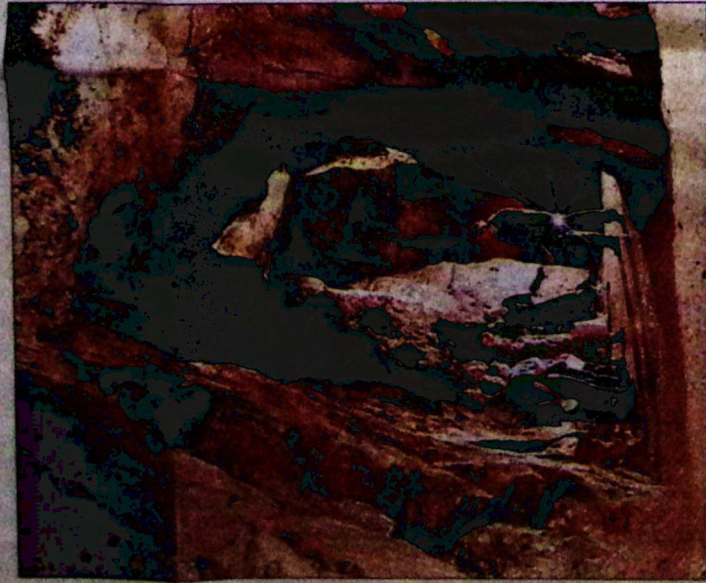


Family outing
Matlock Bath, Derbyshire Dales

Our trip? It had its ups and downs



High and low: two of Matlock Bath's main attractions, the chamber in the Great Cavern, left, and the cable car, which soars to the top of the 1,000m Heights of Abraham near by

THE cable car ride from Matlock Bath to the Heights of Abraham will not strike the fear of Switzerland and Colorado. But, respect where respect is due, it is the highest ride in England. The Heights are the best part of 1,000m high, and on a cloudy day when you can't see the top, those gondolas suddenly look rather small.

As we all started swapping scary cable car stories, some unsuspected phobias surfaced. Charlie was the first to crack. He's been there, done that, in outdoor adventures around the world but in middle age his head for heights had gone. He chickened out and retired to a coffee shop with the Sunday papers.

Then Eleanor, a seven-year-old veteran of rock-climbing, abseiling and tobogganing, grew wobbly. But there was no face to be lost in front of Billy, 11, and brother Freddie, nine. The remaining parents took confidence from the fact that the apparatus had been designed, manufactured and installed by an expert-sounding firm from Grenoble in the French Alps.

Suddenly, we were scooped up and sailing across the Derwent Valley.

walking up here, amid tumbling streams and pools, with wild flowers and dolomite outcrops. Man has added a maze, a picnic area, a tufa stone summer house and two adventure playgrounds that let our children divide. Freddie thought the Giant Slide was "amazing". Eleanor rated it "cool". So much so, Billy was less impressed. "Not fast enough. As fast as a tortoise."

But, perversely, the big deal on top of Derbyshire is to go underground. The hills were riddled with lead mines in the 15th century, and the abandoned caverns were already part of Matlock Bath's spa town tourist attractions by 1810. The tourist blurb from those days claimed that 10,000 people could fit in the Great Masson Cavern. So tourist hype is not new.

The guides have improved, though. In Victorian days, they would let the tourists wander freely through the tunnels until they were lost and then charge double to lead them safely back to daylight.

Today all agreed that the best bit was when the guide turned the lights off. Total clammy darkness. Then tiny shafts of daylight from fissures in the rock winked through.

Next, by candlelight, a talking model of an old miner appeared

England's best houses

Simon Jenkins at
Gawsworth Hall
★★★★★



Gawsworth Hall stages an annual arts festival, including opera

billiard table. Here Richard's eccentricity reaches new heights. Among billiard cues and family portraits are a reclining statue of the goddess Echo and a huge altarpiece. The gardens at Gawsworth embrace the remains of a medieval tiling ground, intended by a previous occupant to impress Elizabeth I should she design to visit.

● Gawsworth Hall, Church Lane, Macclesfield, Cheshire (01260 223456). Open: daily 2pm-5pm, until August 31; adults £4.50, children (under 16) £2.25.

Milk and honey: let's save the baste for last



THE aqua spa in the Sanderson Hotel promised "an urban sanctuary in exquisitely zen-like surroundings". Here, surely, was an antidote to the drizzling gloom of a London spring weekend, a place where one could luxuriate alone or share a sybaritic Sunday with a friend — couples welcome.

We went there for a calming cocktail, ahead of an inspection of the spa facilities, and this being an Ian Schrager hotel, we could have had a lavender martini, but settled for the elderberry and the fig.

I went to check out the Schrager look in the loos. Predictably, all inside was white and so brutally minimalist that the doors did not even have handles.

Finding one cubicle occupied, I went to the next, sat down, and froze as a muffled moan erupted from the woman next door. The poor thing. Was it an asthma attack? Epilepsy? Should I break down the door? Or run for help?

