



Stuart Fenwick is a man happy in his work.
PHOTO: INDIA WHILEY-MORTON



A charming display by candlelight.

Characters of the Cut

Stuart Fenwick - Bria Studio

By Alice Elgie

AFTER sofa surfing for a number of years, florist and fiddle player Stuart Fenwick was finally introduced to the idea of a narrowboat named *The Briarose* by a work colleague. A 42ft semi-trad built in 1984 as a holiday boat, for the past seven years she has become Stuart's home and haven in the busy Big Smoke. However, it seems there was more to this move than initially met the eye...

Stuart shares with me: "In subsequent years my paternal granny, whose family hails from the West Coast of Scotland, told me my great-great-grandfather was a lock keeper at Falkirk Locks, which now has the beautiful wheel." Stuart's maternal grandad took him on the wheel not long after it was built, as

well as on a family canal holiday down the Llangollen when he was about 12. "The canals have always been on the edges of my life, and it feels warming to know I'm tracing my ancestor's lifestyle."

Studio

The Briarose is now the hub of Stuart's floristry business, Bria Studio, which is a venture that came about after many years of working in various florist shops. "My mum's side of the family had a haberdashery in Morpeth, Northumberland, for nearly 50 years and I started with a Saturday job in the florist next door." Twenty-one years later, after working in shops for 10 years across Northumberland, Tyne & Wear, Edinburgh and London, completing a folk music degree at Newcastle University

and travelling the world, Stuart is incredibly humbled by his career path. "I could never have imagined I would be paid to travel, share, teach and graft for some of the top florists around the UK and beyond." It seems being the son of a hill shepherd in the Cheviots means he's not shy of a bit of hard work!

However, branching out alone was always part of the plan and Stuart tells me about how he had a recurring dream for years of owning a floristry business on a boat. "When the boat came along and then Covid stopped my freelance work, it was the perfect opportunity to make this dream a reality." In this venture, Stuart's passion for sustainability has always been at the heart of everything. "Within our industry, we have a huge impact on the environment, and with making our money from this I really believe we should start to think of the true implications of that dome of perfect roses on your coffee table. For me, I use only British or local flowers in my own work and I urge others to buy local, British or at the least, seasonal."

Tradition

His inspiration to cherish the seasonal moment is a timely reminder of the fragility of our environment and as a continuously cruising roving trader, Stuart takes this seriously. When moored in London he can be seen cycling to the New Covent Flower Market in Battersea with his olive collecting basket ready to be filled. "It's quite a site to behold!" he tells me, but it's clear that his love of sharing the old traditions holds great importance in his life and alongside growing flowers aboard, you will also find him playing his fiddle most days, sharing tunes with his Instagram followers. "My dad and great-grandad were both fiddle players and on my seventh birthday I was bestowed with my great-grandad Tom Arkle's fiddle." With a granny who is also a great singer, teller of tales, and accordion and concertina player, it's clear that creativity is in the blood. Stuart tells me:



One of Stuart's beautiful displays.

"One day I hope to do a project with my music, flowers and tales to inspire people across the country, but we will have to wait and see if *The Briarose* is up to the

journey. I for sure am!"

One stretch where Stuart will certainly be sharing his creations is the River Lea. "You can feel the history in the water from top to bottom on that stretch. There have been communities of boats living on it for millennia and it's sad to see space being taken away for wealthier pursuits." Keeping such sacred waters from falling into disrepair and nurturing a space for liveaboards and tourists alike is important to Stuart because, despite his sometimes high-flying floristry career of two decades, his heart lies in the simplicity of local. "Creating a beautiful arrangement

for someone who appreciates the time, effort and love it takes to sow, grow, produce and enhance the beauty that surrounds us, is always my favourite thing."

For more info: Instagram: @briastudio

Alice Elgie is a writer and yoga teacher who leads online journaling and mindfulness experiences to help people de-stress and reconnect with nature, and themselves: wanderingalice.world



Stuart proudly displays his wares. PHOTO: SUPPLIED



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