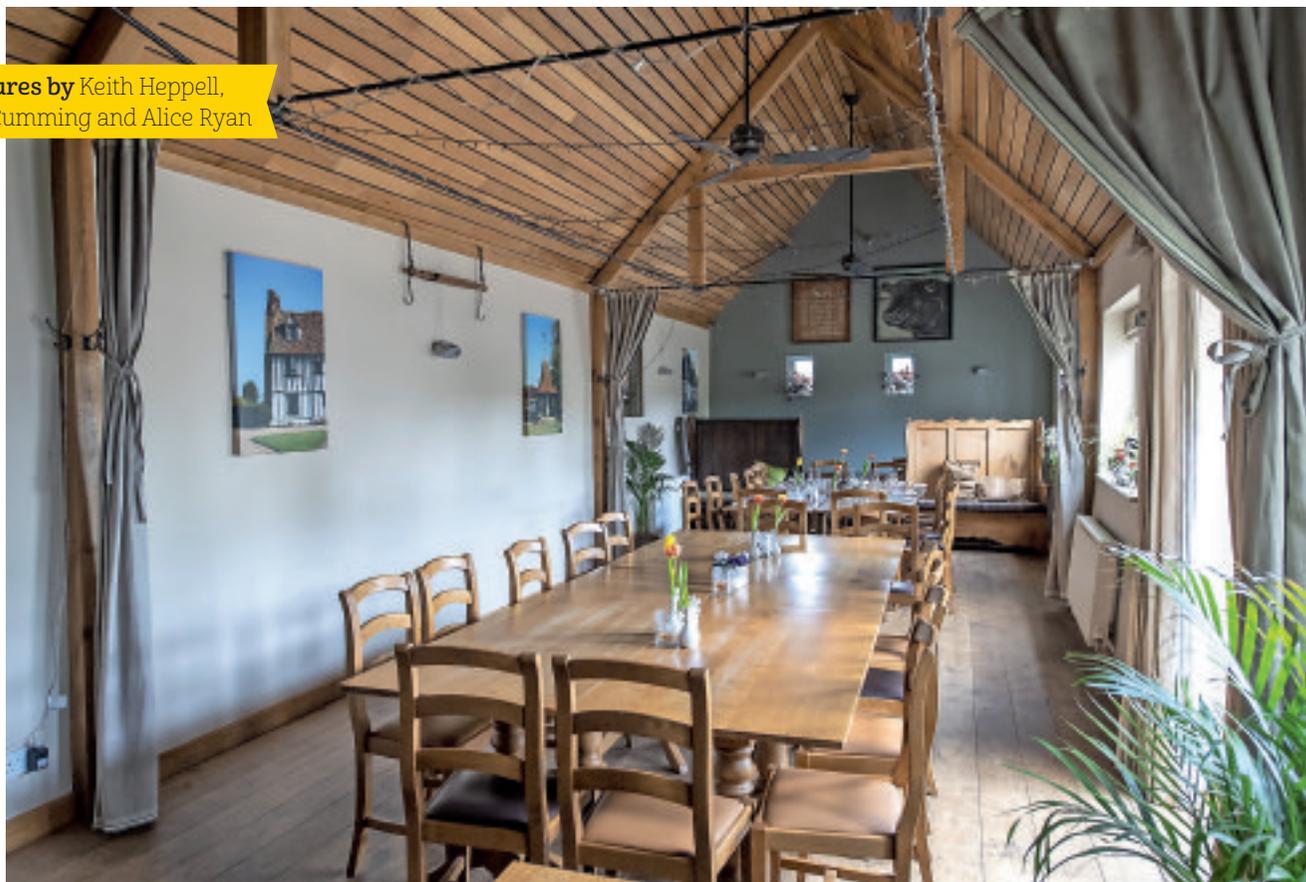


Pictures by Keith Heppell,
Ian Cumming and Alice Ryan



Sunday Best

Sunday lunch at Balsham's Black Bull ticks all the boxes, as Alice Ryan discovers

It's as quintessential as fish and chips and the full English breakfast: Sunday lunch is a cornerstone of the great British menu. Yet tracking down a good one is like hunting Lewis Carroll's snark – so challenging, you start to wonder if such a thing exists.

I've lost count of the number of shoe-leather joints I've tried – and failed – to masticate; the boats of thick-skinned

gravy; the school-dinner domes of overcooked veg. Hence I'm always a little wary when going out for Sunday lunch.

Arriving at Balsham's Black Bull to put said meal to the test, though, signs were good. The pub itself is charming: an inn since the 16th century, it's thatched on the outside and beamy on the inside. Also, it was packed, with every Sunday lunch table booked.

A privately owned free house, sister to Hinxton's much-loved Red Lion, The Black Bull has a regularly rotating ale selection and a menu of some 40 wines, a dozen of which are available by the glass. The bar staff know their stuff, too, pointing us in the direction of a mellow, quaffable red.

Settling on leather sofas, glasses in hands, we – me, husband Ed and my parents – settled down with the menu. The choice was impressive: between us, keen to try a good selection, we opted for the roast chicken, roast beef, roast pork and fish of the day – pan-fried sea bass on a bed of samphire and sautés.

Featured in both The Good Pub Guide and Alastair Sawday's Pubs & Inns, The Black Bull has developed a reputation for its food, first winning an AA Rosette in 2011.



Shown through to our table, our plates were swift to arrive and every one impressed: the meat was tender, the gravy full of flavour, the vegetables perfectly cooked, the boulder-sized Yorkshire puds crispy on the outside and chewy in the middle. . . The fish, too, was excellent: served with a lightly creamy wine sauce, it was simply, yet beautifully, done.

While lunching, we admired the pub itself: with its stained-glass windows, carved woodwork and pew benches, it's full of period charm. There's a series of dining spaces – including an oak-panelled former barn – all of which have been revamped by acclaimed interior designer Annie Lambert; chalky taupe



Photo: Ian Cumming



walls and mink woodwork are warmed by tweedy upholstery and velvety cushions in shades of heather-purple and moss-green. It's lovely.

Operations manager Luis Trandafir, who's worked at numerous top-flight restaurants, including Melbourn's Sheene Mill, did a tour of the tables after the main course, checking all was well. Clearly proud of the kitchen team, he encouraged us to make space for pudding (the main-course portions are notably generous).

We took his advice. Though the seasonal crumble was scrumptious, the sticky toffee pudding was the stand-out, with its springy-yet-soft sponge and treacly sauce.

Hosting periodic special events – including jazz and theatre nights – The Black Bull is a really lovely village pub. Whether you're popping in for a quick drink or dining out, you're guaranteed both a warm welcome and good food and drink. And it's home to the culinary grail: a really excellent Sunday lunch.

.....
The Black Bull is at High Street, Balsham CB21 4DS. See blackbull-balsham.co.uk and call (01223) 893844.



Photo: Ian Cumming