



By Steve Grant

A WELCOME HAND FOR COUNTRYSPOrts FANATICS

The Hand's room 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 complimentary use of the Spa Facilities.

For more information or to book, email reception@thehandhotel.co.uk, visit www.thehandhotel.co.uk, or call 01691 600666.



NESTLED in green, rolling hills is a phrase which must have been made for The Hand at Llanarmon, which is tucked away in the Berwyn Mountains near Wales' border with Cheshire. It's definitely one of North Wales' best kept secrets.

Llanarmon – or more properly Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog – can be found 11 miles from Chirk at the end of the B4500, which winds itself up the stunning Ceiriog Valley – 'a little bit of heaven on Earth' according to David Lloyd George.

The scenery is a sight for sore eyes but what really strikes you when you arrive is the peacefulness. As you get out of the car, all you can hear is bird song and the serene trickle of the nearby river. Bustling it isn't.

An ancient hostelry which began life as a farm back in the 16th Century, The Hand sits impressively at the village crossroads – possibly the least busy crossroads in the entire UK.

Owned by Jonathan and Jackie Greatorex, it features all the classic ingredients – old beams, a roaring fire, real ale and good food, most of which is sourced locally. You can feel the weight of the world dissolving as you sink into its cosy, relaxing embrace.

Clues as to why *The Countryman's Weekly* might be visiting can be found everywhere. The ephemera of countrysports is everywhere – trophies, paintings of hunting and shooting parties, statuettes, taxidermy, and even a fine drawing of the Altcar Coursing Meet of 1877, where Greyhounds competed for the Waterloo Cup.

A former finalist in the Countryside Alliance's Welsh Rural Oscars, The Hand is a popular destination for Guns – the famous Llanarmon Shoot has been owned by the McAlpine family for nearly 90 years – and anglers. Luckily, The Hand has contacts with many local shoots – Jonathan is a keen Shot – so can arrange shooting to suit all pockets.

It also has close links with Chirk Fishery and can arrange fly-fishing on its two large and well-stocked trout lakes, or on the River Ceiriog itself, where you can chase trout and grayling.

And, once you've indulged in your favourite country pursuit, you can also relax in The Hand's new Spa.

Tired from shooting or fishing, then there's plenty of other things to see and do. Pistyll Rhaeadr, Wales' highest waterfall is close, and the North Wales tourist hotspot of Llangollen and Thomas Telford's world-renowned Pontcysyllte Aqueduct are just a short drive away.

Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake in English), Wales' largest natural lake, Lake Vyrnwy, and Snowdonia are also all within easy reach.

However, The Hand has a secret weapon designed to keep you close at hand and that's Head Chef Grant Mulholland and his team. Mulholland has built a strong reputation

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for superb cuisine; a sumptuous and inventive marriage of country fare and more sophisticated metropolitan cuisine, all freshly prepared on the premises. He's been awarded two AA Rosettes for 'culinary excellence' and The Hand features in the Michelin Guide.

As you would expect Welsh lamb and Ceiriog trout are staples of the menu but on my first night I tried something a little more exotic. My starter was a spicy katsu curry soup, served with kidney beans, chick peas, pearl barley and kale, warm home-made bread and artisan farm butter. This was followed by mouth-watering treacle braised pork cheek, served with lamb and onion sausage, creamed celeriac and samphire, and garlic sauté potatoes. Full, I managed to break away from the siren-like call of the home-made puddings and Welsh cheeses.

The following night, I chose a tasty Welsh lamb and mint croquette, which came with a sweet apple and herb dressing. A delicious combination. A fabulous dish of sauté free-range chicken, sauté scallops and lobster ravioli followed, which I again matched with those very moreish garlic saute potatoes.

There's plenty of choice at breakfast, where you must try the tangy and delicious home-made marmalade. Choose the 'Full Welsh' and you get 'proper' sausage, bacon and black pudding from the local butchers. You can dine in the cosy bar area or in the hotel's more spacious and attractive restaurant. Service was never less than excellent.

The Hand's rooms come in a variety of sizes and are decorated with a rustic but modern charm. All come with large comfortable beds, with satellite TV, mineral water, tea, coffee and biscuits. The bathrooms, many of which come with free-standing bathtubs, come fully-loaded with fluffy towels, robes and lots of products and toiletries.

The Hand's four 'Superior Rooms' are all situated in the old farmhouse part of the building, enjoying views over the original crossroads at the centre of the village. A further nine 'Country Rooms' are in what used to be stables and barns at the back overlooking the hotel's field and the hillside beyond. Being south-facing, they catch the sun all day.

Four of the Country Rooms are on the ground floor and two of these are wheelchair-accessible; one has a wet room adapted for wheelchair use. The Hand welcomes dogs and has three rooms available for those who can't bear to be parted from their four-legged friends.

It's perhaps fitting that there is no mobile phone signal at such a peaceful hideaway, but there is wi-fi throughout the hotel for those who just can't live without it.

With such a stunning location, a warm welcome, great food and drink, The Hand isn't just a boon for those looking to shoot or fish in a special place, it's a real treat for anyone looking to sit back, relax and enjoy the serene setting and a fabulous base for those looking to explore North Wales. Be warned though. You won't want to leave.



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