

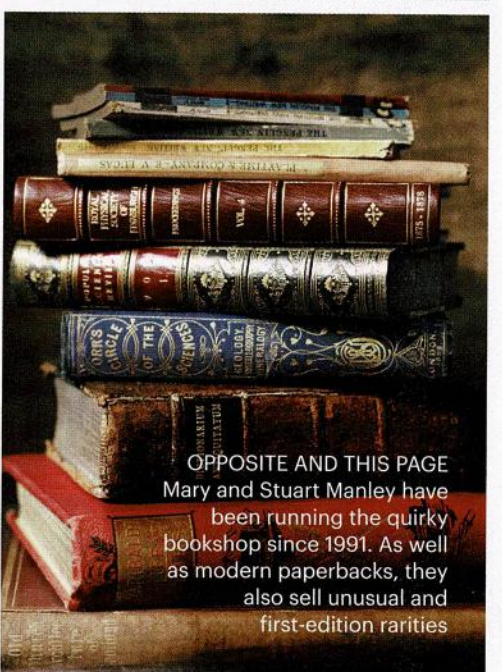
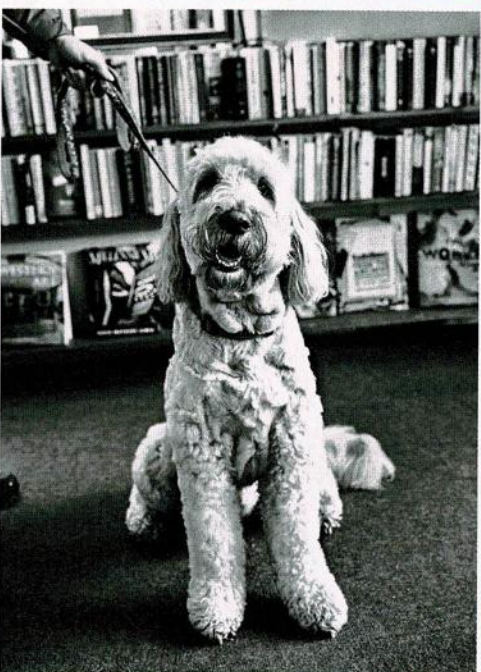
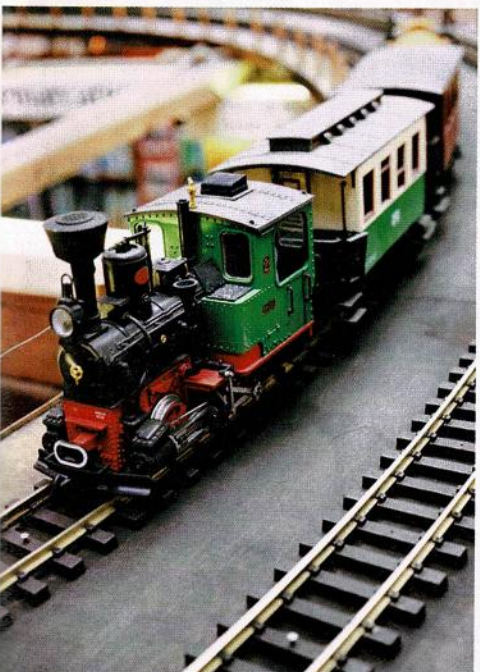
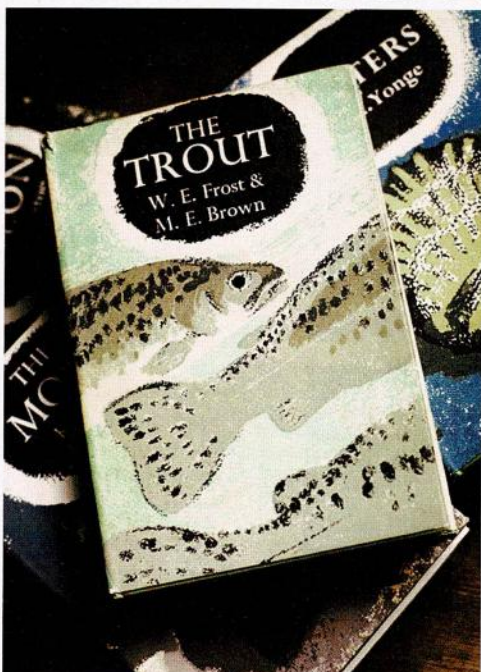
