

THE WINNING HAND



The Hand in the idyllic Llanarmon DC, below



The food is as filling as it is delicious

STUNNING SCENERY, HEARTY FOOD, A SUPERB SPA AND ITS OWN GRISLY MYTHOLOGY... ALASTAIR MACHRAY FINDS A RURAL RETREAT THAT'S HARD TO BEAT

THE first question when you get to The Hand at Llanarmon DC is the obvious one. Why is The Hand called The Hand?

You're going to love this... There are many tales of how the name came to be. All of which I dismiss save for this one. Which I adore.

A bloodied red hand is proud on the coat of arms of the Myddleton family who lived at nearby Chirk Castle for 500 years. Lord Myddleton was dying and would leave twin sons. He was unsure which of the two was the elder and heir to his grand estates and title.

As he lay on his deathbed he challenged the pair to race on horseback around the Castle. The first son to return and touch his father's bed would inherit the estate. The race was close and as the sons ran up the staircase, neck and neck, one tripped. Realising he would lose the race and the inheritance, he drew his sword, cut off his own hand and threw it onto his father's bed, claiming victory.

The Hand at Llanarmon then, takes its name from the legend and a huge wooden carving of the hand in question stands at its door in welcome.

And a welcome is exactly what we got at this charming country pub hotel not far from the North Wales tourist hotspot of Llangollen and just over an hour from Liverpool or Manchester and an hour and a half from Birmingham.

Owners Jonathan and Jackie Greatorex bought The Hand back in 2014. They knew it and loved it enough to shelve careers in teaching and media to risk a change in direction.

They have created a simple mix of cosy local pub, high-end restaurant and elegant hotel. It all comes complete with idyllic peace and wrapped in the spectacular scenery of the Berwyn Hills.

There are oak beams and furniture to match. The bedrooms come in different sizes, are elegantly decorated and equipped with satellite TV. There's wifi for those who can't live without it and The Hand can arrange country pursuits, including horse riding, fishing and shooting. It is a paradise for walkers but just as much for those who seek no more than a roaring fire and a good dinner.

Head Chef Grant Mulholland's menu proclaims a belief in local ingredients and that flavour and portions are more important than fuss and froth.

We ate in the dining room that once was a cow shed in farm buildings that date back to the 16th century.

The farm was a welcome overnight rest spot for drovers - the men who drove the sheep from North Wales to the markets of the south.

The smells are a lot more enticing these days. We dined on real ale battered

haddock, with chips, peas and tartare sauce; Welsh beef burger on a brioche bun with bacon, Per-Las Welsh blue cheese and chips; grilled skreid cod with crab croquettes and langoustine sauce. For dessert, summer berry creme brûlée and vanilla ice cream.

Earlier my daughter and my wife enjoyed facials at the little spa and sung the praises of friendly therapist Anne Harding.

Equally friendly were the locals in the sports lounge who took time out from the Ireland-Wales Rugby international to go through to the bar and get me a stool.

After dinner our rooms beckoned and a great night's sleep followed in the tranquil silence of the Berwyns.

Tranquility was what Jonathan and Jackie sought to foster when they took over. As Jonathan told me, it was about creating an escape; a place where the stressed could breathe out and relax. They've done that wonderfully well.

They deserve a big Hand. Sorry.

NEED TO KNOW

■ **THE HAND** has 13 bedrooms starting from £95 per room per night B&B. More details at **01691 600666** or **thehandhotel.co.uk**

■ The Hand is part of **Signpost** which has been recommending the UK's top privately owned hotels since 1935. Most are near areas of outstanding beauty and all have award-winning cuisine. For details visit **signpost.co.uk**.



Left: The statue that greets visitors to The Hand