

Bearing Gifts

Tim Coghlan relates the story of an old narrow boat named *Balthazar*, and its fascinating connections to the famous author Lawrence Durrell and the 1930s Bloomsbury Set



Not looking her age: The forty-something-year-old *Balthazar* ship-shape and ready to go on brokerage at Braunston Marina in the summer of 2009. (Paul Bennett)

After twenty years and more of selling narrow boats on brokerage, I am still surprised from time to time by what comes along, and the fascinating stories that the owners have to tell about their boats. After all, even today you have to be somewhat different to be a canal boater.

Take for instance narrow boat *Balthazar*. I was asked last summer by one of our moorers if I could help out with the sale of her sister's husband's boat. Although only in his sixties, Paul had developed a

serious heart condition and now could no longer use the boat, which had for the last year or more had been lying unused on its mooring on the Aylesbury Arm. It was, she told me, an unusual and somewhat large old boat that had been built in 1968, but had always been well maintained and was now all-steel. We normally don't take on boats of that age, but seeing it was Debbs, who smiled so sweetly, and had moored her boat at Braunston Marina more or less since I bought the place in 1988, I agreed to take it on, provided Paul would agree to having the boat fully surveyed on arrival and any remedial work being carried out to his account, prior to the boat going on

sale. This matter she quickly sorted and I was now able to ring the seller Paul, and talk to him at an appointed hour when, with his medication regime, he was well enough to speak.

Balthazar, Paul told me, had been owned by his family since new. It was with great sorrow that he was parting with it, as there was now no one in his family to take it on. The boat had originally been jointly owned by his uncle one Don Baker and partner Edmund Fogden, and had been given to him by Edmund in 1998, a few years after Don had died of a long-term illness in 1994.

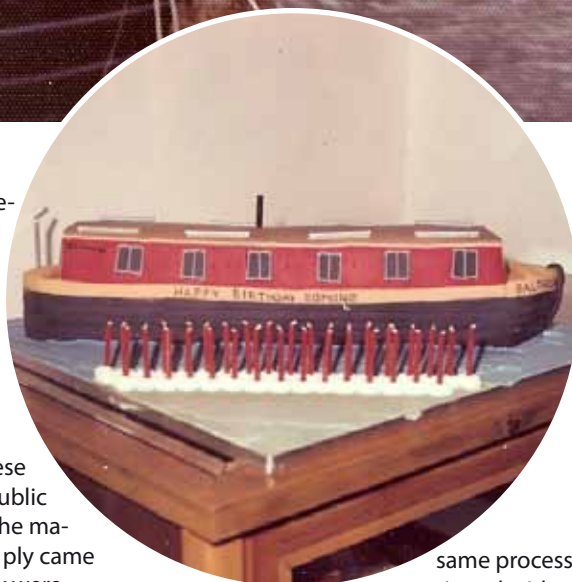
The story of *Balthazar's* construction



was quite fascinating. It was the third of four boats that the partners had owned - the other three being sea-going - and had been commissioned by them from the then very active Rugby Boats as a sort of sail-away in 1968. What they bought was just the 60ft trad-style hull, the boat having no cabin superstructure. The fully installed new Lister SR3 engine was positioned under the small stern counter with some sort of temporary throttle and other controls on a metal post screwed to the deck. The remainder of the boat was open to the elements and covered in a tarpaulin under which they camped whilst moving it all the way to from Rugby to the marina at Thames Ditton.

Fitting out

Once at Thames Ditton, they began fitting out the boat in earnest. It was to have a marine ply superstructure, the frames for which were fabricated by Don in his picture framing workshop in the basement of their house-come-bookshop in Islington, North London. Neither being able to drive, these were then carried ant-like by public transport - tube and train - to the marina. Only the sheets of marine ply came directly to the boat, where they were hand-cut to fit. Once the cabin top was on, the windows were hand-built by Don. The



same process continued with the interior fittings which needed fabrication - doors, bathroom and kitchen units



Top - Weekend of celebrations at Henley 1970: Friends and family coming onboard the newly finished *Balthazar* for Sunday lunch of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding shortly after the completion of her owner fit out. (*Fogden Estate*)