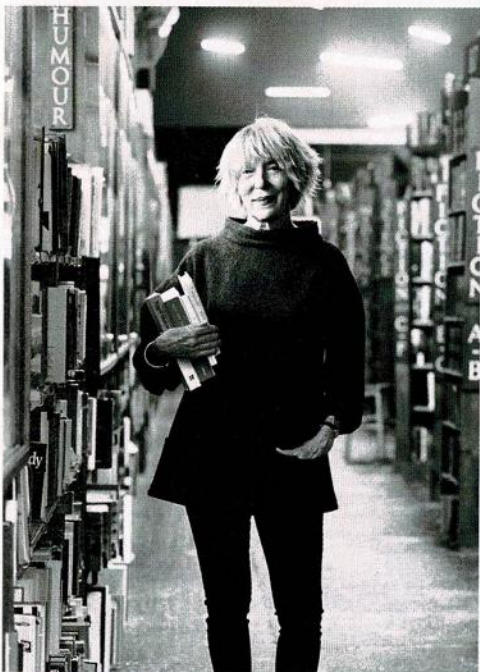
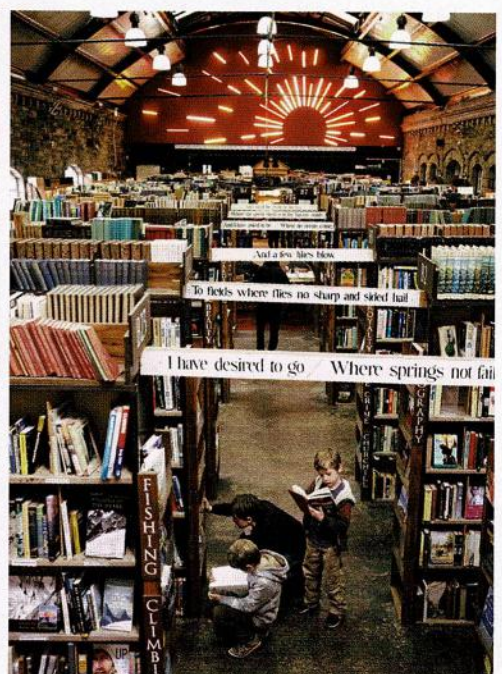
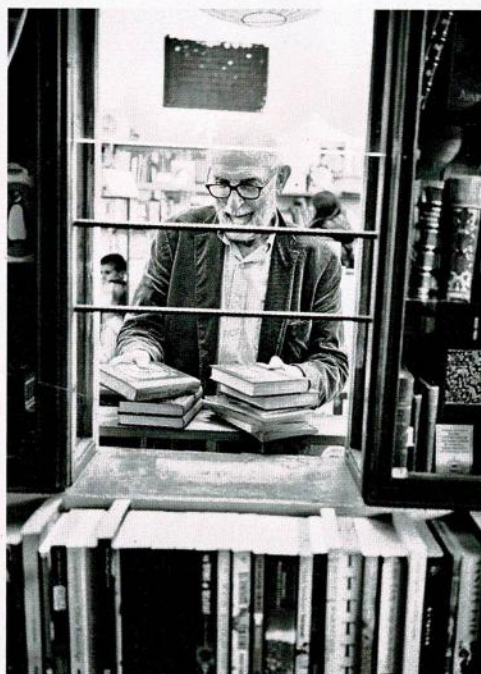
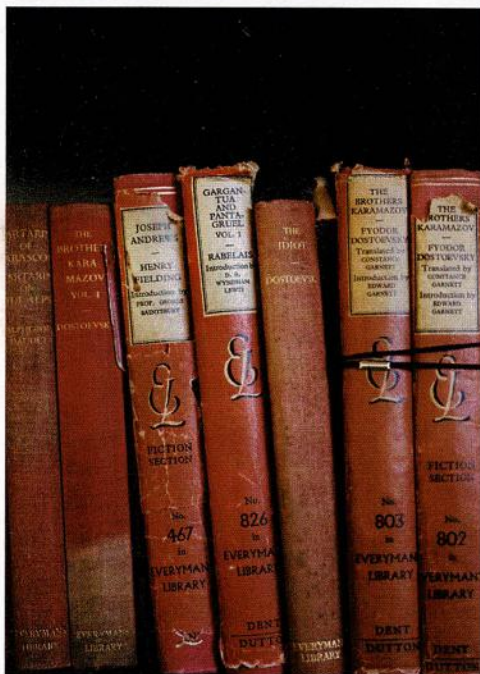
BARTER BOOKS

