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Manna from heaven?

The idea of a top-class café based in a working church might seem odd, but Bill Sewell has proved that it really is a winning combination – not once, but three times. Sandra Ashenford finds out more. Photography by Shaun Thompson

BILL SEWELL could consider himself a regular church goer, but it isn't the Sunday morning peal of bells that generally calls him to service.

For Bill has set up cafés in three separate, functioning places of worship, bringing top class food into these unusual settings.

A strange combination? "Actually, it works very well," explains Bill. "The cafés seem to fit very naturally into the beautiful spaces inside the church buildings."

The Café @ All Saints, in the centre of Hereford, has just celebrated a decade of existence, having won a string of accolades from top food critics. It came about through the partnership of a very forward-thinking priest, a determined congregation, and Bill's expertise and experience. Charged with rescuing the crumbling medieval church of All Saints from destruction, the then-Priest in charge, the Rev Andrew Mottram, came up with the hugely ambitious plan of placing a top-class café into the middle of the working church and delivering delicious fresh food on a daily basis.

Extraordinary fundraising efforts from the modest-sized congregation, supported a massive project of repairs and restoration, and in July 1997, Café @ All Saints opened its doors.

"In fact, it was almost seven years from the idea of a café first being mooted until the project came to fruition, so it took a while," laughs Bill. "It seems to take longer each time; it took 18 months of wrangling for my first café to open, seven years for All Saints – and more than 70 for the latest one at St David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire!"

Bill divides his time between the three projects, but Herefordshire is now his home. "I'm not quite sure how that happened," he laughs, "but I wouldn't change it now. We just sort of got sucked into the place and here we are, with a couple of kids at the local school."

"It's such a fantastic area, so beautiful. Sometimes I remember just how lovely it really is, when I think I could be jammed into a Tube at this point!"

Bill grew up above his parents' antique shop in Notting Hill Gate, and went on to study

History at Cambridge University. But the most enjoyable thing about university life turned out not to be the studying, or even long nights at the pub – but the cooking. "I had a little Bunsen burner in my room, and I really loved cooking for people who came over. I enjoyed it much more than the academic side of things," says Bill.

“ An idea for a café here was first suggested in the 1930s, so it really has taken a while to get this project off the ground ”

He decided to find out more about how the restaurant trade functions by working within it, and took a job at a wholefood café in Westminster. Here he learned a great deal about choosing fresh ingredients and preparing food well – everything was made from scratch, including the bread for the sandwiches. Later, he moved to Launceston Place in London, a popular, upmarket restaurant to see how the 'posher' side of the business worked.

And having gained a good overview of life in the kitchen, Bill trained as an accountant with PriceWaterhouseCoopers. "Right from the beginning I told them it was because I intended to run my own restaurant and I wanted to learn about the business side of things, and they just said, 'Oh, you'll soon get used to the salary', but the day after I qualified I packed it in," explains Bill.

Fully equipped to take on culinary challenges, Bill began to explore how and where he might run his own restaurant. After what he describes as 'a few lucky near misses', Bill went to a friend's art exhibition at St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside. "I thought the

space there was great, but that it was being under-used," says Bill. "The next day I went to see the vicar and asked if he would like to have a restaurant in the crypt. It took 18 months, but The Place Below finally opened in 1989."

The café proved enormously successful, and soon Bill was in talks with the Rev Andrew Mottram regarding All Saints in Hereford. He has recently added a third café to his portfolio, the Refectory at St David's, set in the beautiful cloisters of St David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire. "An idea for a café here was first suggested in the 1930s, so it really has taken a while to get this project off the ground," laughs Bill.

As well as church settings, all the cafés share Bill's philosophy 'to serve wonderful food in beautiful spaces'. The emphasis is on serving fresh, simple homemade food of the best possible quality, at sensible prices in a friendly atmosphere. The Café @ All Saints uses local suppliers such as the Wye Valley Brewery for stout and golden ale, water from Berrington Spring, bacon and sausages from Mr Tudge's free-range Berkshire rare breed pigs, jams and chutneys from Sally's Pantry, made from Herefordshire ingredients, and smoked fish from the Black Mountains Smokery in Abergavenny.

"I think it's really important to use local produce whenever possible, but it's true that some areas do some things better than others," explains Bill. "So, for example, we use a lot of Mr Tudge's bacon at St David's, and we use some excellent Welsh cheeses at All Saints. I see it as an opportunity to introduce good quality produce from one area to another."

Visitors to the cafés who are keen to reproduce some of the mouthwatering dishes can buy copies of Bill's books, *Food from The Place Below* and *Feasts from The Place Below*. In print for around a decade, both are still selling well. But it could be a while before Bill is tempted to put pen to paper again.

"I would like to write another book, but it's likely to be a retirement project. Unless you are a TV star, you have to put a lot of effort into getting a cookery book published, and it's not something I have the time to do at the ▶



Bill's philosophy is to 'serve wonderful food in beautiful spaces'.

moment," Bill explains.

Is he a fan of the plethora of television cookery shows? "Well, I'm a bit bored with them now, but on balance, I think they probably are a good thing, helping to raise awareness of good food. For me personally, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall had a huge impact; his book on meat is such an intelligent introduction to the whole meat

business – and I was a vegetarian for ten years!"

Bill's children Holly (4) and eight-year-old Jonathan are both big chocolate fans, but otherwise are showing little inclination to follow Dad into the food business. Still, even if they wanted to spend some time cooking together over the kitchen stove, it could prove difficult.

"The oven at home hasn't actually worked for nine months!" admits Bill. "It's a beautiful American DCS range and I can't bear to get rid of it, but I haven't been able to find anyone to fix it. If there's anyone out there..." ■

For more information about Bill's cafés, visit the website www.cafeatallsaints.co.uk