Inset - Fed up to the gunnels: The cake of the newly finished *Balthazar* made by the chef at the *Anchor Inn*, Henley to celebrate Edmund's fiftieth birthday party held there on the Saturday night of the weekend of celebrations. (*Fogden Estate*)

004 Going all-steel in 1991: Roger Farrington of Braunston near to completing the new cabin. He worked at Aylesbury Basin in the open during the winter months, the steel delivered to the quayside and fabricated there. (*Fogden Estate*)

and so on - and then carried to the boat in the same way. The whole remarkable project took only two years, being completed just in time for Edmund's fiftieth birthday, by which time the boat had moved to a new mooring above Henley Bridge at Salters Boat Yard. Here a launch-cum-birthday party weekend was held, the guests staying at the *Anchor Inn*, where dinner was held on the Saturday night and a cake of the boat produced made by its chef, with 'Happy Birthday Edmund' on the gunnel.

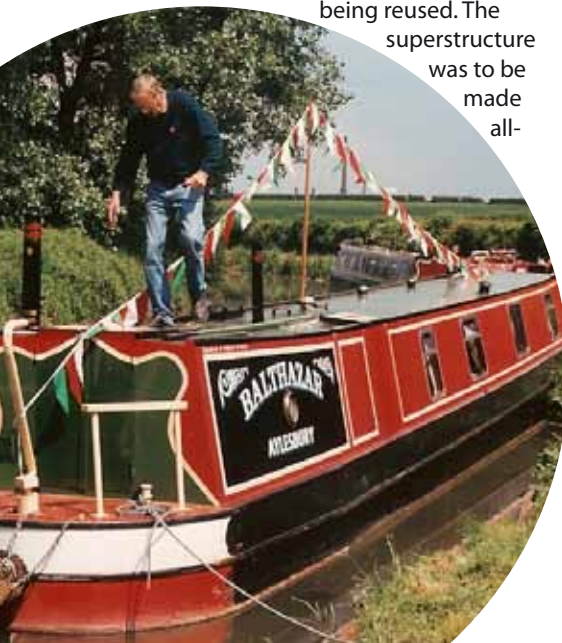
After about ten years on the Thames, the boat was moved in 1976 to a canal-side mooring on the Aylesbury Arm of the Grand Union Canal, just above Aylesbury Basin where its home-mooring remained for the next thirty three years. The partners were keen gardeners and looked after the bank-side. They also enjoyed entertaining their friends, with good food and wine on offer.

However, *Balthazar* was not just a canal-side country cottage. During the summer months it was extensively cruised and it is believed the partners visited every canal and river navigation then available, except the Leeds & Liverpool, which they felt their 60ft boat was unsuitable for. They were also regular attendees at rallies, and active fund-raisers for the Islington Community Boat Project, with its eccentric Crystal Hale the driving force. They attended her funeral, when her coffin was carried from Islington Basin to Kensal Green Crematorium on the roof of the Project's boat, *Angel of Islington*. Going ahead was an escort of canoeists from the local youth club, each sporting a large letter of her name on each side of their canoes. It was a fitting tribute to someone who, in her own way, had done so much for her community.

Gut and start again

In 1991 the decision was made to gut the now twenty two year old boat and almost start again. The whole of the wooden superstructure and internal fittings they had so carefully made were scrapped, with only the stern doors surviving and being reused. The

superstructure was to be made all-



steel, ending the problems of rotting timber and leaks. Also the layout would almost be reversed from accommodation to the rear and a workshop forward for Don's picture framing, to a very traditional layout of boatman's cabin and engine room astern - the engine being moved from under the counter - with sleeping accommodation amidships and living accommodation up forward.

