

# Dover and out!



**Left:** The *Nutfield*, rivetingly repaired and ready for relaunch (Peter Andrews)

**Tim Coghlan** says a sad goodbye to retiring boat builder, Dave Thomas who has been a welcome fixture at Braunston for over twenty years

**T**he collapse in narrow boat building has taken its toll on some established boat builders and, it is with much personal sadness that I record the recent closure of the Braunston Marina based David Thomas Boatbuilders. The reason for this is that Dave had no new orders for hulls, which he had always seen as his indoor winter work. He hasn't built a hull since the beginning of 2011 - a training narrow boat for Rugby based Willow Wren Cruisers. And that will now prove his last.

Dave has for some time supplemented his work with repairs and over-plating to older narrow boats, which has been invaluable to us with our services to our moorers and 'matters arising' from brokerage surveys of older boats. However that work meant working outside, the boat a few feet above ground on a cradle. At times it also meant lying on the ground, which was fine in summer. Now with masses of this work - narrow boats don't die - but no other work, and with winter in hand, at 62, he had decided it was time to hang up his welder.

Dave has been with me since nearly my earliest days, when with the departure of Colecraft Engineering to their new factory at Long Itchington in 1991, I divided what I called the Braunston Marina Trade Centre into four workshops, opening for business in early 1992.

Dave has an interesting antecedence. He was born in Accrington in Lancashire - he denies all links with Manchester. Leaving school at sixteen, he took up a boilermaker apprenticeship with ICI, which he completed and stayed on until the age of 29, which gave him an excellent grounding in metalworking. Astonishingly he then took a job in the Liverpool prison service

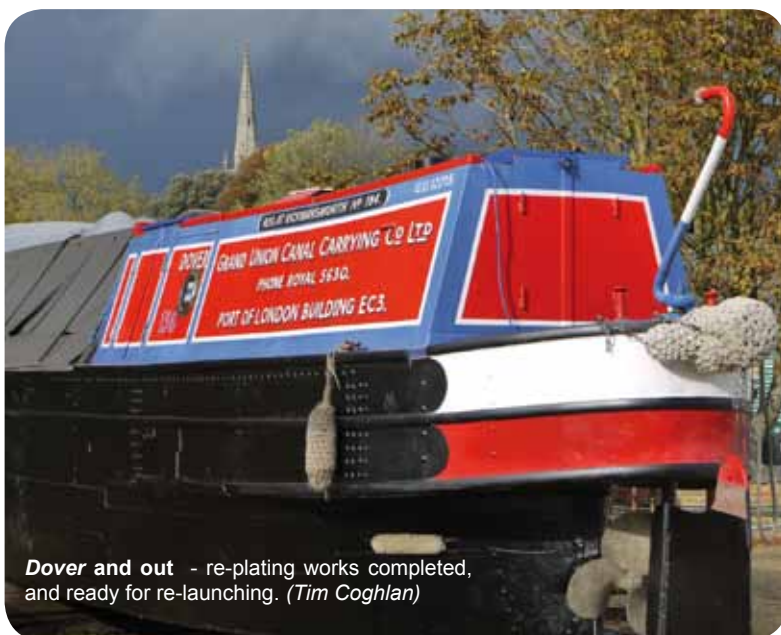
which he only stuck for six months. (When hearing this from him, I reminded him of the old joke: What do you call a Scouse in a suit? Answer: The accused. - He had heard it before, and just shook his head. Then he said that he should never have gone into the prison service.)

With canals all around him, he was interested in them, and went on hire boat holidays with his young family. Then in early 1979, he spotted an ad in *Waterways World* for a welder to come and work with Balliol Fowden at Braunston Bottom Lock. With Balliol's flare for design and Dave's technical knowledge of steelwork, they quickly built up a reputation for building high quality boats. Together they worked out the first Dutch narrow barge, Balliol always having an interest in Dutch barges. Balliol then became more and more involved in other things - building up not one but two hire fleets, becoming a highly reputable surveyor - which took him further and further afield, including, not unsurprisingly, to Holland and France. He also opened a mooring basin at the Bottom Lock.

