

Talk to Bampton Society on 8 September 2014

Thank you very much for inviting me to talk about the Bampton Library Campaign – something I've been doing rather a lot of, to the consternation of my friends and neighbours, since the June meeting held at the library. Mrs Alexander, Deputy Head of Devon County Council's Libraries turned me from my usual placid self into 'Outraged of Bampton' by her manner - abrasive, to the point of rudeness – and most importantly, the explicit threat to the survival of our library.

I couldn't agree more that we shouldn't have to take over the County Council's responsibilities. It does have a statutory responsibility (Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964) to provide "a comprehensive and efficient" library service taking into account local needs and within available resources" but Devon County Council's interpretation of, and response to, this, faced with budget cuts, seems to me not only harsh but exceedingly short-sighted.

One of the first questions I'm asked is 'Why bother? Look what's happened to Barnhaven!' The reason I'm bothering is because I feel very strongly that we, that is our community, which includes outlying areas, should make every effort to prevent our library services being withdrawn. For all of us, it is much more difficult and time-consuming to access the library at Tiverton, but particularly for those with toddlers and a pushchair, or have mobility issues, and/or don't have a car, and needing to use the bus entailing a 2-hour wait for the return journey. (And the bus service is by no means secure for the future either...) I am certain that should we lose our library services they would never be restored to us – and that we must unite as a community to ensure that that doesn't happen here in Bampton. If we can make our voice heard, we *might* be able to prevent its loss. There's no guarantee, of course, but 'It's the squeaking wheel that gets the grease'! Make enough 'fuss' and we might be listened to. Yes, we might fail - but let's give it our best shot.

We do have to have a strategy. If there must, as there must be, adaptation and change, let us be the masters of it!

We enjoyed a six-day event last month which raised the public profile of our library and the threat to it, even making front page news in the Tiverton Gazette! I've brought an album of photographs and posters with me if anyone missed it. Despite it being holiday time, the chance to use the Old Peregrine was one not to be missed. We were able to demonstrate that all sorts of different activities could take place within a space also housing a library.

Talk to Bampton Society on 8 September 2014

Some 200 questionnaires were completed, every one of them positive and generating another set of ideas. (If you haven't yet done so, please take a questionnaire to fill in.) Such a response is a clear indicator that there is significant support for our campaign to retain Bampton Library.

Now it's time to formalise a Group which has been a virtual group thus far. The first meeting of our, as yet, an anonymous group will be held next week, but we will need to devise a suitable snappy acronym – any suggestions welcome. BLAG for Bampton Library Action Group, *isn't* a contender.

Being affiliated formally to the Bampton Society would lend even more corporate weight to our cause, and I would like to ask the society to consider this.

I should mention here that Bampton Town Council is unanimously in support in principle of endeavours to maintain our library services. (Its Minutes and the reports I have made to it, plus other correspondence, are available in the library in addition to the Brook Street Notice Board.)

Bampton is a wonderful unique place but sadly the threat to library services is not unique – it's happening all over the country. Rural areas, the most in need of resources have, however, a proven history of civic engagement. Bampton is no exception to this - the library has been an amenity available to Bamptonians since 1872, and from 1909, until the County Council took it over in about 1973, it was run by the Women's Institute. So we have a clear historical precedent for a community-led library!

There are all sorts of different solutions to the common problem; now there are libraries in pubs, supermarkets, cafés; run wholly or partly by volunteers; with varying degrees of fiscal and managerial responsibility being retained by their respective County Councils. In some cases a community company with shareholders, in addition to grant aid, has been the answer. Visitors from other parts of the country have been willing to talk about their solutions. Ideally, visits made to other areas will feed more into our ideas pot. If you're visiting family or friends in a rural area with a library, please ask them about it, and any further information you can glean will be gratefully received.

As for the plan that will work for Bampton, it's very hard for us to make *any* plan when there is not even a response to a written enquiry from Ciara Eastell, Head of Libraries to my 15 August letter. This was followed up by a further

Talk to Bampton Society on 8 September 2014

letter with a copy of the first, and yet *still*, to date, “the rest is silence”. This is just one instance where having a corporate identity rather than an individual one will have more ‘clout’ – hopefully...

We have been informed that in October the fate of the 50 rural libraries in Devon will be decided. We have no idea whatsoever which model is the one which would apply to Bampton: whether or not, in fact, the County Council would be willing to support a community library at all, or to what degree, or what period of time would elapse before alternative arrangements would or could come into effect – or not... “Known unknowns”?

If we are able to maintain and expand our library services in the future, we need larger premises. The Old Peregrine was one idea for an alternative venue – or redeveloping the rather nasty public loos in Station Car Park to create a new single-storey library building – or, if the ambitious plans for redevelopment of Riverside Hall take off – a room within that. Definitely we must ‘watch these spaces’.

Conscious of time constraints, I will conclude here with three quotations, the first two with which I completely disagree. The first, disappointingly, in 1751 is from the great Dr Johnson himself: “No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library.” Let’s prove him wrong!

From Philip Larkin, librarian, as well as poet: “On the whole, as I am fond of saying, libraries are feminine, they respond, they do not initiate”.

I am in complete agreement, however, with Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress as well as poet, however, writing in 1972: “What is more important in a library than anything else – than everything else – is the fact that it exists.”

Thank you to all the many people who have so kindly and generously contributed their support, enthusiasm, time, skills and energies thus far to a campaign-in-the-making, and to the Bampton Society for the opportunity to speak to you this evening. If you have any questions, I should be happy to attempt to answer them.

Talk to Bampton Society on 8 September 2014
