

BUNGALOW CAFE, MARKS TEY

## The new café

# society?

*Piers Ford tells how he has found a transport caff good enough to call itself a café*



A squat, nondescript building sits in a car park off the Old London Road which runs parallel to the A12 at Marks Tey, a place more passed through than visited en route to the far reaches of East Anglia or south to London. Glamorous it isn't. This is trucker country. The Bungalow Café is a pit stop.

Now I'm prepared to bet that anyone – chartered accountant, sales rep, award winning chef or food writer – who pretends that they don't have the occasional pang for a cholesterol blow-out, satisfied by a discrete rib-lining trip to their favourite greasy spoon is being economical with the truth. So it isn't exactly a hardship to find myself walking through the door in time for breakfast on a muggy summer morning.

But what's this? An airy room full of pine chairs and tables, spotless down to the last sauce bottle; food hygiene certificates on proud display; blackboards which list a comprehensive range of sandwiches, traditional home-cooked meals for £4.50 ranging from boiled bacon in parsley sauce to Pukka steak and kidney pie and even vegetarian specials, all freshly made on the premises; and an open plan kitchen in which gleaming stainless is the leitmotif.

Expectations of runny eggs drowned in cheap cooking oil evaporate in a second. Truckers there are aplenty. But they are shoulder to shoulder with men in suits, soldiers – nearby Colchester



Sarah Webb (right) and her team

is a garrison town – a family with small children and a couple of locals who obviously drop in most mornings. I've stumbled on a totally egalitarian eaterie.

And we're all, as it happens, sitting in a little piece of history. The Bungalow Café used to be a well-known 24-hour rockers' café, a stage post for bands on their way to play the Gaumont at Ipswich further up the A12. The behinds of pop royalty which once graced the seats – fixed to the floor because things could get lively when the local gangs spilled in on a Saturday night – included those of the Beatles, the Stones, Tom Jones, Cilla Black and Dusty Springfield.

In time, owners Sarah Webb – "I hate it when people call us a greasy spoon" – and her husband Steve, who took it over as a run-down business in 1998 and have since carried out substantial modernisation, will probably pay tribute to the Café's heritage with a display of photographs and memorabilia.

They might also be among the first British cafés to accept the Euro. Many customers are long haul drivers heading inland from the continent via Harwich and the Bungalow Café's reputation extends well into Europe. For the time being, though, they are just pleased to have brought the transport café into the 21st century.

"Occasionally someone will ask if we do hash browns," says Sarah. "No, we don't. What we do offer is the sort of traditional home cooking which people don't get at home any more. The menu develops by trial and error but I won't sell stuff unless it can be served in optimum condition. And I'm lucky to have a team which understands and knows what goes into good food preparation."

Old habits refuse to die. Despite the wide choice, which includes egg and chips for £2.50 and ham and cheese flan with chips and peas for £4.25, I go for the all-day breakfast (£4.50) – more modest variations are available – and it appears in front of me in a matter of minutes: what looks like an entire tin of tomatoes, a fried egg, bacon and sausage, freshly made bubble and squeak, black pudding, baked beans, fried bread, a steaming mug of coffee and two slices of bread and butter.

It only defeated me on the last lap. Greasy spoons and tacky formica are dead. Let's hear it for the new café society. ✓

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