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The Volunteer, Theale

[9 Jul](#)

The Volunteer in Church Street, Theale changed hands at the beginning of July. I should declare here that it is run by friends of mine. However, I have already discussed my comments with them and although not all complimentary, I am changing none for publication. In the very short time they have been in charge, Gary and Iain have put enormous effort into refurbishment of both the premises and the menu. Their efforts are, justifiably, already reaping rewards. The building has evolved by stages since 1820 when it was three cottages into the present day pub/restaurant. The dining area is adequately sized but, I suspect, the pleasant outside area will soon be needed as popularity increases. Sunday's expected maximum 20 covers became 65 and, if that could be accounted for by re-opening curiosity, it will soon be because of the quality of the food. Intentionally avoiding the predictable pub pitfall of pre-prepared pap, the owners have focused on locally sourced produce, delivered regularly and fresh preparation of most ingredients. The comfortable interior was busy even on a Monday lunchtime which augurs well for even greater success.

My nachos starter had an unnecessarily large portion of roughly chopped jalapenos but was good overall. I shared it with my partner whilst sharing his large portion of bread with oil and spice accompaniments. The spice mix included hazelnuts. Timings from the kitchen were well controlled so that our main courses made a timely rather than intrusively premature appearance. I appreciated the thought that does not happen everywhere these days; there are too many places where dishes leave the pass haphazardly or spend too long under lights. Greg was very pleased with his generously portioned steak and ale pie and vegetables. It is a cliché but I found my ham (in a baguette) melt-in-the-mouth delicious. I was less enchanted with the migration of dressing from the side salad to the bottom of my baguette which made it a little soggy. This can be addressed by a simple change of plate which I think will happen. I commented too on the hand-cut chips. They are immeasurably better than the dreadful fare widely offered these days but I was not sure that the crispy outside v fluffy inside equation had yet been balanced. However, I would much rather have very slightly imperfect steak chips or fat chips as they are sometimes called, from fresh potatoes, than something which has more in common with Iceland (or even occasionally ICI, I imagine). The Volunteer is to be commended on its rigorous approach to ingredients. I should point out that the Volly Gourmet burger is also hand-made and therefore likely to feature in my next visit. How many pubs get their burgers from anywhere other than the freezer? I finished with Eton Mess, a dessert which is interpreted in many ways these days. This featured both strawberries and raspberries (notably fresh) and was served innovatively in a Kilner Jar. I liked this touch of individuality and liked also the unbidden arrival of two sets of cutlery to allow us to share. Finally, praise from Greg who enjoyed the coffee and that is rare in pub restaurants these days.

I suggest you join the crowd and find out for yourself. There'll be a warm welcome amongst a mix of friends, regulars and new guests. **Food 8 out of 10; Service 8.5 out of 10**