



Helen Browning's Royal Oak, Cues Lane, Bishopstone

By Fiona Duncan, Hotel Expert

In the pretty village of Bishopstone amid a spider's web of oddly named lanes – The Wyncies, High Street (more a tiny lane), The City, The Forty – The Royal Oak can be confusing to find. I passed the blue and white pub, emblazoned with owner Helen Browning's logo (a big pink pig) and then seemed to pass it again without turning around. Was I seeing double? Was everything in Bishopstone in pairs?

It turns out that Helen Browning's Royal Oak is contained in not one but two blue and white buildings: the original pub that her partner Tim Finney has run for 10 years, and a second, long-closed village pub in which they have just created 12 new en suite bedrooms. As well as being a pioneer of the organic movement and chief executive of the Soil Association, Helen ("a force of nature") runs her beloved Eastbrook Farm which, five miles long and two fields wide, stretches from her farmhouse in the village right up to the top of the Downs. Many new hostelries trumpet their back-to-nature credentials and connection to the land; stay at the Royal Oak and you'll find real farmers, real passion, the real deal – and a huge swathe of dramatic, unspoilt yet remarkably little known countryside just off the M4 where the Oxfordshire, Berkshire and the Wiltshire Downs converge.

First the pub. It's owned by local brewery Arkells and Tim is the tenant landlord, humorous and very much his own man. With the help of dishy Italian Valerio, who arrived a couple of years ago, he presides over the popular hostelry with idiosyncratic bonhomie. He wasn't always a publican – he was a farming journalist, editor at the BBC of such programmes as Farming Today and Costing the Earth

I'm getting awfully tired of posh pubs with their carefully created country chic looks and carefully modulated manners. No such pretensions, thank heaven, at the Royal Oak, which like its owners doesn't quite conform to the norm, with wooden floors and quirky features such as bright red radiators and unframed images of Eastbrook Farm on the walls. Dine from a hearty menu of Helen's organic beef, pork and lamb and organic everything else, including, writes Tim on the menu, "mozzarella from Claudio on the farm; eggs from Sophie's chicks; ice cream from the mad Mr Scheckter at Laverstoke, with his flatulent buffaloes. All ridiculous, but it's the only way we know, pious things that we are."

"The new era", continues Tim, "starts here, with 12 dazzling bedrooms in that converted palace at the far end of the car park." On two floors around a courtyard, with a handy pantry/sitting room that includes a record player and a pile of Tim's old LPs, the rooms are, like everything else at the Royal Oak, natural and quirky, reflecting their surroundings. Each is named after a field on the farm, brought to life by a photograph across one wall. Ours was Kate's Folly, the first field Helen put into organic conversion, where she experimented with the release of phosphate from calcareous soils and named for her college friend who helped her in those early days. Helen's passion and her story, which she articulated on Desert Island Discs in September 2015, shines through if you stay at the Royal Oak. And her farm is yours to explore.

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