Alight here for A RIPPING YARN

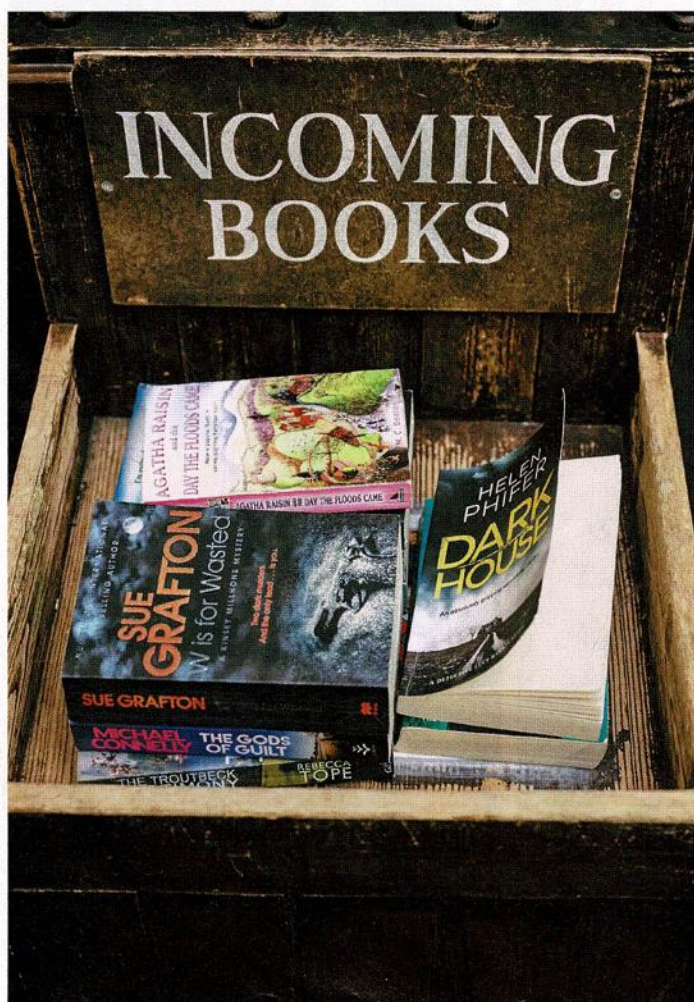
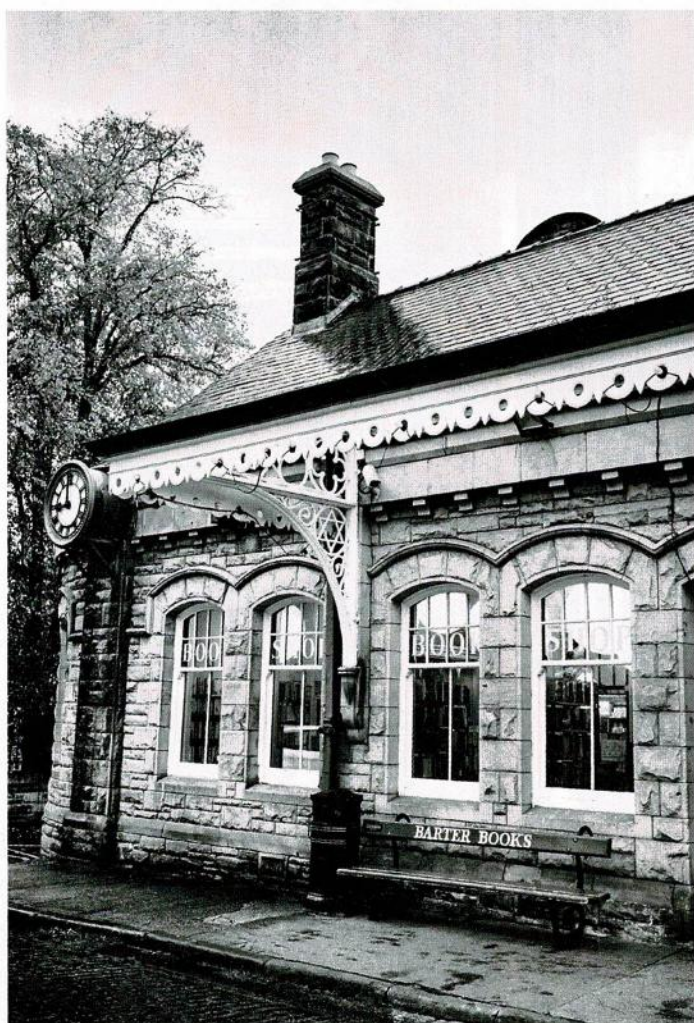
Based in a 19th-century
Northumberland train station, this
secondhand bookshop has a
remarkable back story of its own



