



Blue lights and Blue Apple

Charles Champion pops in on Blue Apple's operation at Hindlip Hall, the headquarters of West Mercia Police

When you next get that sinking feeling as the nondescript car behind you on the M5 turns on those pretty blue lights and indicates that you should pull over for a discussion about the speed limit, you can comfort yourself with the fact that the officers are well fed by a company called Blue Apple and that a high blood sugar is conducive to good temper.

Hindlip Hall may now be the headquarters of West Mercia Police, but this wasn't always such a law-abiding place. Shortly after the Gunpowder Plot, four of the conspirators hid out here in priest holes. The present building was finished in 1820 for Lord Southwell and then went on to be home to a brewing family – Samuel Allsopp and Sons, who were famous for their milk stout. There is still a faded elegance about Hindlip Hall, although the design fads of the 1970s and 1980s seem to be clinging on in various aspects of the decor.

The catering operation at Hindlip Hall is run by Blue Apple, a company that has over 50 sites and has made a strategic decision to concentrate on B&I contracts outside London. Blue Apple was formed when Ruston Toms and Brian Allanson broke away from Initial Catering and the company will be 13 years old this summer. In 2009 they acquired Zest Catering and with it the Hindlip Hall contract, which they have held ever since.

The West Mercia Police Headquarters is a very busy place indeed and the canteen must cater for over 1,000 people – although operational considerations mean that only half that number are at Hindlip at any one time. The main canteen has a fairly staid and old-fashioned feel to it, but nothing can hide the magnificently proportions of the room or the stunning views across Worcestershire. It would put a bit of a damper on the most inventive restaurant designer were he or she to be told that the room also has to do service as a lecture theatre or badminton court!

The best B&I catering companies reflect the values and attitudes of the organisations they work for and that is certainly the case with Blue Apple. For the police, the senior contracts manager based at Hindlip is Louise Hickey M.B.E. and she has nothing but praise for the Blue Apple team. Talking to her, you realise the high level of involvement that is called for. As well as the headquarters, Blue Apple is responsible for the catering at nine other police stations across the West Mercia – anywhere from Hereford to Telford and Redditch. The big challenge is to run the “operational catering” and that is driven by the welfare of the police officers.

“When there are floods or fires or protracted searches, it's the incident that dictates the response rather than





some arbitrary formula,” she says. It is no surprise that Hickey knows all the Blue Apple people by their Christian names; she is the one who has to ring them in the middle of the night and sort out support for the officers trying to cope with the aftermath of sometimes very unpleasant incidents. In these situations, flexible thinking and a quick response are key and a cup of tea and a bacon roll where and when it’s needed can be vital. As Hickey explains: “We had a terrible fire in Hereford City Centre, three shops ablaze and a large police presence to direct traffic and keep the pubic safe. The Blue Apple team responded magnificently - at 7am they were wheeling a trolley across the Hightown!”

The canteen at Hindlip is open for breakfast (there can be over 40 people on residential courses at the Police HQ); then there is a busy lunch service when they will feed between 200 and 250 people; and finally there is an evening shift providing dinner for the resident students. Supplying the tea, coffee and refreshments for a host of meetings, lectures and training exercises also falls within the remit. On top of these commitments, there are a succession of functions held both outside and inside. These can range from canapés, to a buffet for 200 at an awards function, to a full-blown garden party.

The canteen has a grab and go section – everything from the sandwiches to the cakes is freshly made on-site. There is the ubiquitous salad bar. There is a yoghurt and fruit bar. There are baked potatoes. And when it comes to hot food, there is a choice between the ‘hot special’, the ‘hot vegetable special’ and the ‘difference bar’, which as its name implies offers something a bit different. The chef is Howard Longmore and like Julie Cox, the operations manager, and Niamh Hughes, the catering manager, he has been at Hindlip for a decade or so – certainly a long enough time to understand his customers.

The ‘hot special’ of roast pork comes with roast apples, sage and onion seasoning, rosin potatoes, buttered cabbage, carrots, leek and cauliflower cheese and notably crackling. It is in every respect a classic roast dinner. You get the feeling that Longmore knows his customers well and the dining room sees a steady stream of police officers tucking in. The Difference Bar offers a beef chilli, a vegetable chilli and two chicken dishes

(either chicken tikka, or hot and spicy chicken), and they can all be served in a tortilla nest, as a wrap, or with nan bread.

Longmore’s finest hour, however, is his bread and butter pudding. Forget Gary Rhodes banging on about ‘souffléed’ bread and butter pudding. Forget the trend towards making this classic dish with brioche. Longmore offers two bread and butter puddings, one made with white bread and one made with wholemeal. Genius. You can tuck into your wholemeal pud and still feel that it’s a kind of health food. Longmore’s bread and butter pudding is frankly excellent – crispy bits, good dried fruit and that glorious, thick, sticky, yellow custard that is so much more satisfying than wishy washy ‘crème Anglais’. This pud is the sort that could inspire a contented diner to tear up a speeding ticket.

It’s a much over-used cliché, but the Blue Apple operation at Hindlip really does seem like an extended family. The nature of policing means that it will never be a 9 to 5 job. Quite a lot of what the police do on our behalf can be challenging or downright unpleasant, and having the right support services in place is the key to officer welfare. Certainly the Blue Apple operation succeeds because they have become a part of the headquarters operation, rather than merely a contractor.

A typical lunch offer at Hindlip Hall

Hot special:

Griddled chicken supreme in a creamy mushroom sauce with rosti potato

Vegetarian special:

Thai red sweet potato curry made with coconut milk and served with basmati rice

Difference Bar:

Call order omelette bar with fillings of your choice, accompanied by a rocket and grated beetroot salad

Dessert:

Raspberry brûlée with shortbread biscuits