

L'Eau lure (la Grande Bretagne)

Readers of my many French guides will know that I spent the first 10 years of my life in the Himalayas – yet I've never felt my 'roots' lay buried among the high peaks on the roof of the world.

I first heard some of Elgar's haunting melodies during music lessons at Sherwood College in Naini Tal; the school is in wooded country high above an emerald lake and at an altitude of over 7,000ft above sea-level. By the age of 11 my home was in the unloved and much maligned Black Country. Three years later my first 'racing' cycle freed me to head south-west, 'lured' to the borders of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire, Elgar's Land, to discover for myself just what had awoken such genius. Little did I know then that I would choose, over the following decades, to put down my own adopted 'roots' in the same terrain.

Elgar's Land has become for me countryside I love more than any other. I feel especially at home in the Teme Valley and in the hills which both guard and quietly guide the river on a 68-mile journey through, at first, a Welsh valley, immediately followed by a second shared with Shropshire, then on through the Marches to the Severn. This is terrain loved by Elgar, Housman and Mary Webb (by coincidence also by one of my schoolboy heroes, Malcolm Saville); all found inspiration in the English shires, pastoral guardians of one of our finest rivers, the Teme. (For further details see *Housman Revisited* in 'Reprints'.)

However, to add extra lustre to this magical *pays* a surprising, 'culinary' coincidence has come about: at three separate sites, alongside the upper half of the Teme, is a trio of quite differing hospitality havens which are among my UK favourites. Each is owned by friendly, capable owners, all of whom are a credit to their professions. I'll list the trio in order as the river descends from its source under the 1,732ft-high Cilfaesty Hill on the borders of Welsh Montgomeryshire and Radnorshire – then onwards for 34 miles to its dramatic passage past Ludlow.

In my opinion the first half of the Teme's 68-mile length beats any similar stretch of river terrain in Britain. The scenic diversity is breathtaking.



First, 10 miles from the source, on the river's left bank and four miles north-west of Knighton (in Wales), is **The Waterdine at Llanfair Waterdine**. The inn with rooms, once simple cottages, is in Shropshire but has a Welsh postcode! Decades ago I knew the 16C pub as the Red Lion (see my *Best of Britain* guide, p126). The Waterdine's present hosts are the so-likeable Ken Adams and his wife Isabel. He's a talented chef; she's a friendly lady with life-long River Teme

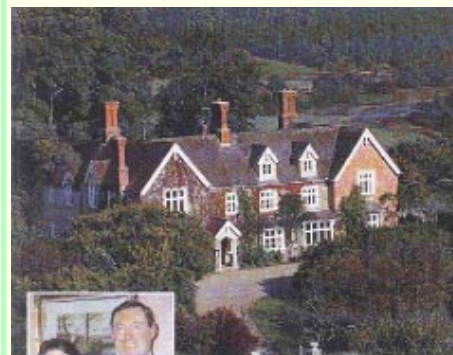
links (ask her). A few years ago they made a culinary name for themselves at Ludlow's Oaks restaurant (now named Hibiscus and the home of Claude Bosi).

The bonuses are many: attention-to-detail cooking; refurbished bedrooms with en-suite facilities; and, at breakfast, an idyllic Teme-side setting where the only sounds are birdsong and the river chuckling happily as it flows merrily eastwards.

For many clients a Michelin star is long overdue; what is certain is that Ken has long been a holder of a richly-deserved Bib Gourmand award. Access his website and smack your lips as you ponder the many menu permutations: witness his well out of the ordinary 'Bar Menu' at lunchtime; his polished 'Ploughman's'; the remarkable RQP (*rappport qualité-prix*) 'Sunday Lunch Menu'; and his 'Restaurant Menu', at lunch and dinner, which allows him to show off a wide choice of varied treats: sea bass, Trelough duck from Herefordshire, Cornish crab, local lamb, Longhorn beef and many others. Breakfasts are among Britain's best.

Look, too, at his latest 'Deals', which offer some great short-break stays. Parking. Terrace. Riverside garden.

The Waterdine, Llanfair Waterdine, Knighton LD7 1TU. Tel: 01547 528214. Fax: 01547 529992. E-mail: info@the-waterdine.co.uk. Website: www.the-waterdine.co.uk. Bar food. Menus: lunch £16 (Sunday) à la carte £20-£30; dinner à la carte £20-£30. Rooms (3) £60-£90 (breakfast included). Closed: 2 weeks end November-early December. I week summer. Sunday dinner. Monday. Cards: MC, Visa.



BERYL AND RODNEY MARSDEN

Next, 10 miles further downstream, alongside both the A4113 and the right bank of the Teme, is **Milebrook House at Milebrook**, in Wales (just) and four miles east of Knighton. The small country house, with 10 bedrooms, is at the heart of exquisite terrain. A sloping, flower-filled garden provides views across the valley to English hills; to the south are Welsh versions. Open the large gate in the north-east corner, walk a few paces and you are beside the river.

Shropshire is either a modest long jump away or an easy-peasy, cooling paddle through the Teme's languid water.

