

'a corner of paradise'



'Ees Wyke is in a glorious setting. Esthwaite Water is the other side of two or three fields, Hawkshead is a little further away and then in the distance is a great unravelling of Lakeland summits: Coniston Old Man, Wetherlam, Crinkle Crag, Bow Fell and Scafell.' Christian Dymond meets Richard and Margaret Lee at Ees Wyke. **PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENNIS SHARP**

What we found was nothing less than a corner of paradise,' wrote one of 12 happy Germans a few months ago in the guest book at Ees Wyke, Near Sawrey. 'Another super visit and cuisine superlative,'

added more contented visitors. 'Everything perfect. We shall be back,' promised others. And return they most certainly do; twice, thrice and, in the case of one couple, 41 times, although a proportion of these visits were to Richard and Margaret Lee's

six room guest house in Ambleside which they used to run before moving to Near Sawrey in February 2003.

"We wanted a change in 2001 but foot and mouth caused a few difficulties with our sale," says Richard. Delay, however, played into their

hands because it brought them Ees Wyke, a property built in 1742 and which for over 200 years remained a family home. Beatrix Potter used to stay here for holidays when she was young and, of course, the 17th Century farmhouse she purchased in

1905, mainly from the proceeds of her book *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, is barely five minutes walk away at Hilltop.

The first thing that must strike everyone as they come down the drive at Ees Wyke is its glorious setting. Esthwaite Water is the other side of two or three fields, Hawkshead is a little further away and then in the distance is a great unravelling of Lakeland summits: Coniston Old Man, Wetherlam, Crinkle Crags, Bow Fell and Scafell.

"It's not a bad location I suppose," says Richard with a wry smile and massive understatement. Indeed on a warm, clear summer's day everything, as the guest remarked, resembled a corner of paradise.

That's not how Richard saw the Lake District when he had his first brush with the area many years ago. Camping with a friend near Windermere, they pitched their tents in a valley but didn't discover the true location until three days later when the rain stopped and the cloud lifted.

The experience did not put him off. In the 1980s, while food and beverage director of a hotel near Bedford, he became a regular visitor. Richard had taken the job in 1976, his interest in food and hospitality stimulated while he was in a completely different line of work.

"I'd left school on Guernsey at 18 and joined a scaffolding contractor in Wembley," he recalls. "The business grew, they opened a depot in Cambridge and I went to manage it. For about six months I stayed in a hotel and most nights I was out trying different pubs and restaurants to eat. That's when I started getting interested in food. When I changed career and joined the hotel in Bedford, the directors used to come up once a year to Cumbria and hold their board meetings at Sharrow Bay on Ullswater. At that time Francis Coulson owned the country house hotel with Brian Sack and because Francis was a Bedford man he used to stay at our hotel when he came down to see his sister."

He acknowledges that both Francis and Brian were a huge inspiration to him.

"They taught me the importance of attention to detail, good hospitality, looking after the needs of the guest, and of cooking for flavour," says Richard. So, by the time he moved to Cumbria with Margaret in 1992 to take over the guest house in Ambleside, Richard had been tutored well in the culinary and hospitality arts.

At Ees Wyke it's more or less the two of them who run the place although someone does come in to



■ RIGHT: Richard and his dog Teddy

help over the summer. Margaret looks after guests in the 16 seat dining room, keeps the place looking spotless (there are eight bedrooms, two lounges and an outside terrace), does all the flower arranging and gives Richard a helping hand in the kitchen in the mornings. Richard is the chef, cooking the meals to order and following Francis Coulson's advice of cooking for flavour. In this year's Good Food Guide, Ees Wyke is one of about 25 Cumbrian entries and it's in the Good Hotel Guide as well.

Richard uses much local produce - meat from Lakes Speciality Foods and Hayton's butchers in Staveley, for instance; bacon and sausages from Clayton's in Ambleside; venison, duck, game and certain fish supplied by Cartmel Valley Game at Cark-in-Cartmel and organic trout from the nearby Hawkshead Trout Farm. Bread, marmalade, jams and pickles are all made on the premises.

The evening menu offers five courses: starter, middle, main, dessert and cheese. Starters may include a tartlet with peppers, red onion, aubergine, artichoke, garlic, thyme, rosemary and goat's cheese; terrine of pork with cranberry Cumberland sauce; or wild mushrooms, tossed in butter with garlic, lemon juice and parsley.

Main courses have dishes such as Lakeland beef, slowly cooked in the style of Provence; pot roasted guinea fowl breast with shallot and pancetta, served with the pan juices and white wine; pan fried calves liver with bacon and onion; grilled fillet of lemon sole with lemon, butter and parsley; or pan fried fillet of pork (local rare breed Hampshire pig) served with glazed peach and a cider sauce.

Desserts may include chocolate truffle tear with raspberry coulis; sticky toffee sponge and hot butter-scotch sauce; chilled lemon terrine



with clotted cream; or a fresh peach, half filled with raspberry coulis and glazed sabayon sauce. There are 60 bins on the wine list, with the seven house wines at £15.50 and the most expensive wine at £39. The half bottle selection runs to about 15.

In his days as a food and beverage director in Bedford, Richard used to relax by racing Porsche 911's at various racetracks, or by driving them down the German autobahns every so often to the Porsche factory at Stuttgart. These days, when he is not tending to the one acre garden at Ees Wyke, he flies radio controlled,

model helicopters - about three feet long with rotor blades of five feet - from the garden's front lawn. The era of fast cars is over: the roads around his patch of the Lake District are, thankfully, not quite the same as German motorways. **FD**

INFORMATION

Ees Wyke, Near Sawrey: 015394
36393. Website:
www.eeswyke.co.uk
Dinner, bed and breakfast is £88
per person, per night. Dinner is £30.