The combined services were chosen of engineer John Pattle of Brentford and Roger Farrington of Braunston - John also helping with the steel work. These two highly skilled craftsmen were based interestingly at each end of the original Grand Junction Canal, with the works carried about half way between them in the Aylesbury Basin, where the steel was delivered. The whole job was done out in the open during the winter months. Roger Farrington recalls, 'We used five mill' steel on the sides and four on the top'. New aluminum hopper windows replaced Don's original pains-taking work,

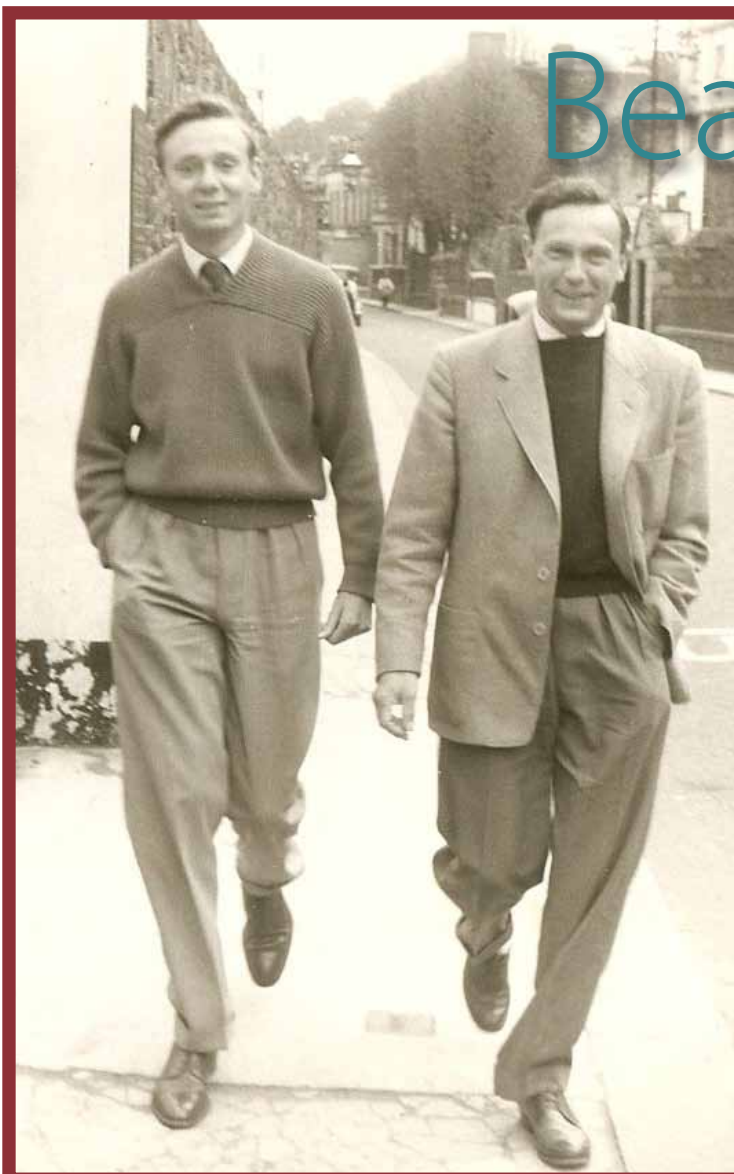
and the boat was given a new livery - the 'sixties orange' of the upper gunnels being replaced by easy-maintenance black. The sign writing was stick-on vinyl lettering, which has survived remarkably well ever since. The roses and castles to the forward and side doors and the boatman's cabin table were by Jane Selkirk who was then based on the Oxford Canal at Cropredy. Once again the fit-out was painstakingly carried out by Don and Edmond, with the boatman's cabin an astonishing achievement.

Why Balthazar?

So why was the boat called *Balthazar*? Well, herein hangs a tale. Don Baker was born in 1932 in Highbury, North London, which is next door to Islington. When he was fifteen, his father bought a new semi-detached house in Canonbury Park South, Islington. The house was built on a bomb site with reclaimed bricks and materials and cost the princely sum of £1,400, at

a time when prices were interestingly controlled by the government. After schooling at Highbury Grammar, where he did well, he became a medical student at St George's Hospital on Hyde Park Corner. He had a weekend job at the Harrods department store, a few hundred yards from the hospital, in the basement packing department. One day he stretched up his arms for a yawn and caught both in an overhead conveyor belt, which damaged them to the extent that he could no longer feel a human pulse, which ended his medical career.

