



Pictures by Phil Cannings

How does their garden grow?

... with many hands making light work, as the children of Kingsclere Primary School dig in to help provide fresh vegetables for the chef at the village pub. Claire Pitcher takes a walk down the new kitchen garden path at Bel & The Dragon

In many villages across the country, the local pub has been on something of a rollercoaster ride over the last few years with refurbishings, reopenings and closings. Kingsclere is home to three public houses and all of them have seen some changes.

The latest are at what used to be The Swan Hotel, but is now Bel & The Dragon at The Swan. Owners Longshot Country Inns have transformed the 15th-century Grade II-listed hotel, sympathetically converting it into a contemporary dining pub with nine en suite rooms upstairs.

Bel and The Dragon pubs have been springing

up across Berkshire and Hampshire, the previous one having opened in Odiham in 2014.

Whichever one you visit, it's clear that there here there is an emphasis on service, local food and community engagement. Kingsclere is no exception, as manager Mia Wildgust explains.

"We've recently just celebrated our first year here in the village. It's taken a while for us to win over the locals as with any new site, but they've all been very complimentary," she says.

The team at Bel and The Dragon have started as they mean to go on, inviting everyone along to



their launch event and offering their support to local services.

"We gave our help to St Mary's to assist in their fundraising for renovations, plus we've catered events for the library," reports Mia. Not only that, they have also donated lunches to Kingsclere Primary and Cheam schools.

Green shoots

As part of their ethos for working alongside the local community, Mia, with chef Mike Murphy and gardener Mark Palmer, decided to involve pupils from Kingsclere Primary School with their plans for a kitchen garden at the back of the pub.

So they organised a competition in which the children would design the kitchen garden with an outline plan of their planting.

"This is the first time we have done a joint project with a school, although we do have kitchen gardens at the other pubs," says Mark, owner of Bethwins Garden Specialists, who design and maintain the gardens at all of the company's pubs.

"We knew Kingsclere Primary had a gardening club," continues Mia, "so we thought it would be a good way to link in and connect with the community. They're trying to grow things, and now so are we."

All The Bel and The Dragon pubs are enthusiastically embracing the 'farm to fork' concept, not just through using suppliers within a 10-mile radius wherever possible, but by growing their own produce in whatever size of garden space is available.

"If we have the space to do it, then we should," insists chef Mike Murphy. "If there's room to grow potatoes, then why wouldn't we? Any staples we can grow help towards a much more sustainable business model and if you can involve as many people as possible, it has to be a good thing. It encourages everyone to grow their own."

With the help of the gardening club, the produce in this Kingsclere back garden will have many hands to help make light work of everything involved.

"This type of garden requires regular care," advises expert Mark. "Because it needs attention little and often – the more people you have to help with watering and picking the better. We need to grow as much as possible but with little maintenance."

Grand designs

With around 30 sq m to play with and a good light position, the garden is perfect for an allotment-style, more traditional veg patch. So with that forming part of the brief, the young club members were given a drawing of the outline shape of the garden.

"It was left totally open as to what they could put in it," says Mark. "But we did hint at the easiest things to grow, incorporating a good mix of seasonal produce"



Above left, head chef at the Bel & The Dragon Mike Murphy. Above, general manager Ed Kyle. Left, below and below right, children from Kingsclere Primary School at work in the kitchen garden with the head garden at Bethwins Garden Specialists Mark Palmer

When the drawings came back from the school, the team was bowled over by the varying designs and choice of plants, which made it almost impossible to pick a winner. So they chose two children, Poppy and Sean.

"[These] designs both stood out with their sheer variety of planting and how well thought-out they were," says Mia.

"They included the staples that we always use a lot of, like herbs, onions, potatoes – what the kitchen should always have."

"The ingredients that enhance the quality of the dishes on the menu," chips in Michael.

Planting has already begun in the garden, with the club lending a hand to help Mark make Poppy and Sean's designs come to life. It appears starting young in educating children on how to grow their own is bearing fruit in Kingsclere.

Mia certainly hopes the pub and all its visitors will be inspired: "The more we know about food, where it comes from and how it's been treated, the better society will be.

"I think the sooner we can move away from the commercial production of food the sooner we will all realise the benefit."

