



The jewel in the
CROWN



Hayley and Chris
with James Buckle

A village hotel has risen from the ashes to become one of Suffolk's finest, scooping a Taste of England Gold Award along the way. **John Henderson** investigates

Bildeston Crown is a surprising place. It looks like the typical small village hotel as you approach down the picturesque High Street and see its understated inn sign on its grade two listed walls.

But turn into the landscaped car park and you realise someone has paid attention to getting things looking just right, and that impression is reinforced the more you see of the place. It may only have 13 rooms, but once you have seen a few of them you realise they are decorated and appointed to a standard usually associated with larger hotels or those run by trendy chains like Malmaison.

As the Crown also took the Taste of England Gold Award this year for its use of local produce, you can be sure the rooms are not all that is done well.

But it has taken seven years, an estimated £4 million and the vision and passion of owner James Buckle and his management team of Chris and Hayley Lee to get



the Crown to this award winning stage from being a seriously run-down inn.

Turning the tide

James says his passion in life is farming, but he is also a successful businessman with fingers in pies ranging from paper recycling to manufacturing electronics.

He had been interested in the Crown for some time before it came up for sale. "Part of the dream was to use produce from the farm here," he said. "But a much more overriding issue was that I saw it as a chance to offer employment here.

"When Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) talks of farmers diversifying it thinks of doing a fishing lake or caravan site outside your door, but that's not beneficial to the community. The biggest problem in rural areas is jobs for young people in villages.

"When I moved to Bildeston in 1978 there were 36 shops, now there are three. The Crown employs 22 or 23 full time equivalents and that makes a big difference

when previously there were three employed here and two of those were the owners!"

James and Chris, the chef, recall touring the place for the first time. The kitchens were such a mess that James, who used to have lunchtime snacks at the Crown, could no longer face eating there. Chris remembers not even wanting to risk coffee.

James describes the building, which dates from the mid 1500s, as "knackered" and Chris says they filled eight skips clearing it out. But James' plan was to renovate without shutting down by working on different parts of the building as separate projects.

Chris explained: "Lots of bottles of wine were given away to keep people happy, as if you shut they go away and you've got to get them back."

James added: "You say that, but nobody was coming here. The previous owners were taking £500 to £600 a week, with more bedrooms than we've got now."

He says weekly turnover now is £20,000-£25,000 and they're aiming for £30,000.

James and the Lees came together by luck. They were

Bottles of wine were given away



Chris is keen on local produce



running a hotel in Devon when a friend with a staffing agency asked if they knew anyone who might be interested in a Suffolk hotel. As the owners of the Devon hotel wanted to “go a different way” the couple decided to see the Crown.

Chris explained: “We’ve seen people in interviews who say ‘we’re going to do this and change that’ and a year later nothing has changed, but here the architects were in the day after we arrived.”

He is now justifiably proud of the Crown’s “beautiful kitchen”, twice the size of the original – which has become the back bar. James says: “When we were doing it I was terrified my wife would find out how much it cost compared to hers.”

Were there arguments along the way? “No, he’s the boss and I do as I’m told,” Chris jokes, but adds more seriously: “The great thing was the passion James had for it and we both wanted the same thing with the place and the food.

“I didn’t want it to be too stuffy. I wanted it to be a place where people could come for a pint and a sandwich or a seven-course meal.”

James agrees, adding: “It does make a hugely confused offering, but it works. I wanted fine dining but I also want



someone to be able to come in here in their wellies with their dog."

Keeping it local

Whatever people eat at Bildeston Crown, it is 80 per cent local produce.

Chris explained: "A lot of chefs think they should do it because it looks good, but I wanted to do it because it was important. We also buy in the whole animal and use all of it, just to use parts of the animal is an insult to it."

Wearing his farming hat, James adds: "It's also much easier to source locally if you use the whole animal. If you go to a farm and say 'I want a pig', they can give you one. But if you say you only want these cuts, the farmer says 'what am I going to do with the rest of it?'"

Chris enthused: "What's wrong with the pig's cheeks, what's wrong with the trotters? Have you ever tried crispy pigs ears? We did a platter of head to toe Nedging pig, from two minutes up the road."

He feels the Taste of England Gold award was recognition for doing it right. Contestants were nominated by the regional tourist authorities and the Crown was Suffolk's only representative. Chris said: "The day afterwards it hit us that this was against every single coffee shop, restaurant and deli in England that uses local produce. It's something to be proud of."

James believes Suffolk has done well in making more of its local produce and argues: "Once you've got the momentum on local produce, it snowballs. It's easier for someone to put lots of something on a lorry to a supermarket.

If they do something differently for us, it's a pain in the neck for them, but you get 10 people like us and that niche bit of their business starts expanding and becomes the premium end of the business."

Chris and James are also thinking locally on other aspects of the hotel and want to expand weekday business by encouraging local firms to see it as a well equipped meeting venue that is easily accessible and does not have the congestion and parking problems of a place in Bury or Ipswich. They also have two IT-equipped function rooms, with their own patios.

Thinking ahead, James says: "We don't quite have enough bedrooms for a partners' meeting. You've got someone who wants to book all the rooms, but you've booked three so you have to turn down 10 for the sake of three. It's frustrating but I don't want to add more rooms until I know there's a demand."

It seems the Bildeston Crown will not be allowed to rest on its laurels.

■ For more information visit www.thebildestoncrown.com



He is proud of the kitchen

