

GLASSBOAT



‘It wasn’t meant to be a restaurant and I probably wasn’t meant to be a restaurateur either...’ Some of the very best things in life occur through accident and happenstance. The restaurant has been serving up outstanding food in one of Bristol’s prettiest waterside locations since 1986. But, as owner Arne Ringner recalls, the original plan was for something very different. Arne had arrived in Britain from his native Sweden to study botany before working as a researcher at the ‘Long Ashton Cider Institute’ (or Long Ashton Research Station, an agricultural / horticultural research centre just outside Bristol). After that came a stint managing Taunton Cider’s orchards and launching the Bristol-based pressure group Save Our Scrumpy. Then, in 1984, Arne had his big idea: a floating botanical garden on Bristol’s docks.

To house this arcadia, Arne and Magnus Macdonald had found themselves the ideal craft. Built in 1924, the barge Yew Mead had hauled timber up the Bristol Channel for decades: now, after a hard life, it had started to break up in Severn Estuary mud at Newnham, Gloucestershire. The process of getting the boat back from Newnham to Bristol was the duo’s first challenge. It was a rusty old barge, semi-submerged into the mud and to be dug out by hand. There were tricky negotiations with planners, harbour officials and river folk. More battles were to come. Bristol’s planners didn’t like Arne’s idea for a floating botanical garden, but told him he could set up a floating cafe instead. ‘All administrators like to have a box to tick, and there was no box saying ‘floating botanical garden’. However, they did have a box for ‘floating cafe’, so they went for that.’ Arne dug his heels in for a spot he’d found on the empty Welsh Back, near Bristol Bridge. ‘The site was too good not to develop.’ There was quite a tug-of-war: the council said they didn’t want any ‘floating failures’ defacing the quaysides’

So, as it turns out, the iconic floating restaurant was more compromise than inspiration. After spending £500 securing the barge, Arne and Magnus had £850 remaining in their budget. Almost all of that went to architects Atkins and Walters, who produced the necessary drawings for planning approval, leaving just £50 for the boat’s furnishings. With this budget in mind (and wanting to give the boat some character), Arne and Magnus set out to furnish the boat using antique fixtures and fittings salvaged from other buildings. ‘The 1980s saw a golden age of demolition to make way for a ‘new era’ and we found everything for our floating restaurant among the remains of once golden buildings. There were cheap, excellent building materials to be had in exchange for vague promises of a meal for a crane driver and his

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missus once the restaurant was finished.’ Glassboat’s glass and walnut floors came from the recently defunct Courage Brewery on Temple Back, the solid marble bar from the old St Nicholas Fish Market and the portholes from a cross-channel ferry. Other fittings came from a former police station, Avonmouth flour mills and the former Western Daily Press offices in Silver Street. The Royal Hotel on College Green provided mahogany and Burmese teak for the doors, whilst the joists come from the local firm Mardon, Son & Hall.

Glassboat opened in 1986 and boom times soon followed on board. ‘The late 80s was the heyday for the financial services industry, stockbrokers and accountants moved in droves from London to cheaper, more attractive Bristol, where they kept up their tradition of long lunches. Glassboat was awash with pinstripe and backslapping.’ As you’d expect, given its unique character, Glassboat has seen more than its fair share of colourful evenings. Notably, there was the visit of Marmaduke Hussey, a former BBC chairman and war hero, who unhitched his prosthetic leg during a boozy fundraising dinner and had to be helped onshore at the end of the night. ‘Marmaduke phoned in the morning, but could not convince Annette, the cleaning lady, that he had lost his leg the night before. His chauffeur had to return to the boat and retrieve the leg from the general detritus.’

Now after the first 30 years’ service, the boat is well worn in – and a key early chapter in Bristol’s Harbourside success story. No other Bristol restaurant has stayed under the same ownership for as long and continues to carve out its own idiosyncratic niche in the Bristol dining scene.