At this time, aged about twenty, Don was already befriended to the thirty two year old Edmund Fogden who owned the famed Canonbury Bookshop of 268 Upper Street, Islington - then very much a hub of intellectual London life. Edmund was a highly intelligent man who is thought to have worked for MI5 during the war. He owned the whole building and having abandoned his medical studies, Don moved in with him at a time when homosexuality was still a criminal offence. Using his compensation money for the



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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE, BOTTOM

- **Dressed over all:** *Balthazar* at the Wendover Arm Rally 1994. The boat is now all-steel and is seen in her new livery. The vinyl stick-on sign writing looks the real thing, and has lasted well to present times. Don is on the roof and was by now very ill and looking very weak. He died later that year. (*Fogden Estate*)

Boatman's cabin with a secret: The fit out by Don in 1991 was a labour of love. The wood was fabricated in his basement workshop in Islington and then carried by public transport to the boat. After his death in 1994, half his ashes were placed somewhere behind the panelling where they remain. (*Paul Bennett*)

Not just a canalside country cottage: *Balthazar* on her mooring at Aylesbury, her home-base from 1976 to 2009, from which long summer voyages were made. Don and Edmund were keen gardeners and maintained the bankside by their boat. The mooring was close to the railway station, which was very convenient as neither of the owners could drive. (*Fogden Estate*)

Boyz Zone: Don aged 20 (L) and Edmund aged 32 (R) in 1952 shortly after they became partners. Practicing homosexuality in those days was still a criminal offence, but it was openly tolerated in Islington, North London, where there was a large gay/artistic community. (*Fogden Estate*)

BELOW - Pictured at an exhibition: Luvvies at the launch party of the first art exhibition held at Edmund's Canonbury Bookshop in July 1954. He is seen (R) rather dapperly dressed, discussing the catalogue with a half-hidden potential buyer. Edmund bought the portrait of the young man seen writing centre above. (*Fogden Estate*)

RIGHT - As I write this letter...: The Adonis-like author and poet Paul Roche painted by his lover for 32 years, the great Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant. Both were friends of Edmund and he bought the painting from the exhibition. It is now owned by one of Don's nephews. The picture was framed by Don, already showing his creative talents. (*Fogden Estate*)

OPPOSITE, LEFT - Exhibition catalogue - front and rear covers: A very modest thing indeed, a copy of which survives, which also gives details of Don's picture framing services. Reference is made to 'craftsmen' – but it was really just Don on his own in the basement. (*Fogden Estate*)

OPPOSITE, RIGHT -Priceless paintings: Big hitters Bell and Grant open the batting in the catalogue. Item (4) was bought by Edmund. History does not relate what happened to the hoped-for future exhibitions. (*Fogden Estate*)

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM, RIGHT - Twenty Years On: Duncan Grant (L) with Paul Roche on holiday in Turkey. Grant died in May 1978 aged 93. (*Daily Telegraph*)

OPPOSITE, CENTRE - Bloomsbury Set: Game and Match: The artist Vanessa Bell, older sister of Virginia Woolf, whose death by drowning was so well portrayed in the film *The Hours*. Vanessa also had an affair with Duncan Grant in 1918 and had a daughter by him.



Harrods injury, Don had a workshop built in the basement and began a picture framing and dealing business, which was very successful due in part to Edmund's knowledge of the artist community.

Nearby in Canonbury Square lived the famous Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant and his long-time lover of 32 years, the author and poet Paul Roche, who had started adult life as a Jesuit priest, and then married an American wife Clarissa, by whom he had three children. Also in the same square was another famous Bloomsbury artist Vanessa Bell, who was the older sister of Virginia Woolf, and had had an affair with Duncan Grant, by whom she had had a daughter Angelica in 1918. In July 1954, Edmund arranged a painting exhibition of 'Nine Artists of Canonbury' in the bookshop, in which several famous artists including both Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell exhibited their paintings. An A4 folded leaflet survives, in which 'Item (4)' was 'Portrait (Paul Roche)... (Price by arrangement with artist.)'. Don and Edmund must have bought the painting, as they had it for the remainder of their lives and it is now owned by a nephew. It is a remarkably good work, finely framed by Don. Grant painted the Adonis-like Roche on numerous occasions including using him for the model of Jesus when he decorated the Russell Chantry at Lincoln Cathedral.