WORDS BY SARAH BARRATT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MONTGOMERY



OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE
Mary and Stuart Manley have
been running the quirky
bookshop since 1991. As well
as modern paperbacks, they
also sell unusual and
first-edition rarities



Just as books can transport you to another place, so, too, can the best bookshops – and none more so than this one. Housed in Alnwick's grand Victorian station, Barter Books is one of Britain's biggest secondhand book stores, stocking more than 350,000 tomes, from 18th-century rarities to popular modern paperbacks. As customers step in from the cold to the former parcel room, they're greeted with shelves brimming with biographies, a blazing fire and an inviting leather armchair. "This is our little domain," say owners Mary and Stuart Manley. "Our refuge and maybe even our customers' when the outside world becomes too complicated!"

While trains stopped departing from the Northumbrian town in the Sixties, there's plenty of evidence of their existence – not least the model railway that runs above the shelves in the impressive central room. Until the early Nineties, Stuart made miniature train parts in a small factory in this very space. He soon found, however, that children were more interested in video games than train sets, and his business struggled. He and Mary – formerly an art history teacher in Memphis, Tennessee – were "stone-cold broke" and needed to find a way to keep the debt collectors at bay.

THE FIRST CHAPTER

While Mary had little interest in model railways, she did have a nose for a good book, having worked in a secondhand bookshop in New York City. "I wondered whether we could do something similar," she says. And so, in 1991, she set up a small store in part of Stuart's factory. Almost 30 years later, what was one room now fills more than 9,000 square feet of the 32,000 square-foot building.

The original station entrance is dedicated to children's books, while the first-class ladies' and gentlemen's waiting rooms (now the Blue and Red Rooms, respectively) provide seating for the Station Buffet – a hot-food counter in the old boiler room. In the Blue Room, a painting of John Patterson, the last 'top hat' station master, watches over diners while a fire crackles, framed by the original marble mantelpiece. The fireplace in the Red Room was looted long ago, but the Manleys have salvaged a replacement from nearby Ilderton station. The main hall, once the outbound platform, is now packed with shelves, too, with books about everything from needlework and natural history to mountaineering and mythology.