Suddenly, I knew: I would run, but not for help. My neighbour was not alone, and whoever was in there with her was a male and b) also having difficulty breathing.

Blundering out, I groped for handles that weren't there, the noises behind growing louder. Eventually I was out, and in need of more restful surroundings.

Upstairs in the aqua spa, all is sparse and white again. This time, however, not only are there no door handles, but also no doors or, indeed, walls. Instead, vast, gauzy white curtains divide much of the area in a sort of Swedish-meets-the-Sahara effect.

Couples are welcome to book in together and can have adjacent massages, although the spa manager, Amanda Lacey, warns: "We tend to find people don't relax because they talk to each other."

Treatments here are done on the face, back and hands and feet at

Verdicts

"It'd give it seven out of ten, but all seven is for the cable-car ride. It's wicked. Top notch" — Billy, 11

"The cable car was amazing. The cave was good, but a bit boring. There's not enough for older children" — Freddie, nine

"The cable car I didn't like and I did like at the same time. Some bits in the cave were difficult to understand. I liked the story at the end" — Eleanor, seven



Sunday lunch Devonshire Arms, Beeley

TO HAVE one pub on an estate named after the local landed gentry is not unusual in rural England. To have two suggests a family with real clout. Indeed, there may be even more Devonshire Arms dotted around the Chatsworth estate of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire than the ones in the villages of Derbyshire, they chose well.

The parklands are sumptuously beautiful. The Peak District National Park provides majestic horizons in every direction. At the southern gateway lies Beeley, a pretentious village that dates back to the Domesday Book.

The Devonshire Arms is suitably historic, too. Ancient blackened fireplaces dominate the three main rooms of the old coaching house. Only the nine surnames grace the list of patrons since 1747, although some of the other claims sound like the commentary on a television history programme. Charles Dickens may have slept here. Edward VII may have slept here with his mistress Alice Keppel.

We arrived too late to spot any modern royal adulterers enjoying the £11.25 champagne Victorian Breakfast. They are expected to vacate their tables by noon. We had booked lunch early and so earned a prime table by the bar. Having confessed that we would be bringing three children, we were pleased not to find ourselves relegated to the modern dining room extension, where the low-beamed atmosphere tends to drop off sharply.

We had a discreet challenge for the Devonshire Arms. Four of our party — two boys, two parents — were vegetarians who lived locally and had learnt to cope with limited expectations of Derbyshire pub catering. First signs were not promising. The menu was red in the face with steak and ale pie, Barnsley chop, Cumberland sausage, mixed grills, liver,

black puddings, forecasters and for a carnivore's cardiac moral — fillet or sirloin topped with haggis and Drambuie sauce. Had we brought our friends to the abattoir?

Closer inspection happily revealed that the line-up consisted more than the usual suspects for vegetarians. We counted seven in the starter list and five in the mains, largely based around cheeses and roasted vegetables.

The boys, Billy and Freddie, found their answers elsewhere on the menu and cut straight to soft drink, garlic bread, two orders of chips, and two vanilla ice-creams. Boys can be vegetarians without bothering with vegetables.

All items were smartly demolished, but this was no help to a food critic. Charlie, their father, chose roast vegetable lasagne and rated it sound. The vegetables had been properly giddled before being assembled in the final bake. Their mother Hilary's shiitake mushrooms in garlic on a rocket salad looked good and tasted better.

The flesh fanciers had mixed results. A sizzling haddock and chips so comprehensively floored young Eleanor that she couldn't face a pudding. But the Barnsley chop, that two-listed rooster to vegetarians, was a slimline version of the classic cut.

We had quite a wait for our food. Indeed, it took quite a time to place our orders; this is a busy and highly regarded pub. So it could do better than serving UHT milk with the coffee. The Black Sheep bitter and Bass, however, were in prime condition. Perhaps more Good Pub Guide than a fair verdict.

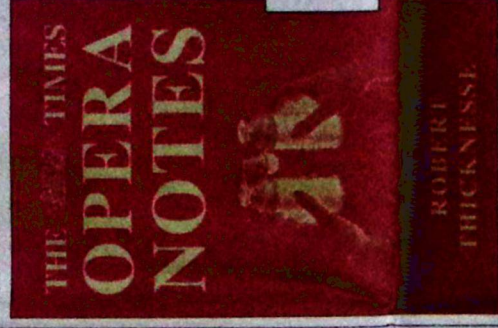
Finally, all puddings on show looked like putting on more bulk than a weightlifter's steroid programme. Only one was tried apart from ice-cream — the chocolate and cherry bombe with liqueur and cream. Guess who suffered most on the climb to the top of Stanton Moor?

● Devonshire Arms, Beeley, Derbyshire; call 01629 733259. Open daily noon-9pm. £20 a head for three courses, house wine £9.75



Devonshire Arms: a feast for flesh fanciers

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