



Creelers on Skye does not look particularly special, but it serves some of the best fried haddock you are likely to taste PHOTOGRAPH MICHAEL BIRD

Shed your preconceptions

Don't be fooled: this is no mere beach-hut chipper



RON MACKENNA

Hey. There are only so many times I can listen to island urchins arguing about whether to have salt 'n' vinegar or salt 'n' sauce with their chips. Especially when the four dwarves have been going on about it for five minutes and they're all that's between me and getting some attention.

They're queueing at the back window of a restaurant in Skye which operates a double life as a chipper. I kid you not. And I am behind them in that queue. How undignified. Anyway, I finally butt in and impatiently demand to know why Creelers, the restaurant out front, is not open at the advertised time. Quite clearly it is operating to some infuriatingly sleepy Hebridean timetable. "It opens at 12," says the serving woman. "Aha, madam," I say, majestically brandishing my watch. "It is now 12.40." Before she can reply, Island Urchin Number One pipes up: "The clocks went back last night, mister." All five of them eye me silently. Someone sniggers. I retreat. Sheepishly.

About 20 minutes later I skulk past four chip-munching midgets to become Creelers' first customer of the day. And yes, I did consider taking my dignity elsewhere. It's not as though the place looks anything special, I mutter. Think beach hut with no sand, then toss in the contents of the pub decor department at the local ship-chandler's - an anchor, some creels, that sort of thing - and you'll get the drift (boom, boom). If I look long and hard, I'm sure I'll find a salty sea dog nailed to a mast somewhere in here. The style is distinctly nautical, shall we say. Comfortably so. And if there's a chip shop out back, you're thinking, surely the restaurant is just going to be a disguised chip shop out front. Maybe.

It's cold. Were it not for the coal-fired stove blasting out heat right beside me, it would be like being adrift on the Baltic. But the menu is warming the cockles of my heart, Jim lad. There are squat lobster tails in a Pernod sauce, local hand-dived scallops, wild venison in a bramble jus, sea bass and a seafood lasagne with dill, no less. Unfortunately the waitress is deftly steering me towards the haddock. With chips. Mmm. Am I too early for the decent stuff? Or is it to be chipper fare for Sunday lunch? I have eaten in enough restaurants to know it is always wise to follow your waitress's advice. So I do. Glumly.

CREELERS RESTAURANT

Broadford, Skye
(01471 822281)

HOURS Noon-10pm.
Closed Wednesdays.

MENU Don't be put off by the takeaway: this is quality stuff. Seafood gumbo, monkfish, cajun haddock: all the right dishes for an island restaurant. **4/5**

ATMOSPHERE Hard to tell when you roll up at noon on a Sunday.

Reputedly fully booked all summer, when it goes like a fair: **3/5**

SERVICE Flawless when dealing with one customer [me]. **4/5**

PRICE Just £7.50 for the best fried haddock

for miles, and £11 for wild venison. Well into bargain territory. **4/5**

FOOD On the basis of that haddock, it's up there with some of the island's better known names. Certainly fresh and certainly well presented. **8/10**

TOTAL 23/30

To start I order up Loch Eishort (wherever that is) mussels in white wine and garlic sauce. They're here in front of me now: a big, steaming bowl with a thin-looking liquid. I can't fault them. Are they farmed? Probably, although there is a bit of grit in one, suggesting otherwise. Not that it really matters. The mussels are so fat and soft that they steal the show from the sauce - which is good, but not good enough to overshadow nature's bounty. I am warming to this. And the haddock and chips? Coming, sir. Is that murmur the sound of a deep-fat fryer bubbling in the background? I should warn you that almost every Friday night in our house my mum served up freshly landed Oban haddock fried in hand-grated, oven-toasted breadcrumbs. So there. I'll not be settling for any cack, y'hear?

Umm, humble pie time again. The haddock has arrived and has

quite clearly been pan-fried. Beautifully. There are little brown toasty patches all over its pale-coloured breadcrumb coating. Hand-dressed on the premises? I cut into the crisp outside to reveal white, almost translucent, flaking fish. Steam rises slowly (it's still baltic in here). It tastes sensational. Why? It's fresh and has been fried in butter. It's hard to overemphasise how much flavour that adds. Here it gives a salty, savoury edge to the fish, transforming it into something special. I cannot fault it. There's a very nicely dressed salad with fresh coriander on one side of the plate, and a pile of fresh, golden-brown chips on the other. This is the best piece of haddock I have had for 20 years. At least. From a beach hut. Appearances can be deceptive.

Of course, I had worked out very quickly that those little ragamuffins out back were on to something. Honest injun. ■