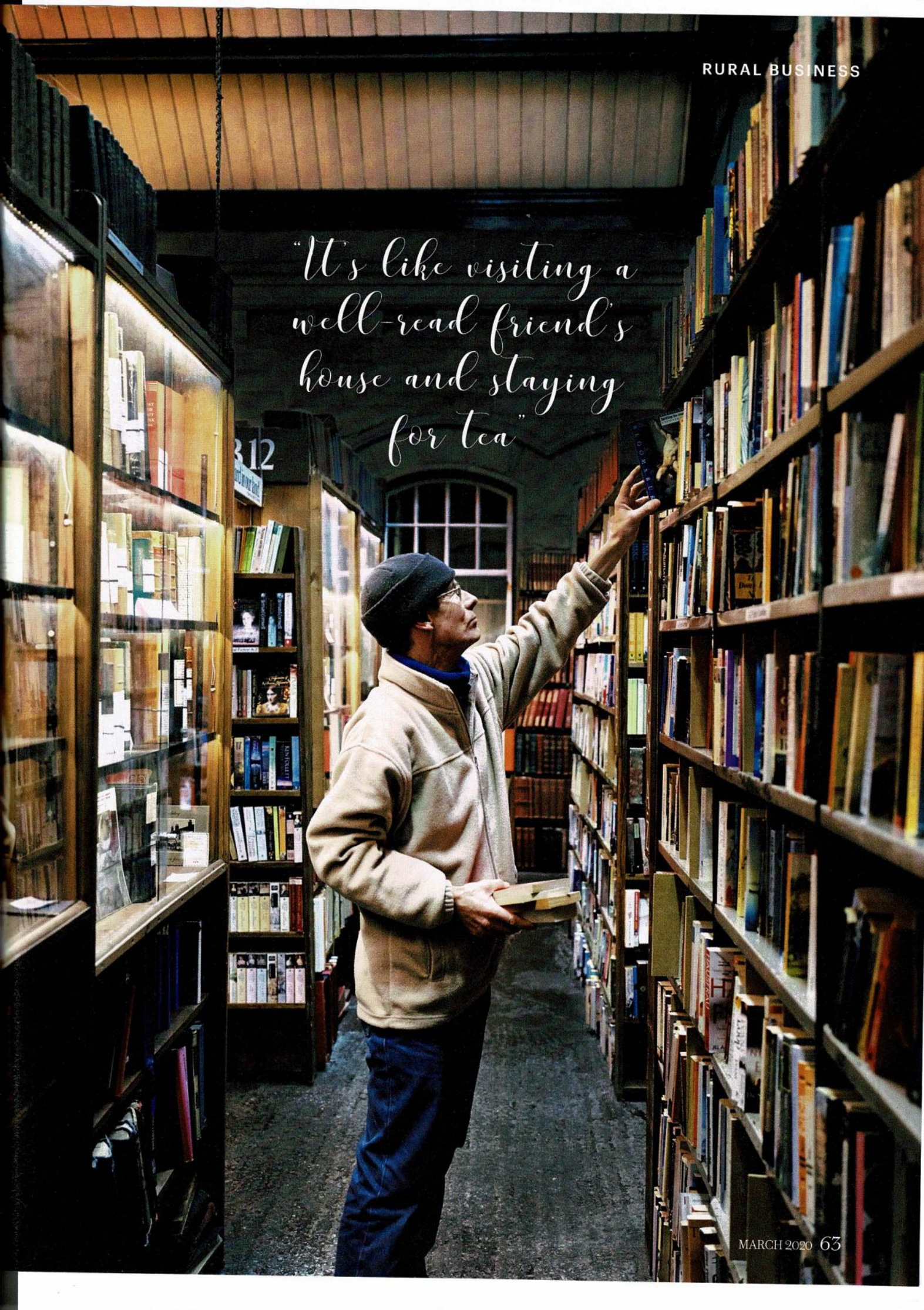
The bookshop runs partly on a barter system, as its name suggests – an homage to a similar shop in Mary's home town in Memphis. Customers are encouraged to swap their old books for new (secondhand) stock. The team welcome work by evergreen authors such as Roald Dahl and Ian Rankin, and pay handsomely for unusual or first-edition books. "An early copy of Darwin's *Origin of Species* would easily sell for £400 as it's very sought-after," Stuart says. The Manleys also attend about 30 auctions a year across the north of England for antiquarian items. As a result, their stock ranges from a huge choice of everyday fiction and non-fiction to rare volumes and 1st editions, which can cost thousands of pounds.

