

Characters of the Cut

Paddy Screech – *Word on the Water*, The London Bookbarge

By Alice Elgie

WHEN Paddy Screech and his friend, Jon Privett, were moored together in Springfield Park, Hackney back in 2010, they found themselves discussing ways to ensure they would never have to leave the canal again.

"It's not enough to just live on a boat, Paddy, you're going to have to (and I think you'll want to) make your living from the canal. Someone who lives on a boat and makes their living from a boat is a bargee, whereas a boater is just a sort of hat!" was Jon's quote at the time.

At that point Paddy's plan was to run a bookshop from his 40ft cruiser stern narrowboat but with the interest of Jon, who was selling second-hand books on Embankment Bridge and the High Pavement in Angel, they started to hatch a grander plan.

Paddy explained: "Moored opposite us was Stephane Chaudat (also known as Noy, French for knower) on a beautiful 1920s Dutch barge. We went over and managed to persuade him to think about letting us lease his boat to use as a bookshop. However, he saw the potential in the same way myself and Jon did and said we should build a stage on the roof and make it into an events space as well." Noy was soon all in and so the three friends began their floating adventure: *Word on the Water*, The London Bookbarge.

For seven or eight years they continuously cruised their shop through the waterways of Central London, the River Lea, along the Regents Canal and Limehouse Cut. "At

that point we were very much running it for love and we were very poor!" Paddy said. With bookshops closing down, high street rents high and Amazon and Kindle flooding the market, the future for books might have seemed bleak had it not been for the three friends' unshakeable confidence that people loved their bookshops and wanted them to thrive.

"Bookshops are more than just a place to buy your books, they're a place to have a selection of books curated to you by other humans. They're also meeting places for people who love books and thoughts and things of the mind, as well as community environments where people can begin to build up friendships and connect."

It seems many people did feel the same because when, in 2015, the bookshop was at risk of closure after a permanent mooring space was declined in favour of other developments, 6000 supporters came to the rescue, signing petitions and writing emails. The outcome was they were offered a permanent mooring at Granary Square, just behind King's Cross, which enabled the business to finally work in a



A performance taking place on the roof of *Word on the Water*.

PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

bit more of a sustainable way and Paddy is certainly grateful for the community spirit generated: "People really care about bookshops and they have no intention to let them disappear."

When I talked with Paddy about the importance of keeping the written word alive, he mused: "We've had this infinite speeding up and shortening of the way that we 'consume media' in the last decade so I think books are vital because it's such a deep engagement. You spend so much time with someone, sometimes some of the greatest thinkers and writers in human history, so you have to go at the correct speed. You can't rush it."

The organic growth of this bookshop has also not been rushed, which is a beautiful thing to observe. From its early days of being continuously cruised and sometimes pulled for miles by rope — even legged the traditional way through Islington tunnel! — because the engine didn't work, to where it is now: a vital counterpart to modern technology. "I like to think we fill the human-sized spaces, where real people can meet each other and form communities and see live performance; the sort of things that don't happen on the internet."

For more information:

To visit: Granary Square, Regent's Canal Towpath, London N1C 4LW
Instagram: @word.on.the.water
Facebook: Word on the Water — The London Bookbarge
Website: www.wordonthewater.co.uk

Alice Elgie is a writer and yogi who shares words about her nomadic life, along with journalling and mindfulness courses to inspire and heal, on her blog: slowintotheseasons.substack.com



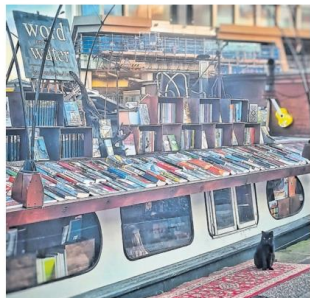
From left: Stephane Chaudat, Jon Privett and Paddy Screech.

Very sadly Jon Privett died a year ago, which was a huge shock. Paddy said: "Jon was a world-class curator and the Bookbarge would not have been possible or happened without him. He taught us pretty much everything we know and his loss is incalculable." However, alongside Noy, and also Jon's daughter, Meg

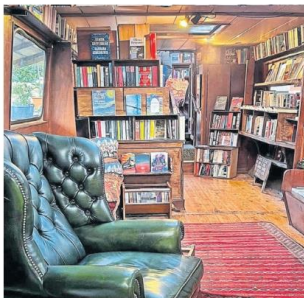
Ferreira — herself a gifted curator who keeps up tradition by helping to choose books to go on the shelves each week — Paddy has every intention of keeping *Word on the Water* afloat. "It feels like it's our responsibility to keep the shop going until the end of time, so we can try and pay a fitting tribute to Jon."



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A retail outlet and performer venue with towpath appeal.



Inside, the boat has a very homely feel to its retail area.



A giant Scots pine weighing 21 tonnes was craned out of the Grand Union Canal by the Canal & River Trust after it came down during a recent storm. The tree had to be removed by a crane seated on specialist steel matting. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Massive tree blown into canal is hauled away in rescue mission

A MASSIVE tree weighing 21 tonnes has been cleared from the Leicester Line of the Grand Union Canal near Blaby — reopening the waterway for boaters.

The huge Scots pine, which had come down in stormy weather, was blocking the canal and preventing boaters and local people from being able to use the canal and towpath. Because of the size of the tree, the Canal & River Trust had to bring in a crane and seat it on steel matting so it could be removed safely without damaging the canal bank and surrounding area.

The charity invested several thousand pounds in the removal, with local colleagues working alongside contractors to get navigation back open.

Richard Walker, contract manager at Canal & River Trust, said: "Trees falling into the canals can present us with some real challenges. Not only can they block navigation for boats, but they can cause significant damage and, because towpaths were built for horses to tow boats rather than heavy modern-day machinery, this can present several access considerations.

"We carry out proactive tree works outside of the nesting season and remove windblown branches and trees from our nationwide network of canals year-round. With winter approaching, and a changing climate that is bringing more frequent and severe storms, we will be on hand over the months ahead to keep navigation open.

"Our amazing canal network is 250 years old and is open to the elements. We welcome people's support, through volunteering, donating, or spreading the word about our charity, to help us keep canals alive for years to come."



Word on the Water by night, an inviting sight.