

First Floor, First Class

This Darlington eating place may have been around since 1933, but quality and value for money never go out of fashion.

We have a friend who is interested in architecture, and makes a point of travelling on the upper floor of double-decker buses so he can see above the modern shop fronts. There's so much you miss otherwise, he says—all the character and history are up there, if you bother to look.

He may be right. Crombies Café Bar, now 73 years old and counting, occupies a prime first-floor site on Tubwell Row, and is full of both. Opened by Jamie and Katherine Crombie to serve good home-cooked meals at a reasonable price, the tradition has passed down two generations, via daughter Christina McCallum, to their granddaughter Maureen and her husband Frederick Stehr who now run operations with help from their team of friendly staff. One of the oldest businesses in the town centre, Crombies is the longest serving member of Darlington Chamber of Trade, and is a local institution boasting a loyal clientele, many of whom have been coming since they were first brought there as children by their own parents and grandparents.

Looking at the menu, it's easy to see why Crombies has survived and flourished through the years when other eating places have come and gone. The prices are affordable; the fare is traditional though definitely not dull; there are plenty of special offers and seasonal variations to keep customers interested. Main meals are a mix of carvery-style food (usually beef, lamb, chicken and ham, all home roasted) and grills and fish dishes, with a range of hot and cold desserts. Opening at 9.30, Crombies goes through all day serving breakfasts and morning coffees, lunches and teas, and closes at 6pm.

"With an image like ours, there's a danger you'll get dismissed as 'just a chippie,'" admits Frederick, "but you only have to look at the menu to realise that's not so." Quality ingredients are sourced locally, with the emphasis on healthy eating. All the eggs used on the premises are free range, for example, and fresh Hartlepool fish is delivered regularly. And of course Crombies is licensed, serving draught bitter and Carlsberg Export and a selection of wines. Definitely not just any old café—in fact, the Herald & Post judged it their "Restaurant of the Year" back in 2002.

Over the years Crombies has catered for coach parties, market visitors and locals alike, and has also become a regular haunt of performers from the Civic Theatre. It can

be a lonely life on tour: living in digs for week after week, fitting mealtimes around shows and eating out on a budget with few chances to enjoy proper home cooking. Crombies' warm welcome and good value food are well known in the trade, and actors and technicians arriving for a week's run at Darlington will often ask the resident theatre staff for directions there. Frederick and Maureen keep clippings and autographs from their famous visitors going back decades: in a recent one, actress Linda Robson looks forward to returning to the Civic and bringing her family to eat at Crombies again: "...This café is our idea of heaven".

I suppose it is a bit heavenly, sitting high as it does above the street with views on two sides up and down Tubwell Row. Climbing the staircase for the first time—shame on me, after living here for 15 years—I was expecting something a little smaller and darker, not a bright, sunny, 75-seat room in warm colours, with plenty of space to sit in comfort. Crombies is a real find: somewhere to step away from the bustle of the town centre for a few moments, linger over an excellent cup of freshly filtered coffee, and watch life passing by below.

It is nice to go up in the world.
Crombies Café Bar is at 36-40 Tubwell Row, opposite the Cornmill Centre. It's open Monday-Saturday 9.30am-6pm. Tel: 01325 464475. www.crombies.com.



MENU

Two-course Meal £4.95

Baked Ham in Cheese Sauce
Home Made Chicken & Leek Pie
Poached Cod in Parsley or Cheese Sauce
Local Pork Sausages & Yorkshire Pudding
Braised Chicken Breast Chasseur
Honey & Almond Gateau & Cream
Baked Jam or Treacle Roll & Custard
Apple Strudel or Lemon Sponge & Custard

TODAY'S MENU

Vegetable Soup & Bread Roll £2.40
Fresh Fillet of Salmon in Orange & Tarragon Sauce £4.60
Pan Fried Sea Bass in Parsley Sauce £4.80
Roast Beef & Yorkshire Pudding £5.20
Home Made Steak & Mushroom Pie £4.50
Cheese Omelette & Chips £4.20
Home cooked Ham, Two Fried Eggs & Chips £4.20
Grilled Minute Rump Steak, Egg, Chips & Peas £5.60

Banana Split £1.50

Strawberry Trifle & Cream £1.55
Fresh Apple & Strawberry Crumble & Custard £1.45
Meringue with Raspberries & Fresh Cream £1.80
CHOICE OF CONTINENTAL CAKE OR GATEAU,
COFFEE OR POT OF TEA INCLUDED £1.95