

METROLIFE

PHOTOGRAPHY
Viktor Kolár reflects
town's industrial past 23

MUSIC
The irreverent sound
of Cold War Kids 23

NON-FICTION
Nick Cohen explores How
Liberals Lost Their Way 24

Relaxed and impressive

FOOD AND DRINK

Cock O Barton

★★★★

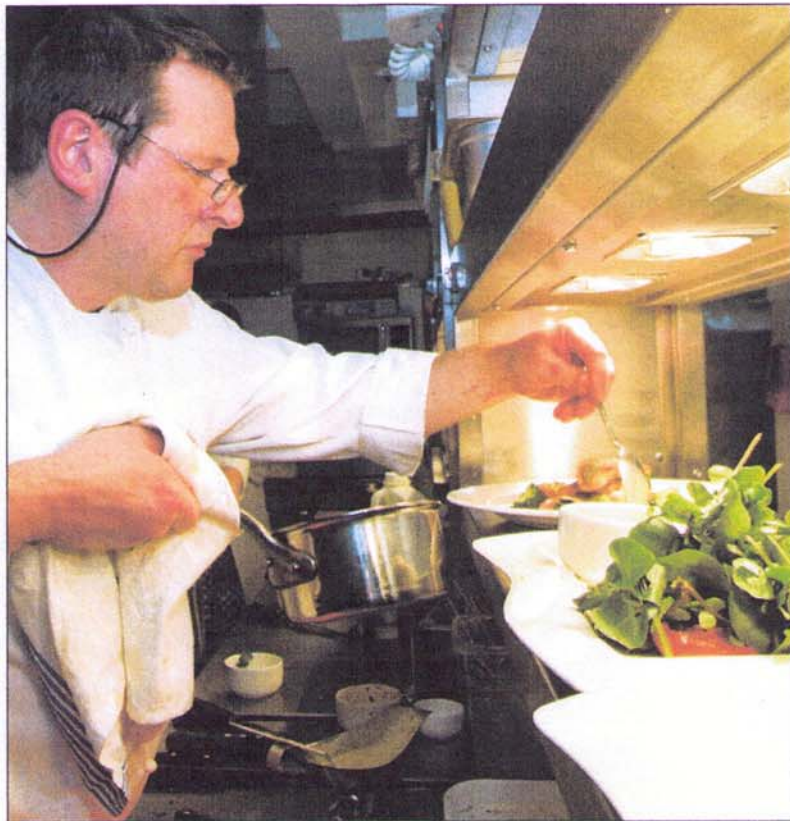
The Cock O Barton is 400 years old, cost £1.2million to renovate, and sits in a country landscape so pricey that you might see the occasional celebrity. For us, the draw of this ex-drinker's pub is not the stylishly offbeat makeover, or even its relative proximity to Chester and Merseyside. It's the chef, Robert Kisby had a difficult departure from Manchester's highest restaurant, Le Mont, at the end of 2005. His French food was sometimes delicious but, served in a room that couldn't shake its stiff formality, never entirely successful. The Cock may be an ex-pub, but Kisby will never be a sandwich kind of a guy. When the private investors who own it hired him, he told them so.

Kisby's way around the pub lunch is to produce an oversized menu card offering three options, with drink recommendations for each. Plate & Glass features lightish dishes such as smoked haddock brandade (£7.95). Platter & Bottle is sharing plates of mighty proportions, and the à la carte is dressed up as Wine & Dine.

Local ingredients and producers feature prominently, though these don't sit happily with the liberal use of asparagus, which Kisby is getting from South America because he thinks people – even people who live in Cheshire, home of fine spears – expect it all year round. Are they mad? Le Mont customers will also recognise Kisby's signature soup, his habit of garnishing meat with linked classic dishes (steak with beef bourguignon, for example), and a fondness for big plates.

My starter was a big plate: the house selection of five hors d'oeuvre (£9.95). Not surprisingly, the asparagus mousse was dull, and the gravadax with beetroot salad didn't quite hang together, but the pork rilletes were fantastically piggy, a stack of crab and cucumber fresh and light and the smoked chicken with a Waldorf salad excellent quality. My friend was surprised by the generosity of his starter (£11.95), which featured four fat, bouncy, seared Loch Fyne scallops with the corals intact. Unusually for this menu, the dish had a Chinese bent, using a noodle salad and flavours of hoi sin and sesame that really worked. A glass of Explorer Gewurztraminer (£3.95), from Chile, was good but not as aromatic as I'd hoped.