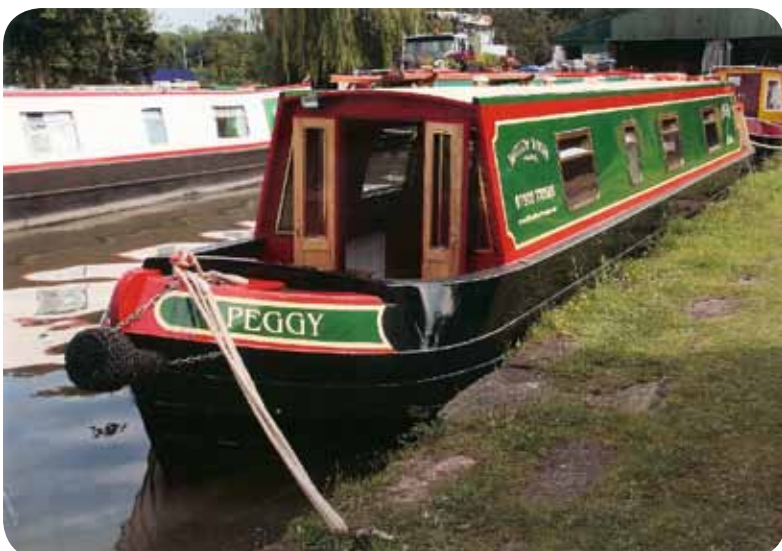
Dave only wanted to build boats, and so he came to us. In his time here he has built many hulls, including more of those Dutch narrow barges. And several for the former Braunston based Merlin Narrowboats, some of these still moored in the marina including that inseparable trio, *Charlotte*, *Huffer* and *Jola*. For me a poignant moment was in 1994, when moorers Audrey and Gordon Simms had their new narrow boat *Royal Ruby* entirely built in the marina. Dave built the hull, Sue and Paul Tanser, then of Utopia fitted it out and painted it, and our alas now deceased John Percy carried out the engine and other technical installations. The champagne-launch was very special for me. At last I had succeeded in bringing back narrow boat-building to Braunston Marina, which had ceased in the 1970s, after being here famously since the late 1790s - including the *Raymond*, the last wooden narrow boat built for the canals.

Dave's last assignment was to carry out major repairs to one of our most distinguished moored boats, the seventy one foot 1938 former working narrow boat *Dover*. The over-plating, done in the famous TV film, was kept to the minimum to preserve the integrity of the hull. Now a half dozen years later, things had moved on, and major strengthening repairs were now needed. Indeed we were all worried the 35 ton boat might have broken in half when it was gingerly lifted out of the water.

Dave did a very sensitive repair, with the main strengthening below the waterline, so that the visual hull looks much as it formerly did. After *Dover's* re-launch, he said to me, 'I'm pleased that my first and last assignments on the canals were repairing old working boats. When I arrived at the Bottom Lock, I set to on restoring the *Cleopatra*, as a result of which she is still out there, still owned by the same owner. But the one that gave me most pleasure was the re-riveting and repairs to the *Nutfield*. There was the challenge of recreating genuine authenticity. Also the boat was a Northwich built GUCCC - the part of the world I came from, and special to Braunston, as Braunston is special to me.' We will miss him greatly. 🚣



**Dover and out** - re-plating works completed, and ready for re-launching. (Tim Coghlan)



**Clockwise from top left: Cleopatra – First job and 'still out there'.** In addition to restoring the 1935 Harland & Wolfe Woolwich hull, the works included installing a vintage Ruston Hornsby engine to the butty stern, and a steel full length cabin. (Pete Fretter)

**Splashing in at Braunston Bottom Lock.** Launch of one the earlier hulls in partnership with Balliol Fowden and Roger Farrington (Dave Thomas)

**Boat building back in Braunston.** Celebrations following the launch of *Royal Ruby* in 1994. Dave Thomas second (R) (Tim Coghlan)

**Going Dutch.** *Queen Margaret of Anjou* in 2011. It was built in 1997 to the design originally developed with Balliol Fowden. It featured in the *Blakes Paints* advertisement for some years. It was resold in 2011 by Braunston Brokerage. (Tim Coghlan)

**Last order.** The narrowboat *Peggy* following its completion in 2011 - the last hull by Dave Thomas. It was built as a training narrowboat for *Willow Wren* of Rugby. (Dave Thomas)

**The last fair-weld.** Dave Thomas after completing the hull repairs to 1938 former *GUCCC* working narrowboat *Dover* in October, 2011 – the last task he carried out in his nineteen years based at Braunston Marina. (Tim Coghlan)