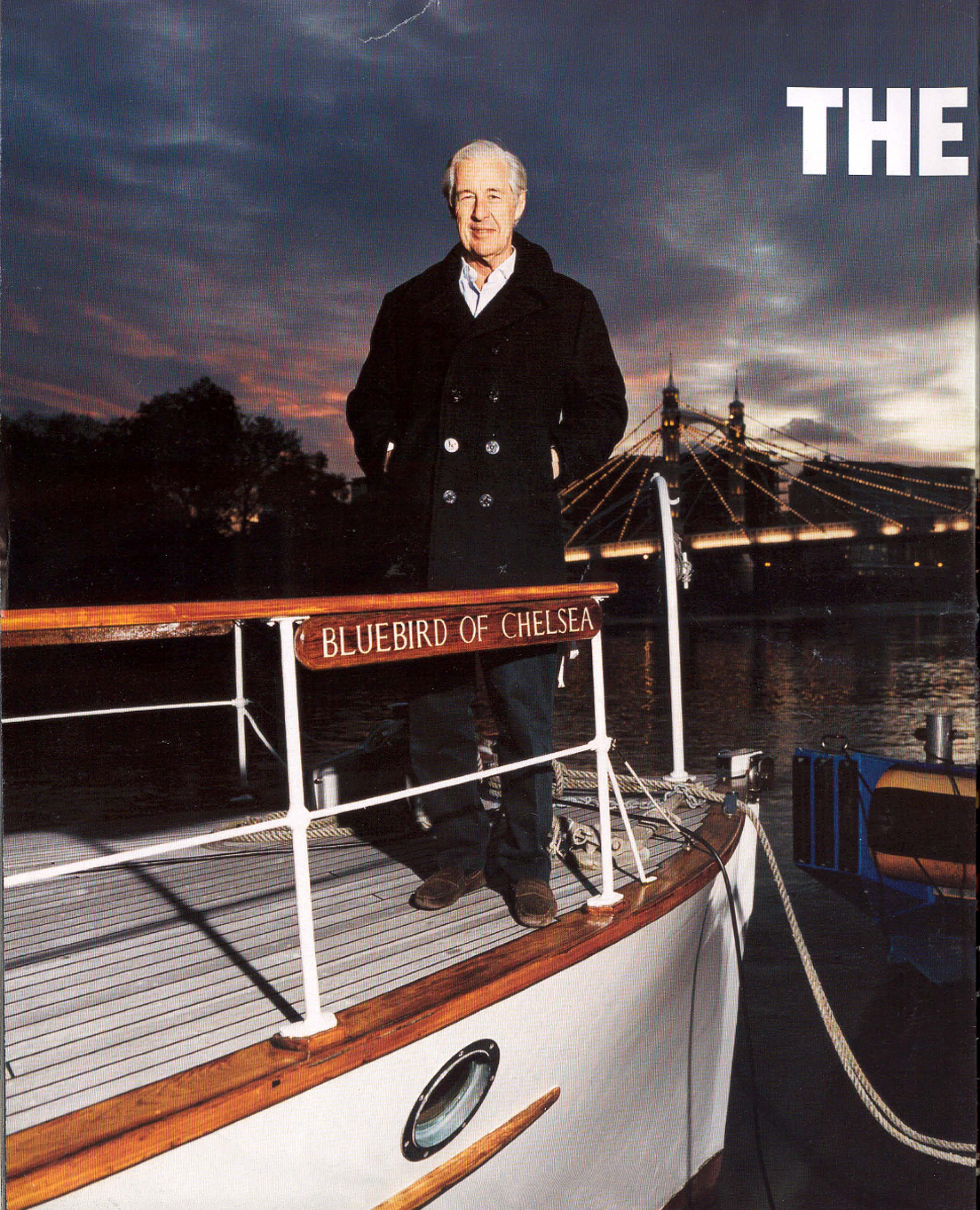


THE



QUAY TO THE DOOR

Prestigious new moorings on the Thames are tempting high-flyers who want to escape the stresses of the city – without leaving it. Jane Hughes talks to some early adopters. Photographs: Dean Belcher.