Main courses were really enjoyable, offering, like much of the menu, big



Comeback king: Robert Kisby has made the trip up to the Cock O Barton and, if you like big flavours, follow his lead

► My friend loved stripping the tastiest bits of the local partridge from the bone, and the take-no-prisoners accompaniments of fatty pork belly, sausage and sauerkraut ◀

rather than fine flavours. My friend loved stripping the tastiest bits of the local partridge (nearly finished now) from the bone, and the take-no-prisoners accompaniments of fatty pork belly, sausage and juniper-studded sauerkraut (£14.95). I enjoyed the crisp, flavoursome fat on my Bowland Forest lamb cutlets (£17.95), as well as the rosemary gravy and a Lancashire hotpot wrapped in cabbage leaves. The components were far too finely diced to represent the true stew, but tasted great.

Cocunut ice cream from nearby Cheshire Farm was too good not to be the star of my friend's dessert, pineapple-filled crêpes with a cherry sauce (£5). I wasn't eating solids during most of the

1970s, but I imagine the decade tasted like this. The plate of local cheeses (£7.95), skewed towards Wales and had a crisp accompaniment of home-made piccalilli.

It may have been the wine, from Ribera Del Duero (£31.95), but this dinner struck me as the cooking of a happier man. It was unmistakably Kisby, but appealingly relaxed, and served by staff who care. Kisby still lives in Manchester and makes the daily journey to the restaurant. If you like good cooking, follow him there.

Emma Jean Sturgess
Barton Road, Malpas, Cheshire, daily noon to 10pm. Tel: 01829 782 2777.
www.thecockobarton.co.uk

■ More food and drink news page 22

Simply Heathcotes

★★★★



Last Wednesday was a day of mixed fortunes for Paul Heathcote. His flagship Longridge restaurant lost its Michelin star while a very visible part of the empire, Liverpool's Simply Heathcotes (pictured), retained its Bib Gourmand. The award denotes good food at reasonable prices and, though the Bibs are less talked about, they're not given out like sweets. On a sunny day, Simply's glass-fronted plaza setting is a cheering place to be and, dining solo, I wasn't under pressure to hide behind a newspaper. A starter of avocado, baby gem and rocket (£5.50) with pumpkin oil boasted impeccably fresh leaves, decent cherry tomatoes and the doing-you-good crunch of pumpkin seeds, with a salted soft-boiled egg for creaminess. My main course of roasted haddock (£15.50) came with silky creamed celeriac and a red wine sauce with lardons of bacon, mushrooms and tiny onions. Served on a really hot plate, it was a dish ideally suited for its purpose, which is, at this branch, to add a reliable, delicious back-note to meetings. Dessert was a slice of sticky, just-warm treacle tart with clotted cream; the pastry could have been crisper but the filling included just enough lemon zest to carry it through to the last bite. It's easy to see why this place is still sporting its Bib.

EJS

Beetham Plaza, 25 The Strand, Liverpool, Mon to Sat noon to 2.30pm, Mon to Fri 6pm to 10pm, Sat 6pm to 11pm and Sun noon to 9pm. Tel: 0151 236 3536.
www.healthcotes.co.uk

IN TOWN TONIGHT



GIG FIONN REGAN
Pure and simple folk thrills from the Dublin singer-songwriter touring debut album *The End Of History*
Tonight, Barfly Loft, 90 Seel Street, Liverpool, 8pm, £8. Tel: 0870 907 0999.
www.fionnregan.com

■ To win tickets see page 22



THEATRE HOOP!
The script goes out the window as the six-strong improv troupe make up two comedy plays on the hoof
Tonight, Unity Theatre, 1 Hope Place, Liverpool, 8pm, £8, £6 concs. Tel: 0151 709 4988.
www.unitytheatreliverpool.co.uk



BOOK NOW HAYSEED DIXIE
Possibly the world's finest bluegrass-playing AC/DC fanatics return for more outlandish banjo action
Apr 13, Carling Academy, 11-13 Hotham Street, Liverpool, 7pm, £14.50. Tel: 0870 771 2000.
www.hayseed-dixie.com

RATINGS GUIDE
★★★★ Excellent
★★★★ Very good
★★★ Good
★★ Adequate
★ Poor