

Aylesbury Duck **Pub Food**

If you own an Aylesbury pub it'd be foolish not to make the most of an Aylesbury tradition. And for the Broad Leys, it's paid off, as John Porter reports

The genuine article

IF YOU were looking for Aylesbury Duck, the town of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire would seem to be a good place to start.

In fact, that would be a classic schoolboy error. As it turns out, not all ducks from Aylesbury are Aylesbury Ducks, and true Aylesbury Ducks actually come from a few miles down the road in Chesham.

Confused? It's a puzzle that has been unravelled by Helen Wood, lessee of the Broad Leys pub. The 16th century coaching inn is now serving up the town's best known delicacy, marking the return of a British food classic to pub menus.

For more than 200 years, Aylesbury Duck was a staple on upmarket dinner tables across London, as well as on the menu of every coaching inn between Bucks and the capital – the ducks' traditional route to market (see box).

Helen, formerly a manager with Whitbread, took over the pub on a lease with Punch five years ago. "At the time, it was around 99 per cent wet trade," says Helen.

Refurb to realise potential

Having seen the potential in a pub that one structural survey said would be better off torn down, Helen has spearheaded a total refurb, which has seen the lounge and back-bar completely renovated and a restaurant area added. The Broad Leys was shortlisted in the Pub Design of the Year category in the *Publican Awards* 2007.

Trade is still very much dominated by locals, but with a much healthier mix between the wet side and those attracted by the pub's menu built around fresh, local food.

"We were increasingly being asked about Aylesbury Duck," says Helen. Which is where Richard Waller came into the equation. Richard, who claims with plenty of justification to



The Broad Leys serves confit leg and pan-fried Aylesbury duck breast

be the last remaining commercial breeder of Aylesbury Ducks, was celebrated as one of Rick Stein's *Food Heroes* in the book and TV series of the same name.

A dowry of ducks

So pay attention: Richard's grandma started in her married life in the 1880s with a dowry of ducks from her family's flock, which dated back to the 1770s.

Richard's father inherited the family business in the early part of the last century and, having become a father relatively late in life, passed it to Richard himself.

That means the ducks farmed by Richard are directly descended from one of the earliest Aylesbury flocks.

"My dad used to, very occasionally, bring in a few ducks from outside to

strengthen the flock, and as other Aylesbury producers shut down we bought a few, but he was very careful about keeping the breed pure."

Clearly, ducks living wild on the area's ponds and rivers have not been as choosy about diluting their DNA, meaning there are precious few genuine Aylesburys left.

At the Broad Leys, which is serving up Richard's output as a duo of confit leg and pan-fried breast, that means Helen sometimes has to bite her tongue.

"There's been so much interest. People tell me over the bar that they have Aylesburys in their garden, or wherever. I know they can't be genuine, but it's not for me to argue – the customer is always right."

Even when they're clearly quackers. ■

Aylesbury Duck

- The breed emerged in the early 18th century
- A genuine Aylesbury Duck has white plumage and a pink beak
- It was declared a "universal favourite" by Victorian cook Mrs Beeton in *The Book of Household Management*
- Ducks were originally walked the 40 miles to London, walking through tar and sawdust daily to protect their feet
- From 1839 ducks were taken to London by train
- The trade declined after World War II when farm workers who kept a few ducks 'on the side' switched to industrial/factory working.