During their 17-year tenure Beryl and Rodney Marsden, cheerful, helpful and confident hosts, have created a relaxed, homely and informal feel in the dining room, bar lounge, general lounge and, most engagingly, in their blaze-of-colour gardens.

The latter, local producers, *les patrons* and French chef André Cluzeau combine to provide a truly enjoyable eating-out treat. Enjoy a pre-meal drink on the terrace overlooking the garden and choose from a wide-choice, fixed-price menu. The

anglophile chef, from La Rochelle, is a neo-classicist with a British repertoire and is helped in the kitchen by the owners' grandson Christopher.

Vegetables are a highlight; as is local Welsh lamb – as tender as the night. Cheeses come from both sides of the border. Over 80 wines from a dozen countries; 17 are half-bottles (all but a few are less than £10). Finish with coffee on that beguiling terrace.

Milebrook House Hotel, Milebrook, Near Knighton LD7 1LT. Tel: 01547 528632. Fax: 01547 528632. E-mail: hotel@milebrook.kc3ltd.co.uk. Website: www.milebrookhouse.co.uk. Bar food (lunch). Menus: £9.75 (2 courses weekday lunch), £12.95 (Sunday lunch); dinner £23.50. Rooms (10): £60-£92 (breakfast included). Open all year. Cards: All.



The third haven is a further 14 miles downstream, at **Ludlow**. This is the most dramatically scenic section of the Teme Valley. When the river cascades over the long Dinham Weir, watched majestically by Ludlow Castle atop a high, wooded hill on the left bank, you've reached the site of the most romantic of all restaurants with rooms, **Mr Underhill's at Dinham Weir**.

Chris and Judy Bradley, self-taught, opened the first of their two Mr Underhill's restaurants on 1st March 1981: at Stonham, near Stowmarket in Suffolk. I made my first visit there in 1984 and have since seen them prosper over the decades. During the 1997/98 winter the Bradleys moved to Dinham Weir, where they opened for business on Valentine's Day 1998.

I recall the words I penned in *Best of Britain* in 1984, after visiting Stonham. 'A *faites simple* chef and a couple brave enough to risk all and follow their own instinctive culinary noses.' Almost immediately after they opened they won a Michelin Bib Gourmand; later they gained a Michelin star which 'travelled' with them to Ludlow. They've made wonderful progress. Classical cooking, still *faites simple*, but using high-quality produce and cooked with a rare degree of finesse. Typical of a late 2003 no-choice menu (except sweets; the other courses are discussed ahead of you visit): Day boat halibut on savoy cabbage with chive and smoked haddock cream – the fish fresh and glistening white and served with a silky, delectable sauce; roasted rack of slow-cooked shoulder of Marches lamb with sorrel and mint – succulent and tender meat with perfectly matched

accompaniments; vegetables, too, in prime condition; followed by a heavenly hot chocolate tart with spiced tea ice-cream – so typical of the chef's creativity. To finish: coffee with petits fours; the latter, year by year, improved to a point where the greatest of chefs would be proud to offer them to clients.

Mr Underhill's? Alas, you cannot ask Frodo Baggins, their beloved cat; he's no more. But the recently premiered film, the third of the trilogy based on Tolkien's epic novel, will give you the clue. Suffice to say the Bradleys are a welcoming, attentive couple; a wooded valley, both upstream and downstream, with walks galore; a weir humming away; and wild life in the Teme, including kingfishers, herons, dippers and otters; all are second to none.

(In the summer of 2003, because of particularly low water, the Bradleys were asked to turn off their exterior garden and riverside lighting. Why? Wild salmon, moving upstream on their long journey from the Atlantic, could not leap the weir and, as a result, had started to spawn around the mid-river island. What they needed was privacy! That's Underhill's 'wild life' for you.)

Latest news: rooms have been refurbished and new versions have been completed in the last few months; one beside the mill race; and a couple across the road in a small house (both are of 'duplex' form, as the French would call them). Reconstructed garden. Booking essential. Lunch by arrangement.

Stop press. If you want to really spoil yourselves, or celebrate a special occasion or anniversary, then revel in the Bradleys' newest addition to their entrancing Teme-side 'restaurant with rooms'. Their latest bedroom, known affectionately as 'The Shed', is as close to the river as any building could be; the foundations are almost in the Teme's waters. I'm lost for words to describe the light, airy and spacious joy: a combination of oak beams and stout supports; soft furnishings which complement the light-hued timbers perfectly; two exquisite Teme views from large 'portrait-shaped' windows, one of which, of Dinham Weir, is utterly ravishing; the latter also humming you to sleep at night; two 'uplifting' views of Ludlow Castle high above the bedroom; and five colourful modern creations by artist Simon Dorrel; and, finally, high-tech mod-cons. Surely there's nothing to quite match the luxurious 'Shed' anywhere else in inland Britain? Price: 'The Shed' (including breakfasts for two) £175-200.

Mr Underhill's at Dinham Weir, Dinham Bridge, Ludlow SY8 1EH. Tel: 01584 874431. Website: www.mr-underhills.co.uk. Menus: £34. Rooms (6): £70-£140; suites (ask for price details). Closed: Christmas Day. Tuesday for dinner. Cards: MC, Visa.