

KENWOOD House is almost certainly our most elegant local landmark. We've people with passion and enthusiasm to thank for it: William Murray – first Earl of Mansfield – the man who commissioned Robert Adam to design him a house on this section of Hampstead Heath in the eighteenth century and Lord Iveagh – heir to the Guinness empire – who bought the estate in which to house his art collection.

After he'd pulled his last pint in 1927, he was generous enough to bequest the house and its contents to the nation. The last group to thank for this beautiful house and grounds is English Heritage who took it from there, using the income for each summer concert season to help foot the bill for upkeep, which runs to millions.

It has taken a man with a fervour for food to provide Kenwood with catering that more than matches the quality of its surroundings. Mike Lucy was a regular visitor to the café in the early 1990s, when eating there was a different experience.

He was at that time working in the catering industry, having previously trained in Hotel and Catering Management up at Middlesex Poly, as it was then. He had also worked as "an enthusiastic cook" (his words not mine) not having formally trained as a chef, for a year or so.

The café was so uniquely unimpressive, he asked the House's management whether they were looking for a new operator. They weren't. But when the company running the café went under a year later, Lucy was invited to tender for the new business.

He took on the opportunity under a two-year contract, left his job and formed Company of Cooks. In that move, he took venue catering several leaps forward – from the bad old days of curled up sandwiches and dry scones to an inviting feast of freshly made, colourful and inviting fare.

English Heritage obviously appreciated his efforts too, as the contract is still going strong today. As is Company of Cooks, which now runs the catering at no less than 12 other venues; from the South Bank Centre to the Imperial War Museum to Wisley Gardens in Surrey and most recently, the Royal Opera House.

Days of weak tea and stodge are long gone

Victoria Prever charts the rise and rise of good quality catering at historic venues



It's a diverse portfolio, but what the properties all have in common is that they are rich in English heritage and culture, each with very individual characters.

Whether you're a tourist visiting the House, one of the hardy dog walkers who meet daily before a stomp around the Heath or just a local enjoying the Kenwood grounds, you'll have enjoyed the fruits of his labours. The food is attractive, appetising and has a home-cooked feel.

Kenwood's generous, hearty breakfasts, are a big draw (come rain or shine) especially at weekends. At lunchtime there's a selection of hot food, soup, sandwiches, cakes and puddings.

The menu on a recent visit to the Brewhouse offered a lettuce,

spinach, pea and mint soup, pork and hop sausages with apricot, chilli and red onion chutney, slow roast chicken thighs with gremolata and spring onion mayonnaise as well as a baked green tomato, spring onion and chick pea stew and a range of sandwiches and seasonal salads.

Asparagus, new potato and pickled cucumber salad was packed with punchy, astringent flavour. A sandwich of a thick slab of Belton Double Gloucester with pear, beetroot and ginger chutney looked straight off the farmer's breadboard.

In mid-June, fridges were laden with strawberry filled desserts. The cake table is laden with temptation – gooey brownies, a towering, icing-filled carrot cake,

sticky bread pudding, fudgey chocolate cake and much more.

If you've forgotten your concert picnic, the Steward's House offers salads, sandwiches, wine and other snacks to take outside to the grassy hill, until 30 minutes after the concerts start.

The Brewhouse menus are planned seasonally and monthly and are evolved by a core committee. Lucy (still CEO of the company) remains a pivotal force but has also brought in some big hitters from the food world. Henry Harris (owner and head chef of Racine) has worked with them for several years. "He spends about a day a week consulting with us," says Lucy.

Harris also assists with sourcing of ingredients which are sea-

sonal and, where possible, local. He was involved in the planning for Kitchen Front in the Museum's café during the current Ministry of Food Exhibition. The menu, which reflects Company of Cooks' brand ethos, uses seasonal produce and minimises waste while creating interesting menus including original Second World War dishes.

With the exception of the bread and pastries, all food is freshly cooked at each site, where each chef has autonomy for choosing his or her own menu.

The South Bank Centre and Wisley sites even bake their own bread. That isn't possible at some of their smaller sites, so Lucy is setting up a Company of Cooks bakery, allowing all sites to serve

food almost entirely prepared by them.

Brand identity isn't critical for Lucy, but, visit any site, and you'll get a feel for the gusto behind Company of Cooks.

Food looks fresh and inviting and is simple and straightforward – no fancy terms or frills. Lucy talks about an "enthusiasm for each of the locations" and says that at every venue, a balance is made between retaining the Company of Cooks style and providing something special for that location.

The work that has gone into the food at the Imperial War Museum is indicative of this. At the sexy new architect-designed café at Chiswick House there are interesting cakes and a great range of healthy snacks for the pint-sized visitors to the park and playground. Real thought has gone into everything you eat.

Another well-respected chef who has been involved in menu making for Company of Cooks is Pierre Kaufmann, who has been involved at the Royal Opera House.

Dan Stevens, who has worked with the River Cottage's Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and is a bread specialist, is another part of the decision-making team, as well as some of the chefs from the various venues.

It's all a long way from the weak tea and stodge that previous generations put up with. The missing ingredient in so many businesses is genuine enthusiasm and that old cliché – passion. The inspirational Lucy and his team have plenty on supply. And it was at Kenwood House that it all began.

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