

Getting away from it all

Looking for a break off the beaten track, **WILLIAM CROSSLEY** heads to Wales to visit The Hand at Llanarmon

If your idea of a weekend away is somewhere with bustling streets and buzzing nightlife, the directions sent out with the booking confirmation suggest this may not be the destination for you.

“Just at the point when you think you must have taken a wrong turn and there’s nothing but sheep, you’ll come into Llanarmon D.C. and find us in front of you as you enter the village.”

And if you can’t go a minute without checking your mobile phone for the latest update, forget it.

“No mobile service works in the village.”

Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, to give the village its full name – which translates into English as the church of St Garmon in the valley of the river Ceiriog - nestles at the end of a picturesque valley stretching west from the border town of Chirk, with the Berwyn mountains rising beyond.

The Hand’s origins are as a 16th century farmstead, but it has been welcoming guests for many centuries. It stands at the meeting point of two old drovers’ roads and was an ideal spot for the drovers and the livestock they were taking to market to rest for the night.

Gradually the inn side of the business took over and it now uses the whole of the former farm at the crossroads in the centre of the village. The outbuildings have been converted into a dining room, comfortable bedrooms and a spa, which boasts a sauna and outdoor hot tub.

The hotel’s name comes from the heraldic emblem - a red hand - of the Myddleton family, who lived at nearby Chirk Castle from 1595 to 2004. A giant wooden hand, created by local sculptor Jim Heath, stands just outside the front door to welcome weary travellers.

Since 2014 the hotel has been owned by Jonathan and Jackie Greatorex, who fell in love with it when staying as guests. They used to live in Lechlade and Jackie is a



Pointing the way: The Hand at Llanarmon, Wales. All pictures by William Crossley

former headmistress of Ferndale School in Faringdon.

Today they are hands-on hoteliers, behind the reception and in the bar and dining room, at the head of a friendly team of staff drawn from the local community.

The skills of head chef Grant Mulholland and his kitchen team have won The Hand a mention in the Michelin Guide to Great Britain and Ireland, along with a series of AA Rosettes.

A regular selection of classic dishes features on the menu, supplemented by daily specials which give the chefs the chance to showcase their skills.

The ingredients come from suppliers in nearby villages and towns, including locally-reared lamb roasted to tender perfection for dinner, with fresh seafood also a feature. I enjoyed a perfectly-grilled piece of seasonal skrei cod, caught off the Norwegian coast.

If you want to work off the calories after a filling and delicious cooked breakfast or work up an appetite ahead of lunch or dinner, The Hand has its own book of walks for sale. The work the hotel’s previous owner, Martin De Luchi, and John Swogger, it will guide you along paths around the village, as well as walks and drives in the surrounding area.

A number of tourist attractions are close by. Chirk Castle is now



Fine dining: An artistic treat on a plate from the kitchen

owned by the National Trust, offering the chance to explore a medieval fortress turned stately home, set in 480 acres of parkland.

To the north is Llangollen, home of the annual musical Eisteddfod and the Llangollen Railway, which will take you on a steam-powered train ride back to the 1950s and west to the historic town of Corwen.

If you prefer a more sedate outing, horse-drawn boat rides are available along the Llangollen Canal, or, if you have a head for heights, you can cross the Vale of Llangollen on foot or by narrowboat using the Pontcysyllte aqueduct – known as the Stream in the Sky -



Explore: The rolling hills around Llanarmon

which is a World Heritage Site.

PS: If you can’t live without that digital connection to the outside world, The Hand does have wifi broadband, but why bother logging on, when you can get away from it all here?

* There are three types of bedroom available, Superior, Country Rooms and Small Doubles. Two of the Country rooms are wheelchair-accessible and dogs are welcome to stay (but let the hotel know when booking to be allocated a dog-

FACT FILE

THE Hand at Llanarmon, Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, Denbighshire, LL20 7LD

STAY: Rates start from £110 for a Small Double, £130 for a Country Room and £150 for a Superior. All rates are per room per night and include a full breakfast, together with spa facilities. BOOK: Go to thehandhotel.co.uk, call 01691 600666 or email reception@thehandhotel.co.uk



Elegant: Bedroom at The Hand at Llanarmon