One of that Canonbury artist set painted the original back doors to *Balthazar* which are still on the boat, but who it was has now been lost.





This Exhibition is presented as an experiment. I regret that so many pictures have had to be crowded into a small space, but it was thought essential that artist's work should be represented as thoroughly as possible. It is hoped that in future it will be possible for the artists of Canonbury to hold yearly or half yearly exhibitions in a larger public hall.

VANESSA BELL
 (1) Flower Piece....) Prices by arrangement
 (2) Venice.....) with artist.

DUNCAN GRANT
 (3) Flower Piece..... Not for sale
 (4) Portrait (Paul Roche)..... Prices by
 (5) Florence (Sketch).... arrangement with
 (artist

The Durrell connection

Another of the great writers whom Edmund befriended was Lawrence Durrell, who lived most of his life on various islands in the Med, making only the occasional visit to England. Just how they got to know each other is lost, but know him Edmund certainly did, and they would all go boating on 'boyz own' trips on Edmund and Don's second boat, which they had bought new. This was the *Justine*, a 26 ft four-berth Folk Boat, which they ordered from Denmark. It had a Bermudan sloop rig, and a deep fin keel giving an overall draft of 4ft 6in, thus making it very suitable for coastal and offshore cruising. (Their first boat was *Pat II*, which they bought in the mid-fifties. This was an ex-Dunkirk Little Ship that had begun its life as a North Sea inshore trawler and been converted to leisure use. They bought her in poor condition moored behind an island near Richmond Bridge, where they overhauled her.)

The *Justine* was named after the first book of *The Alexandria Quartet* that Durrell wrote in the late 1950s. The quartet is a fictionalised account of his time in Alexandria, after he had escaped with his first wife from Corfu to Egypt in 1940, following Greece's occupation by the Germans. Whilst in Alexandria, Durrell worked as press attaché to the British Embassy and had an affair whilst still married, with Eve Cohen. She was a Jewish woman and native of that ancient city, whom he later married and then divorced in 1955, before the work was published. He went on to have two more wives - the same as Ernest Hemmingway, who also enjoyed battling for both sides. Durrell was worse and allegedly abused his and Eve's daughter



Sappho, who committed suicide by hanging in 1985, leaving writings that suggested an incestuous relationship with him.

To Malta

The *Justine* was moored initially at Thames Ditton Marina before being moved to a swinging mooring off Queenborough on the Isle of Sheppey. Durrell boated with them at both locations, enjoying exploring the Thames and its estuary. Then in summer of 1967, a year before the *Balthazar* narrow boat project - *Balthazar* appropriately being named after the second book in the quartet - Don and Edmund decided to take time out to sail the *Justine* all the way to the island of Gozo off Malta, where Durrell was then living. The book-

shop was left to be run by the staff for six months. Taking as crew another of Don's nephews, who was aged only fourteen, they set off for Le Havre, then up the Seine to Paris, and into the French canals then down the Rhone to Marseilles, where the boy flew back for his return to school, after the adventure of a lifetime.

Don and Edmund then sailed to Gozo and stayed with Durrell, before returning to Marseilles, via a dog's leg to the Greek Islands. The plan had been to put the boat on a steel cradle at Marseilles and ship it back to England as the 4 HP Stuart Turner petrol engine would never have got up the Rhone. By chance a British warship was in port on a goodwill visit, and the pair of them went on board. Here they got talking to one of the young officers, who had the brilliant idea of offering his services, together with those of three cadets and sailing the boat at no charge, back to England by way of a sail-training exercise. It worked perfectly and six weeks



later, the boat was handed back to them in Portsmouth in immaculate order, with much of the running rigging replaced at no cost. Edmund and Don then only had to sail *Justine* back to Queenborough, a voyage which, with mainly running before the prevailing wind, only took a few days.