The highest-priced book they've ever sold? A copy of *The Kelmscott Chaucer* (published in 1896, with pages designed by William Morris) ▶

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP Once a small room in Alnwick's former train station, Barter Books now encompasses a large part of the

grand old building; besides its paying customers, it offers a barter system, with old books swapped for secondhand stock

*"It's like visiting a
well-read friend's
house and staying
for tea"*

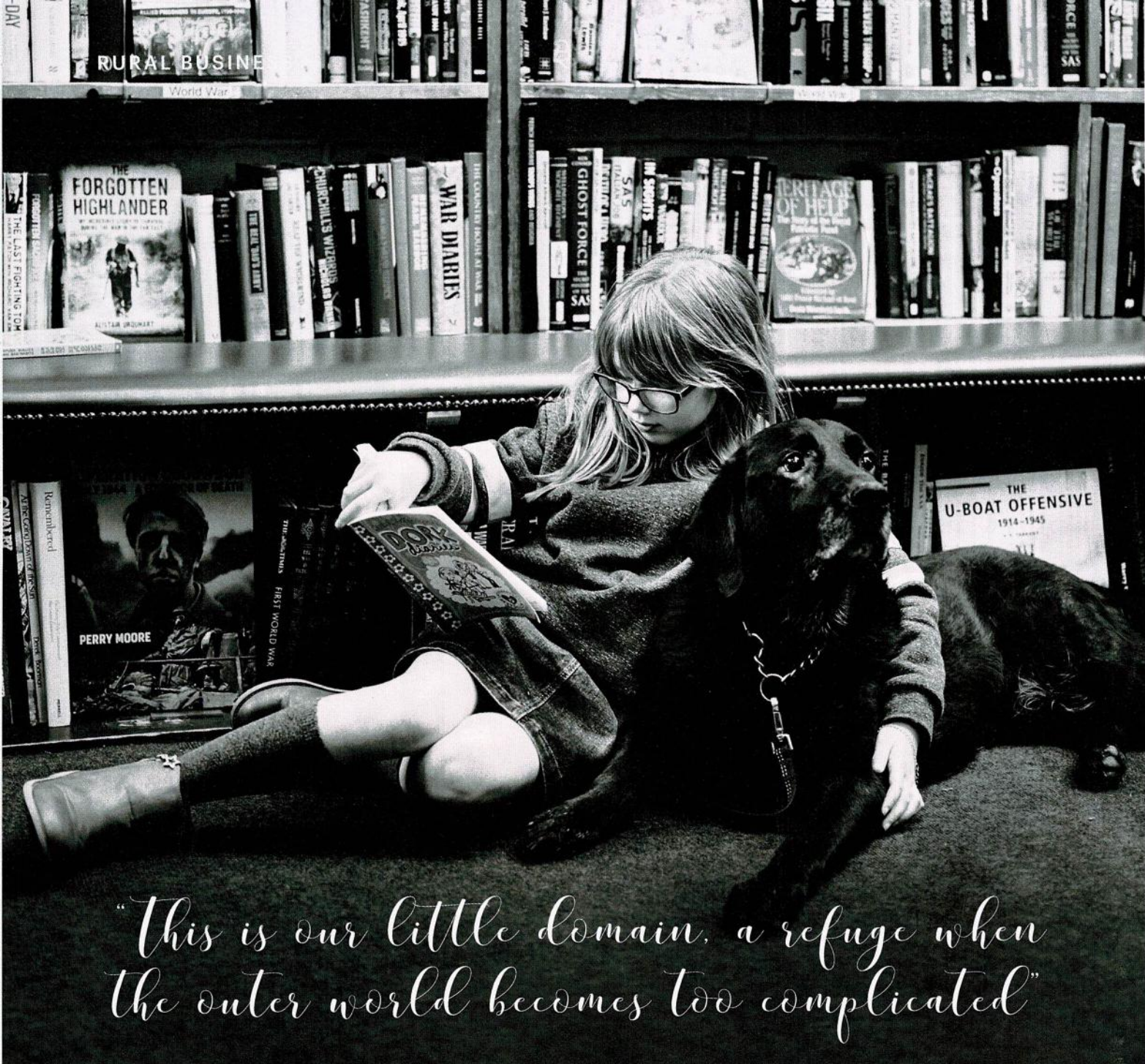


for £38,000. "You might say that was exceptional," Mary says. It's not just antiquarian books for which the shop is famed. An original Second World War poster bearing the words 'Keep Calm and Carry On' hangs in the former ladies' waiting room, with fold marks and pinpricks in each corner. Today, it's a well-worn saying, but that wasn't the case when Stuart found the poster in 2000, buried in a box of books he'd bought at auction. Millions of copies were pulped in 1940, meaning there are few other originals – which, until recently, were hidden in a drawer at The Imperial War Museum in London. "I liked the poster so much I framed it and put it up on our wall," Mary says. Customers liked it, too, so they printed copies and emblazoned mugs, unwittingly unleashing a new national slogan. At its peak, in 2005, the couple were selling 9,000 posters a month. In 20 years, they estimate they've made around £80,000 from it. "Not much when you consider how popular it has been,

but not bad for something well out of copyright," Stuart says. Any profits go towards the upkeep of the Grade II-listed structure. Built in 1887 and designed by William Bell, it requires a lot of maintenance. "Any time we make a bit of money, we put it right back into the shop," Mary says. "Our aim is perfection!" One of her dreams, realised in 2008, was to add a buffet specialising in homemade food. Another, still to be realised, is to restore the original glass roof.

It's ambitious, but Stuart's dream is even more so. As the founder of the Aln Valley Railway Project, he's been campaigning since 1997 to restore the heritage line from Alnmouth to Alnwick, which was a victim of the Beeching cuts in the Sixties. Construction began in 2012 and is ongoing. Visitors can currently hop on a steam train at the newly completed Alnwick Lionheart station, and ride two miles before the tracks stop. There is just over half a mile ▶





