

In at the start of a new reign at quintessential English pub

I hadn't intended to stop at West Hanney, but the newly-thatched Plough Inn, with its whitewashed walls and ornamental redbrick trim, looked so inviting, the car automatically ground to a halt when we saw it. I found myself parking in the car park opposite without a second thought.

This certainly appeared to be the quintessential English pub, particularly as it stands opposite the parish church in one of the many attractive little villages in this area of south Oxfordshire just north of Wantage.

With footpath signs scattered throughout the village, I was confident that the dog would get his walk after lunch too — which he did, though I hadn't realised just how densely populated with pheasants this area is. We had to be extremely careful where we walked, in case the dog spotted them too.

What I didn't realise on choosing to lunch at the Plough Inn was that it had changed hands just three days previously. The new tenants, Trevor and Ann Cooper, were still settling in.

Although they had made considerable changes at the back of the house, having installed new cellar and kitchen equipment, they had not had time to make their mark on either the menu or interior decor.

Obviously, I would have waited a month or two had I realised this, as settling into a new pub takes time.

But this information didn't come to light until after we'd ordered our meals in the public bar area, where dogs were permitted.

Because there's a separate entrance for both the public bar and the main bar/restaurant area, we were amused to discover we had to walk through the bar itself to read the blackboard menus. But that was fine.

I won't list all the lunch dishes we made our selection from as I was assured the menu was being redesigned to embrace some of the many things Ann enjoyed cooking, using local ingredients where possible.

I went for battered cod and chips (£6.25) and my friend had home-made steak and ale pie at £7.25.

Her dish turned out to be one of the few Ann had created herself to begin getting her ideas in place. It was delicious. I say this with authority, having tasted it too. It was simply stuffed with chunks of meat and



Left: The Plough Inn at West Hanney

Below: the steak and ale pie

Award-winning beer writer Helen Peacocke trained as a chef at Singletree Catering College, Rose Hill, Oxford, in the 1960s, and went on to run her own pub, The Kings Head, Woodstock, where she created the first filled-jacket-potato menu. She then travelled to Australia, where she spent ten years, lecturing on gastronomy and hotel management at the William Angliss Catering College, Melbourne, before returning to Oxfordshire. Since taking up her post with Newsquest 13 years ago, she has won two national awards for her write-ups on beer and pubs.

the sauce was superb — you could really taste the ale. The assortment of vegetables served with it appeared fresh and well cooked too.

When speaking to Trevor after our meal, he explained that they fell in love with this attractive 17th-century pub the moment they saw it. He described it as one of Oxfordshire's best-kept secrets.

Their aim is not to serve up-market food and turn it into a posh gastro pub (they both value their local trade far too much for that). What they want to do is put on first class pub grub that's not pretentious, but

cooked on the premises from first class ingredients. Sunday lunch, for example, will be the traditional roast, using meat sourced locally, at £6.75, and served with real roast potatoes, not boiled potatoes fried in the chip pan and masquerading as roast.

There won't be a special menu for children featuring chicken nuggets and burgers. Where possible, children will be able to order a smaller portion of what their parents are having, as they do on the continent.

The real ale trade, which offered a choice of Abbot Ale,



Fuller's London Pride and Tetley's bitter the day I called, is important to Trevor, so are the local customers who have kept the pub going through the years with their darts matches and pub games.

Because the couple have a young family themselves, their main aim is to create a happy environment at the Plough Inn, which aims to offer old-style hospitality to everyone who calls. I shall certainly remain among that number.