It's a warm spring evening on the River Thames and as the sun sets behind Putney Bridge, the water is suffused with glowing pink tints. A lone heron disappears into the inky blackness that envelops the river bank and a soft breeze blows through the open doors of the loft-like Wandsworth houseboat where artist and entrepreneur Sharyn Wortman is cooking dinner. Sharyn, who rents the boat with her boyfriend, Chris Peratides, a Canary Wharf banker, watches the scene through the large picture windows of her open-plan kitchen and can't imagine living anywhere else. "Everything looks different from the river," she says. "It's like the ultimate getaway in the middle of London. As soon as I step off the bank and close the pontoon gate I leave all my stresses behind me."

Wortman and Peratides are far from the only professional high-flyers who have taken to the river to live, work and generally de-stress from the whirlwind of modern city life. Their neighbours at the cluster of moorings created when Prospect Quay, a waterfront development of around 70 flats, was constructed eight years ago include a fashion designer, scriptwriter, events organiser and film producer – collectively described as "a sophisticated media crowd".

Such is the demand for upmarket moorings like these – which are connected to all the mains services and offer facilities such as broadband and secure entry gates – that waiting lists are long and prices are rising. Yet it's only in the past couple of decades, as the docks closed and wharfs and canal basins were redeveloped, that Londoners began to acknowledge the potential of the river on their doorstep. Until then, most of the people who lived on what was primarily a working industrial waterway were a hotchpotch of out-of-work actors, alcoholics and batty old ladies who couldn't afford anywhere else.

True, the fast-flowing and tidal Thames, hemmed into a channel narrower than its natural banks by the 19th century Embankment, has offered fewer obvious boating opportunities than, say, the Seine, where barges can be moored up to six deep. However, new mooring sites are emerging, with around 250 approved residential and non-residential on the central London stretch of the river, and several hundred more in basins and marinas.

Although today's prime moorings can reach the height of sophistication,



environment, looking out over the lovely parkland of the Hurlingham Club."

The fact that the moorings at Prospect Quay were sold on long leases means that a houseboat in tip-top condition on its mooring could fetch around £700,000, says Tony D'Alton of estate agent Knight Frank. Residents have use of the private gym, pool and underground parking at the onshore development and, says Wortman, are always looking for excuses to work from home. Having previously worked in advertising, she runs a boutique herbal tea business from the water, supplying her Tea and Philosophy brand to the likes of Harrods and Harvey Nichols.

Somehow it's not a total surprise to find that another entrepreneur, Charles Nicholson, lives next door. Nicholson is a director of The Chair Company, which sells designer chairs from four London shops, and built his houseboat from a Thames lighter. He and his partner Anna (pictured above) use it as a weekday

base, returning to their New Forest house at weekends. "There's a real sense of freedom and adventure that comes with living on the river – I once saw a seal swim past as I was sitting in the bath," he says. With a kitchen that seats 16, Nicholson often entertains and finds his home provides the perfect wow factor for work functions. It's taken a long time for property developers to wake up to the idea of quality

misconceptions still persist. When Wortman, 35, and Peratides, 36, moved into their boat, *Lambhay*, three years ago, his family in South Africa thought he had fallen on hard times. In fact, the three-bedroom, two-bathroom *Lambhay* has all the comforts of a home on land, with a soaring double-height studio-style living room (see photograph overleaf). "We've got a dishwasher, central heating and a bathroom that is bigger than my old bedroom in Hampstead," says Wortman. "But we're also living in this wonderfully restful

Left: chez Martin Summers. Top and above: Charles Nicholson and his partner Anna on their Prospect Quay houseboat.

moorings as a unique and vibrant selling point. Prospect Quay was a pioneer, but the stylish new Riverside Quarter apartments next door are accessorised with 12 residential moorings that enter new realms of luxury and expense. Interested parties can expect to pay upwards of £150,000 for a 60-year licence to keep an average-sized houseboat of 20-25 metres here. On top of that, there's the cost of buying a houseboat, plus annual service charges and ground rent, totalling around £4,000. Underground parking and membership of Riverside Quarter's leisure club, which will open at the end of this year, are optional extras.

It's probably significant that the developer, Dr Stanley Quek, hails from Singapore and has built opulent waterfront developments both there and in Sydney. He's certainly big on ambience. "We've had a lot of requests for these moorings but it's important to get the right mix of traditional and modern craft to fit the lifestyle we're trying to create," he says. As well as the houseboats, there will be opportunities for residents of the apartments to moor up a speedboat or sailboat on additional outer visitor moorings.