"This is our little domain, a refuge when the outer world becomes too complicated"

to go. The couple are used to big schemes, as shown by a 12-metre-wide mural of 33 of Mary's favourite writers – a two-year project completed in 2001 by brilliant young artist Peter Dodd. It features Oscar Wilde, Jane Austen and Shakespeare, among others. "People asked us why we were squandering money, but we don't see it that way," Stuart says. "We're willing to spend money on things that don't have an immediate return. It's the long term that matters." But in the early Noughties, as Amazon rose to prominence – out-competing bricks and mortar by a country mile – even the short-term future of bookshops looked uncertain. Were bookshops to suffer the same fate as model railways? "Everyone was talking about a rocky future, but we attract 350,000 customers a year," Stuart says. Sales today average 3,000 books a week.

MORE THAN A BOOKSHOP

What is the secret to its success? Visitors are often impressed by the building's grandeur, as well as its growing book collection. Madeline

Ong, from Newcastle, has been coming since she was a child. "It's so much more than a bookshop," she says. "When I pop in, I end up there for hours. It's like visiting a well-read friend's house and staying for tea."

With the shop open every day (except Christmas Day), as well as the new ice-cream parlour Paradise, life is busy. They employ about 70 people, aged between 16 and 76. Neither works behind the counter anymore – Stuart is responsible for business management and book valuation, and Mary is the creative brains and marketer. While the couple are in their 70s and "working on retirement plans", neither shows signs of slowing down. "We both dream of having the time to read a book," Mary laughs. It's a line she uses a lot, but as a woman who cites Robert Fagles' translation of *The Iliad* as her favourite book, she might be exaggerating a little. Trains may no longer depart from Alnwick station, but as long as there are books, visitors will always be able to indulge in some good old armchair travel.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on Barter Books and to search Mary and Stuart's antique collection, visit barterbooks.co.uk.