old school radiator and vibrant red Roberts wireless. The lighting is gentle, the mood rustic and restful.

I am given a choice of eating in the bar or dining room, both warmed by open fires. I opt for a table by the Christmas tree in the dining room, and it's good to see entirely wooden decorations and pewter beer mugs filled with sprigs of holly. The candlelight bouncing off the dark beams takes you back



Old-fashioned charmer: The Crown

a couple of centuries. A perky Australian waitress tells me she's just passing through and doesn't know how much she can take of the English winter.

I know the feeling, and we've still got several months of it to come.

My cod, rainbow chard and mash in parsley sauce is a huge plate of good-quality food: hot, robust, generous.

I am alone in the dining room, which must be a worry at this time of year. The staff are itching to get on with their job. They may have to start dragging people in from the moneyed High Street.

It's noisy in the morning if you have the window open, but I've slept soundly.

Breakfast is laid out on a trestle table in the middle of a room as if a Tudor banquet is about to begin. There's stewed rhubarb and plums, cheeses, hunks of bread and Cole Porter playing in the background.

When paying my bill – which I had negotiated for a reasonable £129 for dinner, bed and breakfast – and noticing that some mistletoe has been placed on the entrance steps, I'm asked if I am about to tackle Christmas shopping.

No, but I can think of nothing nicer than staying here and wandering up and down the High Street with my pared-down list.

The Crown is a charmer. Let's hope it's thriving by this time next year.

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