

Throgmorton brings back the bad old days, says **Matthew Norman**

It is more in pity than in anger that I turn to today's restaurant, but most of it all it is in delayed shock, perplexity and something close to disbelief. That Throgmorton exists at this point in the space-time continuum cannot be doubted. Even so, despite its presence in many directories, and despite not one – let it never be said that this column spares itself the rod – but two visits for lunch, it effortlessly retains the quality of a feverish dream.

I am always dubious about the use of global superlatives. When callers to radio phone-ins describe our police as 'the best in the world', for example, I wonder how closely they have studied rival law-enforcement agencies in Chile, Iceland, the Solomon Isles, Andorra, Swaziland and Laos. In this light, I am not prepared to state that Throgmorton is the worst restaurant in the world. All I can say is that I'd lump on at 9/2 or longer if such a contest were ever held.

Buried in a basement beneath an old Lyon's Corner House a coin's throw from the Bank of England, the room is aptly shaped after a coffin, and whether the first warning of the ensuing horror comes from the scent (eau de cottage hospital mingled with essence of mothball) or the insane decor – wood-panelled walls beneath electric pink ceiling; filthy scuffed red carpet; chandeliers styled after mutant bunches of grapes – is probably a matter of personal taste.

One thing in Throgmorton's favour is its consistency. For my guest's and my first visit there were two other customers (Japanese businessmen) present. For my second there was also a single pair (middle-aged ladies) of fellow diners. The service also held its form, although I preferred the dour Glaswegian waitress who warned us off the beef salad ('It's no' very good; people have complained') to her younger and even less interested Hispanic successor. The same bored-looking chef was visible through a hatch at the end of the room, the music piped through from the hideous bar next door played at the same oppressive volume, and the food... well, the only change I saw on the 'new' menu was some emaciated Thai mussels in semi-skimmed milk doctored with a few drops of coconut essence (£6.50) with which



THROGMORTON

Score 0.07/10

Eat There is at least one McDonald's within 300 yards

Bring Nosegay, Brasso

Take Captain Peacock, Mrs Slocombe, Mrs Slocombe's Pussy

Price of dinner for one £26.25 (with coffee and half a bottle of house wine)

Address 27b Throgmorton Street, London EC2 (020-7588 5165)

I began; and which, to spare the feelings of the poor guy in the white apron, I removed from the shells, wrapped in a paper napkin and flushed down the loo between courses.

Returning to the original lunch, let it merely be said that if you want to pass off what tasted to me much like New Covent Garden wild mushroom soup (£5) as your own recipe, it is such a highly distinctive taste that it's probably wise to doctor it with a little sherry and a dollop of cream. Both my friend's grilled chicken breast (£10) and my sausages (also £10), meanwhile, suggested an account with a butcher in one of the smaller Soviet republics in the era when the national sport throughout the Warsaw Pact nations was queuing for nine hours for a gizzard of syphilitic mountain yak.

In fact everything here, from the music (*Ziggy Stardust*) to the sepulchral atmosphere, places Throgmorton in the mid-1970s, when Mollie Sugden and Trevor Bannister were bickering over cuisine of this kind in the Grace Brothers canteen, and when we regarded an outing to the Golden Egg as a major treat.

In strict truth, the grilled tuna on a salad niçoise I had the second time (£7.90) bucked the trend. In 1975 it would have been the contents of a John West tin rather than a chargrilled piece of relatively fresh fish. However, the salad itself, with its overcooked beans, undercooked new potatoes, monstrously oversweet dressing and lack of a single anchovy, was an atrocity.

If Sherlock Holmes had been called in to investigate why a restaurant on this site is doing all it can to scare off punters, he would have recalled the tale of the Red-Headed League, and assumed the management were master criminals with a cunning scheme to tunnel into the Bank of England vaults. There may be a more innocent explanation, of course, but I can't imagine why the owners or lessees of a prime property, with a captive City audience desperate to unleash their plump wallets on food and drink, would willingly eschew potential profit in favour of creating a loving tribute to the era when eating out in Britain was the unfunniest of jokes. ●