

Not Just Books

At the Bridge of Allan Library Peter Meech discovers that things are definitely not what they used to be.

For centuries libraries simply housed printed or handwritten matter (the name itself derives from the Latin for 'bookcase'). The atmosphere in them was scholarly; silence was enforced; books and other documents could be consulted but not borrowed. In the 19th century public lending libraries were established, newspapers added, and a broader range of readers attracted.

Today, as it approaches its 40th birthday, the Library in Fountain Road demonstrates the radical transformations that have occurred since the era when Bridge of Allan was a Victorian spa town.

Books are still at the Library's heart, with over 60,000 issues last year - an increase of more than 14% on the previous year. But walk into the building nowadays and you will also find babies and toddlers being read to by staff, children absorbed in craft activities, and adults working on computers, borrowing DVDs, learning new skills, or taking part in a creative writing group. Rhymetime, for example, is a fortnightly session for children under two run by library assistant Fiona Frize, who job shares with Jane Galloway.

It takes place on a Friday at 10.30 am. Storytime, for two to four-year-olds, is the responsibility of assistant librarian Vickie Crockett, and takes place once a month at the same time, but on different days. More details are on flyers available at the Library.

To date the seasonally-themed craft activities have included Hallowe'en, Christmas, Chinese New Year and Valentine's Day, with the finished items mounted on a display board in the children's section. Easter this year provides the next opportunity for the crayons, scissors, paste and paper to be brought out (if not the glitter).

On the other side of the building eight computers are available, free of charge, to anyone for up to two hours a day. The Library is Wi-Fi enabled so that everybody can have Internet access using their own



Library staff members (left to right) Vickie Crockett, Fiona Frize and Victoria McAra

laptop anywhere in the building. There are also taught classes, as part of the Community Access Programme run in conjunction with Forth Valley College, entitled 'Computing for the Terrified' and its sequel 'Computing for the Less Terrified'. A post-beginners class in computing is also offered by the Stirling Council Adult Learning Team.

But IT does not exhaust the list of classes available in the Library. As part of Learn @ the Library Forth Valley College offer free online courses, for example, on garden design and care, floristry and theatre production - a fun and interactive way to learn at one's own pace.

In addition to all these activities, the Library in recent years has participated in the annual Stirling Off the Page book festival, with a number of readings by celebrated authors. And last December it hosted an informal concert of Christmas Carols followed by seasonal mince pies.

There's also to be a reading group for 8-11 year-olds, as part of the UK-wide 'Chatterbooks' initiative, a beginners' Italian class and a monthly travel group for adults.

Victoria McAra was recently appointed Bridge of Allan's new acting community librarian. She succeeds Ian McLean, who, after many years service, has transferred to the Bannockburn Library and Stirling Central Library.

Victoria, a graduate of Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, has over 20 years experience in the Stirling Library Service. Her interests range from fly-fishing and photography to scuba diving and bungee jumping.

And while she has travelled very extensively - including to Australia, New Zealand, South East Asia, South Africa and the USA - she now lives with her husband in Tillicoultry.

What ambition does Victoria have for the Bridge of Allan Library? "I'd like it to be a focal point for the community," she says. "We want people to come in and have a 'wow' experience."

Given the present range of services and activities together with those planned for the future, this ambition seems well on course to become a reality.

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