Slightly downriver at Fulham, plans are under way to create high-end leisureboat moorings on a pontoon running alongside Imperial Wharf, a waterfront development of flats and houses being built by St George. At nearby Cheyne Walk, a long-established community of around 60 houseboats has a more eclectic feel. Russell Day, who cofounded waterside property specialists riverhomes.co.uk in response to the growing market on the Thames, says the location attracts an arty and entrepreneurial crowd. Day sold rock star Nick Cave's "loft" boat here, while Yo! Sushi founder Simon Woodroffe is a relative newcomer.

At Limehouse Marina, a former dock at the base of the Regent's Canal, City and Canary Wharf professionals make up about 40 per cent of boat owners. The figure at the newer Poplar Dock marina, part of the West India Dock complex which opened in 1999, is even higher. "Some of our clientele live in the surrounding apartments and simply enjoy being able to look out at their own boat," says Dawn Reid of British Waterways Marinas Ltd, which manages both sites. "However, although these are not strictly residential moorings, it's becoming very much a lifestyle statement for people who live out of town to buy a boat as a weekday pied-à-terre."

Probably the most prestigious of London's leisure moorings, though, is Cadogan Pier, situated in a prime Chelsea location at Cheyne Walk. Part of the Cadogan estate, the pier was built to serve the steamers that ferried fun-seeking Victorians to the pleasure grounds then lining the riverbanks. It's deep enough to be accessible at all times, and hugely popular with the Chelsea set and well-known figures, who in the past have included John Hurt and Pete Townsend. Current visitors include a



millionaire who prefers the occasional stopover at Cadogan Pier to staying at the Dorchester.

Last year the pier was extended, with 25 new moorings and a goal to resurrect this stretch of the Thames as a playground for Chelsea. "We thought it would be a fantastic opportunity for more people to park a classic boat or barge on their doorstep and use it to lunch, unwind or sail off to France," says co-director John Everett. "There's also a new river taxi service to ferry people from the pier down to Embankment." Little wonder, then, that

Top: Sharyn Wortman and Chris Peratides on *Lambhay*. Above: their mooring in Wandsworth.

"It's becoming a lifestyle statement for those who live out of town to buy a boat as a weekday pied-à-terre."

interest for the moorings – which cost around £5,000 a year for an average-sized boat (about 15m long) – has been intense.

One long-term Cadogan enthusiast is art dealer Martin Summers (pictured on previous spread) who, when he's not selling Picassos and Basquiats, escapes to his beautifully restored vintage 1930s cruiser, *Bluebird of Chelsea*. *Bluebird* was originally owned by the landspeed record holder Sir Malcolm Campbell, who called all his cars and boats by the same name. Rescued from rotting away in the South of France by Summers and his skipper, art school teacher Scott Beadle, she was refitted with mahogany interiors and is now quite possibly the classiest boat on the Thames. Summers has begun to hire her out for tailor-made private trips because, he says, "She's a piece of history and I like the idea that people will get a buzz from her."

For him, the river is an undying source of fascination: "At the wheel, you feel a real affinity with figures like Samuel Pepys, Sir Thomas Moore and Henry VIII who used

the Thames in the past." Over the years he's seen derelict warehouses become desirable residences and watched Canary Wharf rise out of the old docks. But sometimes, simply being on the water at Cadogan Pier is enough. "It's one of the most beautiful moorings in the world," he says. "There are wonderful views over Battersea Park and when the Albert Bridge lights up at night, it's truly magical. I only live about 150 yards up the road but after a few hours on *Bluebird* I feel like I've been away on holiday." ♦

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British Waterways Marinas, 020-7308 9930; www.bwml.co.uk. **Cadogan Pier**, 020-8748 2715. **Humberts Leisure**, 020-7629 7600; www.humberts-leisure.com. **Limehouse Marina**, see British Waterways Marinas. **Riverhomes.co.uk**, 020-8788 6000. **Riverside Quarter moorings**, see Humberts Leisure. **Riverside Quarter apartments**, 020-8877 2000. **St George (Imperial Wharf)**, 020-7610 9693. **Travel By Design**, 020-7823 5612; www.ameliadaltan.co.uk. **Bluebird of Chelsea** runs private charters for up to 12 people from £1,200, see Travel By Design.