Continental explorations

However this was not end of their boats. One of Don's nephews Paul recalls; 'They loved their boats!' As well as continuing to keep the *Balthazar* for canal cruising, Edmund wanted to explore the Essex, Dutch and French coasts, for which the deep fin keel on the *Justine* was totally unsuitable. So they sold her in about 1982 and bought a glassfibre Sabre 28 yacht with a shallow twin bilge keel. Again, the boat was a sailaway, which they had to fit out below, so it was back to Thames Ditton Marina. The new yacht was called the *Clea*, after the last book in *The Alexandria Quartet*, and it was also to prove their final boat, despite their wish to own at some



stage a boat called *Mountolive* - the third book in the quartet. Given their ambitions for the *Clea*, Don set about studying to obtain his Yachtmasters Certificate which he achieved after three years. They had many adventures sailing in the North Sea and down the French coast.

Durrell died in France aged 78 in 1990 having divorced the last of his quartet of wives in 1979. His death was caused by a stroke after suffering from emphysema for many years. It was a somewhat lonely and miserable end for a man who thrived on



ABOVE - Other animals: Author Lawrence Durrell of *The Alexandria Quartet* which inspired the naming of *Balthazar*. He is seen here delivering a lecture, and looking like a VAT inspector. Edmund and Don knew him well, and went sailing with him and visited him in Malta.

LEFT - In to lunch: Don in about 1992, following the refit to *Balthazar*, enjoying a lunchtime snack – the boys liked their food. He is looking fit and well for his sixty years. This was shortly before he became terminally ill. (*Fogden Estate*)

BELOW - Under New Ownership: In 1998, four years after Don's death, Edmund gave *Balthazar* to Don's nephew Paul, a keen narrowboater who had been with them many times. Paul is seen here with his wife a few years later 'somewhere in middle England', and enjoying a somewhat more modest lunch than the boys did. Paul became very ill in 2008 which forced the sale of the boat. (*Fogden Estate*)

the cut and thrust of adulterous relationships, and bringing misery to those about him. Given his diminutive physique and taste in High Street suits, he could have easily passed for a VAT inspector - so in terms of his numerous conquests, he had in one respect done remarkably well. And the way he spelt it all out in his books made for great literature - if you like that sort of thing.

Silk Route

In about 1992, Don and Edmund joined an overland expedition following the ancient Silk Route of the Middle Ages, in this case all the way from London to Peking. Edmund decided that now he was 72, he would pass on the rougher bits through the Himalayas and the Gobi Desert. It was on this stretch that Don contracted the illness that made him terminally ill, which in the first instance forced the sale of the *Clea*.

Don died in 1994 in the house in Islington that his parents had bought in 1947, and in which he had lived for the last few years of his boyhood. It had been left to him following their deaths, and he and Edmund had then moved in so they no longer lived above the shop. It was quite remarkable that though Don had wandered far and wide - by land and water - the three places where he had lived all his life, together with the schools he had attended, and the only place where he had really worked, were all only a few hundred yards apart. Despite his great practical skills, Don, and for that matter, Edmund never learnt to drive nor owned a motor car. Following Don's dying wishes, half his ashes were placed behind the paneling in the boatman's cabin he had so painstakingly built in *Balthazar* - so he could, in a sense, continue cruising the canals with Edmund. His remaining ashes





LEFT - Balthazar Revisited: The octogenarian Edmund (R) in 2002 revisiting his old boat at the time of his 80th birthday and having a good lunch onboard. With him are, amongst others, two friends seen here who moored next to Balthazar for many years. (Fogden Estate)

CENTRE - Third Hands: The American Chris and his partner Catrina, who bought *Balthazar* in 2009 as only the third owners in over forty years. (Tim Coghlan)

BELOW - Balthazar by the Book: New owner Chris's edition of *The Alexandria Quartet*, which he bought years before whilst backpacking in Alexandria. It now has a new home in *Balthazar's* boatman's cabin.

