

Whoops...I've bought a chandlery!

Alasdair Flint never planned to buy a 400-year-old nautical institution – but he just couldn't bear to let the business close down

As a keen sailor I have known about Arthur Beale Yacht Chandlers for a long time. Many Londoners know the shop as it is situated in the heart of London, in Shaftesbury Avenue, and it stands out as being rather unusual. Years ago I used to pop in to buy things for my old clinker-built yacht. For some reason my visits became less frequent, perhaps because the stock became less useful for my needs.

For many years I have run a company which supplies theatres. We coined the phrase "theatrical chandlers" to describe the company as we stock ropes, shackles and paint just like a yacht chandler. Being based in South London we thought that it would be good to have an outlet for our products in the centre of Theatreland, and felt Arthur Beale's may be interested. So I rang Mr Coleman, the manager for over 50 years, and he said we should come up. When we arrived, the shop was deadly quiet with very little stock, and it transpired that they were about to close down. Our visit had rather changed in nature! We didn't really want to buy a yacht chandlers but knew that it would be gone if someone didn't act quickly. As it happened the idea of regenerating an old chandlery was quite



appealing. We also had access to a lot of relevant stock plus experience in running a similar organisation. There was no time for a business plan, we just had to cross our fingers and go for it.

Oh dear, what on earth had we done! Gulp, we were now in possession of a 400 year old nautical institution and it was time to explore.

Shackleton bought his ropes, axes and pulleys from Beales – we still have the delivery note he signed

The company started as John Buckingham Ropemakers on the banks of the River Fleet. We heard that ships could sail up the Fleet on high tide and get their rigging repaired. Rope is at the core of Arthur Beale's business. They produced a rope called Alpine Club Line which was world renowned as the best climbing rope. Many early Everest attempts were made using Beale's rope. The company supplied polar explorers and mountaineers. Shackleton purchased his rope, axes and pulleys from Beale's. We still have the delivery note signed by Shackleton himself! His Beale's ice axe is in the National Maritime Museum and we have the same Neo Belay Pulley that he ordered, on display in our shop.

All the accounts were handwritten and the old leather bound cash books make fascinating reading. There are copies of letters from famous climbers such as Edward Whymper and a telegram from Gino Watkins demanding rope be sent to Greenland on the next Danish Ship. We haven't had time to study everything

because we desperately needed to devote our efforts to turning the sinking ship around. We had to clear out tons of rubbish, decorate rooms to make them presentable, install a computer system, launch a website and start to stock up the shop with serious sailing kit.

It was important to us that we reconnected with real sailors. One of our first projects was to put a board outside the shop with the shipping forecast and tide times. It looks very unusual in the middle of Shaftesbury Avenue! We then opened up the beautiful first floor rooms to hold stocks of clothing and nautical books. To celebrate we invited Tom Cunliffe to preside over an opening party and we were really chuffed how many people came to support our new venture. We realise that shops need to provide a distinctive service so we can differentiate ourselves from the online suppliers. We decided to have monthly special events and have already had splicing and varnishing lessons, talks on Tilman, Albert Strange, and Arctic Sailing plus the, now famous, Noggin the Nog weekend. We will be showing the film *Riddle of the Sands* on July 2, hosted by the Riddle of the Sands Adventure Club, and later in the year plan a talk on the lost rivers of London..

So if you are in London and have a moment to spare why not come and visit us. We have been very busy and are brimming with ideas for the future. We hope you will be pleasantly surprised!

If you know of a boating business with a story to tell, let us know and we'll feature it in *Cruising*.

