

THE ARBUTURIAN



| The Talbot, Ripley

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Barely a mile outside the M25, just off the A3, sits a rural idyll usually flown past by the otherwise oblivious Friday evening exodus out of London toward Guildford and beyond. Ripley is a quintessential country village, the preserve of antique shops, quaint cafes and interiors boutiques, of cricket matches on the green and farmers markets on weekends, as much visited now as the gateway to the Surrey Hills as it might have been a pit-stop in or out of London in coaching days of old.

If one were inclined to pull away from the crowd, your stopping point might well have been – and still should be – the Talbot. It greets you as you enter the high street, its distinctive coaching arch and frontage dripping with ivy beckoning visitors for a closer look. One can imagine Ross Poldark pulling in en route to Bodmin. Or Elizabeth Bennett and family stopping overnight on a trip to London. There's more than simple fiction, however, for the Talbot's 500-year history is perhaps best known for it being the staging post for Lord Nelson's love affair with Lady Hamilton.

Publication: The Arbuturian [Online](#)

Date: 16.10.2016

UMV: 80,000

EAV: £25,000

Following its acquisition last year by the Bespoke Hotels group, the Talbot has undergone an extensive – and sensitive – restoration, breathing new life into what was once, I'm told, a rather tired old nag on the Ripley scene. Not any more. It's beautiful, retaining all the character and integrity of the original building with some dramatic contemporary touches; the new garden room with floor to ceiling glass surround to the terrace (flooding in light, even on an overcast Autumnal morning), an updated bar and dining room (where a copper ceiling compliments the original wood beams), not to mention bespoke furniture and soft furnishings throughout all making a once weary old timer wonderfully warm and cosy.



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The updates downstairs notwithstanding, the rooms in the main building are a trip back in time, brought delightfully back to life. A heavy-set wooden staircase, bearing hundreds of years of knocks and gnarls, takes you past a vast wall-mounted timepiece into the definition of cosiness. I'm underselling it when I say that the low ceiling, wonky doorframe and uneven floor might make it sound like a mistake, but this is far from it. I'm in 18th century heaven. This is the coaching inn experience, with all the home comforts. There are lovely touches, too. The fruitbowl is spurned in favour of a plate of plums (locally-picked, I'm sure); the artwork throughout a happy blend of 17th century prints, all homages to its history, and 1930s black and whites in elegant silver frames. Candles in bell-jars compete with shabby chic watering cans bursting with dried flowers. Habitat, eat your heart out.

Bespoke's update continues in the kitchen, too, with the appointment of double Michelin-winner Martin Blunos in charge. His CV needs little introduction, being a man who's catered for the Queen – a meal he's replicating for guests over two sessions in the coming week – and the menu, much like in the rest of the hotel, reflects the hotel's heritage. Coaching inn classics – if there are such a thing – are here perfected.



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We took our pews against the bookcase, dipping occasionally into Simon Callow's biography of Charles Laughton and brushing up on the effects of temperature on solubility from Daniels' *Physical Chemistry* in between mouthfuls of spectacularly meaty mackerel pate, a pea and mint dip with toast, and scallops with a gazpacho reduction. You might argue the latter's a little fancy for an inn, but Blunos was just warming up.

A menu of English pub fayre pimped to perfection may have been on offer, but there was but one thing we had eyes for: the 'pie of day'. Rich, sweet, tender, peppery venison in a buttery puff pastry case, with ladels of creamy mash, carrots so recently pulled from the ground they were called 'dirty' (don't worry, they weren't really), and a haystack of greens. The only thing un-inn-like was the bold South African cabernet we gleefully sluiced through. What a meal. Never mind imagining Ross Poldark pulling up, resting his horses and marveling at his 'fine venison pye', I was he for the night.



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Unsurprised by the take up in the dining room for dinner, what did surprise me was how busy it was for breakfast. The Talbot's location clearly showing you don't need to travel miles from the capital to feel like you can get away. It's a secret I fear hasn't stayed very secret for long.

In spite of the previous night's excesses, breakfast presented plenty of comforting touches, from the mini Bonne Maman confections to the juices in Kilner bottles. And as well as the more cosmopolitan options of florentine eggs and continental offerings served from the 'fruit stall', it was a joy to see grilled kippers on the menu and a choice of salted or sweetened porridge.

Most capably rested, fed, and watered, it was time to step through that magnificent coach archway and back into modern life. Yes, Mr Poldark, you can saddle the horses now.

For more information about the Talbot, Ripley, including information about the Wisley rooms hire for weddings and functions, details of room rates, menus and offers, visit www.bespokehotels.com.

Martin Blunos's 'A Feast Fit for a Queen' is available for dinner on Wednesday 19th and lunch on Sunday 23rd October 2016, features several courses and a selected cocktail with local-sourced Silent Pool rose gin. For more information visit the [website](#).