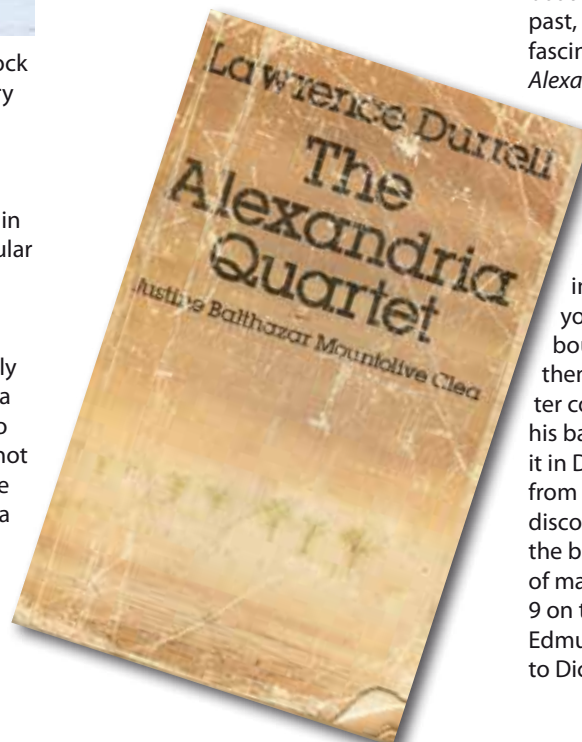


in B-17s from a base in Norfolk, volunteering for the second, from which he could have rightly been exempt. (The *Memphis Belle* flew only one tour of 25 missions, its fame resting on it being the first US bomber to complete a full tour, which was in May 1943.) From all his flying he luckily emerged unscratched except when he slipped descending a boarding ladder after completing a mission and broke an ankle. For this accident he astonishingly received a Purple Heart, something only the Yanks could do! Dick returned to New York and married, but that marriage ended in divorce. Instead he came back to England and earned a living editing medical journals and writing a major biography of Joseph Lister, as well as compiling the then standard reference book on medical drugs. Don and Edmund introduced

were ceremoniously scattered above Lock 9 on the Aylesbury Arm, in open country where that canal is at its best.

Ashes to ashes

The ashes of Don in Lock 9 were joined in 2004 by those of one of *Balthazar's* regular crew, an Anglophobe New York Jew living in Islington called Dick Fisher, who was also very much part of that literary scene. Dick had come to England in early 1940 to join RAF Bomber Command as a volunteer; long before the US came into the war. Being small of stature, he was not big or strong enough to be a pilot in the days before hydraulics, and so became a bombardier. Having seen ops with the RAF, he then transferred to the US Air Force once it had come into the war and established air bases in England. He flew two tours totalling 50 missions



him to the English canals, which he fell in love with, and he would join them and Edmund's sister for long summer voyages.

Edmund finally died in 2006 at the good age of 86, and not surprisingly his last wishes were to have his ashes also scattered at Lock 9.

Hi to Dick!

And there our story might have ended, except that whilst *Balthazar* was on sale in our marina, a tall American of Hawaiian roots, who had lived in England for twenty years, was looking around it with his partner Katrina. He was spotted by our moorer Debbs, who had introduced the boat to us. She happened to be walking past, and got chatting to them about its fascinating history. Chris was amazed. *The Alexandria Quartet*, he declared, was his favourite work of literature. In fact whilst back-packing round the Middle East as a student, he had arrived in Alexandria where he was introduced to the work by another American who was also travelling in those parts - saying, 'If you're here, you've just got to read this!' Chris bought a second hand copy there and then, and still has it to this day. In fact after completing the purchase, he brought his battered edition with him and placed it in Don's fine boatman's cabin, only feet from his ashes. Chris had no worries about discovering what ghost might be sharing the boat with him. Indeed he is thinking of making a sentimental voyage to Lock 9 on the Aylesbury Arm to meet up with Edmund, and Don's other half, and say 'Hi!' to Dick! 📖