



# Perfect platform to barter a book deal

A chance encounter in an airport led to a romance, marriage and the creation of one of the region's greatest attractions, as Peter Jackson reports

**A**lnwick businessman Stuart Manley was on a sales drive in the USA when, catching a flight out of New York, he first met Mary.

He recalls: 'I was in Newark Airport, preparing to fly back to England, when this amazing woman came up to me and asked me something about the flight. I was transfixed.'

'I love transfixed,' puts in Mary, with a smile.

We are sitting in the cafe of Barter Books in Alnwick: an iconic attraction for the town, a magical place, where line-upon-line of bookshelves occupy the town's old railway station, where customers browse by roaring open fires and where model trains chatter



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ceaselessly along tracks running over the top of the shelves. This is the amazing business which Mary and Stuart built, and which would never have existed but for that flight from New York.

On that plane, Stuart sat at the back, wracking his brains as to how he could strike up a conversation with Mary.

'I'm a shy Englishman and I don't chat women up,' he says. 'I was desperately trying to find some way of opening a conversation and in the end I threw a note at her, which said that if I could talk to her, would she raise her hand momentarily. Eventually she did and the rest is history.'

And it was to prove quite a history. Mary, a teacher from Memphis, Tennessee, who was doing a summer degree at Oxford, went to visit Stuart in Alnwick, fell in love with him and with Northumberland, and in 1989 they

married.

But it was by no means clear they were going to live happily ever after. Stuart's business, making models for railway enthusiasts in a small factory in Alnwick's old station, had a large overdraft and Mary needed something to fill her time.

She had once worked in a New York second-hand book store and loved it, and this gave her the idea for Barter Books, a store based on a swap system for old second hand books. She ran the idea past Stuart.

'She came up with the idea and explained it all to me,' says Stuart. 'I disappeared into the bedroom for two hours while I thought about it and then came downstairs and told her I thought it was a very good idea.'

They converted a part of Stuart's space in the station into a small bookshop,

hunted out books from friends and auctions, made bookshelves out of planks resting on bricks and, within three months in 1991, had opened Barter Books. It all took some courage.

'We had no idea we were beginning an institution,' says Mary. 'People said it's not going to work; it's too far from the town centre; second hand book shops are closing; if it's such a good idea, why hasn't someone-else done it.'

But they went ahead and the pessimists were proved wrong. They had hardly any experience but started with paperbacks, within a year were expanding and then were able to bring a friend into the business who had been a book collector for 20 years.

'From day one, at least people came in,' says Stuart. 'We had no great ambition, but, to our great surprise - bearing in my mind that our advertising in those days consisted of me going round nailing notices to trees - gloriously it worked and it built up very fast.'

That is not to say they didn't hit problems and a threat came out of nowhere in the first years of the business when a major supermarket chain revealed plans to buy the station. Fortunately, after six frightening months, it was decided the site was unsuitable and the danger passed.

'There was no way we could have replicated this elsewhere,' says Stuart. 'The building is unique and the combination is unique.' Mary nods agreement and says: 'Just when we were beginning to go places, it could have all gone, just like that.'

And there was another, more frightening problem to face. Within months of starting the business, Mary was diagnosed with breast cancer. Fortunately, the disease was caught early



A roaring fire warms a corner of the bookshop where coffee is served.



**Left:** Visitors to the bookshop are encouraged to relax while browsing the stock.

**Below:** Model trains chatter incessantly around an elevated track in the former Alnwick Railway Station.

**Bottom:** Original features of the old station have been retained as far as possible.



enough and she made a full recovery, but, as she says: 'It was a terrible scare at the time, and it just shows you, how things could turn out differently.'

Those early obstacles were overcome and the business grew steadily, to the point where it now occupies most of the station, turnover is 'just into seven figures', it employs the equivalent of 30 full-time staff, has a stock of around 350,000 books, turns over some 4,000 books a week, has a website which accounts for 25% of sales and attracts some 250,000 visitors every year to Alnwick. It is believed to be the second largest second hand bookshop in the UK.

Books range in price from 30p for a humble paperback to £17,500 for rare 18th century Italian volume.

From being almost complete novices, Mary and Stuart have clearly learnt a lot about their trade, a trade in which you will sell only half of your stock.

'If you do barter books that's inevitable,' says Stuart. 'You have to sort the wheat from the chaff. When you go to auctions, you may buy a box of 40 to 50 books and there may be only half a dozen of those books you actually want, the others will either have to be pulped or go into a lower grade area.'

Unwanted books are not always pulped. In the past they have supplied 10,000 books out of which a sculptor made a maze, and they have had an order for 20 metres of 'distressed Scottish books' for a Scots themed pub in Italy.

The pair will not reveal their ages,



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admitting only to being 'over pensionable age', but they have no intention of retiring. Mary quotes Noel Coward: 'Work is more fun than fun'.

It's also obvious that Barter Books means too much to them to give it up.

'Prior to Barter Books I was always a budding entrepreneur,' says Stuart. 'I'd tried this, that and the other and I feared I was a failed entrepreneur, that I just didn't have it and I felt my main weakness was that I wasn't ruthless enough. But with this, what I found was that I was a perfectly good businessman.'

'It's been absolutely wonderful,' says Mary. 'It has allowed me, in middle age, to be more productive, to use whatever abilities I've got. It has made the last 20 years the most productive of my life - and the most fun.'

And none of it would have happened if Stuart hadn't thrown that note. ☺

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