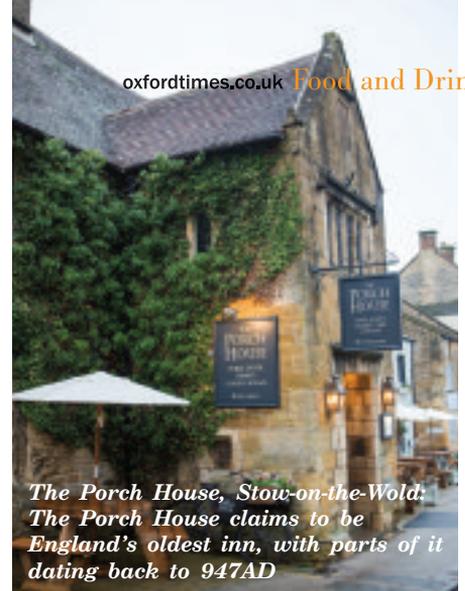




*Conservatory bar: We dined in the newest addition to the ancient Porch House, the light and airy conservatory*



*The Porch House, Stow-on-the-Wold. The Porch House claims to be England's oldest inn, with parts of it dating back to 947AD*

# Effortlessly good

**Denise Barkley** lingers over lunch with friends at the historic Porch House in Stow-on-the-Wold

I love a pub that is getting it right without trying too hard, and I'm delighted to put The Porch House, in the bustling Cotswold market town of Stow-on-the-Wold, into that category.

It's "claim to fame" is that it is England's oldest inn, with one part dating back to 947AD, and that feeling of great age and history is reflected in the carefully thought-out décor. The original stonework, fireplaces and oak beams add character and charm to the rustic ambience of the place – and while this is clearly a gastro hotspot, it's just as nice a place to linger over a glass of wine or a coffee.

There's a maze of rooms, accessed by little corridors. We dined in the light-filled conservatory, a new addition, and then there's the main bar with its cubby holes and corners, another nice lounge bar with comfy sofas, the fabulous restaurant with its two huge Cotswold stone fireplaces, and a snug and private dining room.

Upstairs there are 13 *en-suite* bedrooms and there's a pretty outdoor courtyard where you can linger over a pint of the inn's very own Porch House ale. Yes, they have everything covered in fine style here.

With friends Sue and Dee, I combined lunch at the Porch House with a pleasant afternoon browsing Stow's shops. It is a quintessentially Cotswold town, and (be warned) a tourist trail favourite, so there's a nice range of shops and boutiques alongside the endless tea rooms. I was particularly taken with the gorgeous earrings at Pure Silver, discovered up a little alleyway called Talbot Court. I managed to resist a purchase, but I will be back.

We were warmly welcomed at The Porch House by general manager

Alex Davenport Jones, who took up the post a couple of months ago. This genial guy has an illustrious hospitality background including stints at The Seven Tuns, Chedworth, and The Chequers Inn, Cassington, and is a wiz with wines, having built wine investment portfolios for worldwide clientele.

Head chef Damian Roberts is another new face, having arrived from the highly rated The Chequers Inn at Churchill. He describes his style as "modern British" and is passionate about using the best seasonal, local produce he can lay hands on.

First impressions were good as we settled down at our table. A carafe of water, infused with cucumber in thin spirals, arrived unbidden, along with some hunks of fresh white and brown bread and butter.

And so to the menu, which was thankfully short, sweet and to the point. Lighter options included ploughman's or a cured meat board, as well as a variety of sandwiches which came with chips and mixed leaves. I liked the fact you could add a mug of soup to your sandwich for a modest £1.50 too.

But we were there for the "full lunch", so we started by sharing a couple of starters. The twice-baked cheddar soufflé in a light sauce of leeks and grain mustard was universally praised. It had just the right consistency and level of lightness to allow full appreciation of the remainder of the meal.

However, the mighty slab of ham hock terrine, served with toast, was a bit unwieldy. We liked the crispy quail's egg served with it, and the scattering of peas and (broad bean?) puree, but the densely packed ham chunks would have benefited from incorporating something to soften it slightly – perhaps some savoury jelly?



*Adam and Damian: New arrivals at The Porch – general manager Alex Davenport Jones and head chef Damian Roberts*

My main course was one of the daily specials – a nice moist fillet of stone bass sitting on top of roasted courgettes, pattypan squash and puree, and roasted red peppers. I couldn't manage all the veggies, but it was a lovely, fresh summery dish.

I had a touch of food envy about Dee's choice – battered cod with crisp golden hand-cut chips, pea puree and homemade tartare sauce. She declared it as good as it looked and gave me a few of her chips to appease me.

Sue (who had a dinner date that evening) chose a lighter option – a blue cheese and onion tarte tatin served with a salad of rocket and heritage tomatoes. This savoury version of the classic French apple dessert looked very tempting with a sticky-glazed surface and oozing cheesy centre. The sweetness of the glaze worked perfectly with the natural sweetness of the onions.

We returned to sharing mode for puddings – sampling the lemon posset, a model of its kind and with biscotti on the side, and poached peach with ice cream.

It was a great lunch, the kind that you linger over while chatting and sipping chilled white wine. The perfect place for a summer soiree.

I'll be back.

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• *The Porch House, Digbeth Street, Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire GL54 1BN, call 01451 870048, visit [www.porch-house.co.uk](http://www.porch-house.co.uk)*