

## **The long battle to keep our library going: The formation of the Friends of Nether Stowey Library and the birth of The Thomas Poole Library, Nether Stowey**

On 15 December 2010 Somerset County Council announced that it was proposing to cease funding Nether Stowey Library. On 17 January 2011, following public consultation and a public meeting, Nether Stowey Parish Council resolved to support the continuation of Nether Stowey Library as a Community Library. The Parish Council resolved to support the formation of a Nether Stowey Community Organisation which would take on the funding of the library and the management of the library building.

The Nether Stowey Community Library Steering Committee was formed to progress matters up to the point that the new NSCO was established. The Committee, chaired by Ian Clarke, met frequently; it produced a comprehensive business plan and considered matters such as the conditions for a lease of the building, the best corporate structure for the organisation, and sources of funding.

During this period the Friends of Somerset Libraries was established. It was supported by library support groups from all over the county, including Nether Stowey. Funds were raised, and a Judicial Review of proposed library closures in both Gloucestershire and Somerset was sought. In November 2011 Judge Martin McKenna found that the local authorities had failed to comply with their public sector equality duties when pushing through the closures. The proposals were unlawful and should be quashed.

The immediate consequence of this ruling was the reinstatement of funding for Nether Stowey Library and the withdrawal of the planned closure. The Steering Committee considered its work done, pro tem, but it was felt that a Friends group should be formed. The group would aim to support the work and profile of the library in Nether Stowey and the wider community, provide additional funding where possible, and promote events. To this end a General Meeting was called on 28 March 2012 and approved the formation of the Friends of Nether Stowey Library (FoNSL), together with its Constitution and Committee. In the following years FoNSL arranged monthly evening talks, which are now a feature of village life, together with a number of other regular activities – Knit and Natter, ancestry research, mah jong, Beetle drives, plant sales, and a 100-word story competition. Books were purchased and donated to the library.

In 2015 Somerset County Council again announced that the Library Service would have to make considerable savings. These were achieved largely through ‘back office’ savings, but cuts were also made to front-line services; in June 2016 opening hours at Nether Stowey were reduced from 24 to 20 hours per week, and the days on which the library was open were changed. The new opening hours were modified following representation by FoNSL.

In 2018 the County Council required the Library Service to reduce its costs further and embarked on a consultation with the communities affected by the proposed cuts. The

consultation ran for 12 weeks until the end of April, and included a presentation in the Library on 14 February and a questionnaire.

Since the end of 2017 the Parish Council had been the preferred partner of SCC, along with Parish Councils and Town Councils in the other affected communities. These were seen as organisations with the appropriate structure and potential to be able to deliver community partnerships in one form or another. Nether Stowey Parish Council was engaged in discussions with SCC throughout the spring and summer, and in an attempt to provide support and further ideas, a working group from FoNSL joined the PC Working Group at two meetings in the Parish Office. By the time of the second meeting it was clear that the PC was not going to be able provide the necessary financial support required for the librarian or the library building, or to organise the daily management of a library. The FoNSL group tabled the proposal on which it had been working, which envisaged FoNSL becoming a Registered Charity, taking a lease on the building, entering into a Community Library Partnership, and organising sufficient volunteers to staff the library without any professional support. This was accepted by the Parish Council, and FoNSL became the lead partner with SCC.

On 16 October 2018 the County Council made known its intentions, and these were ratified at a County Council Cabinet Meeting on 5 November. It took the decision to retain 19 libraries and to seek to establish Community Library Partnerships in 15 communities, on the basis that if such partnerships could not be established, those libraries would close. Thirteen libraries subsequently submitted Expressions of Interest, including Nether Stowey: at a Public Meeting in a packed Nether Stowey Village Hall on 13 November it was clear that there was sufficient support to warrant the submission of an Expression of Interest to the County Council, and this was duly sent the following day.

The task of achieving charitable status then began, and with help from the staff at Spark Somerset an application to become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation was made on 4 December and approval received on 17 December. The new CIO was named The Thomas Poole Library, Nether Stowey (TPLNS). In tandem with this, Heads of Terms were discussed with SCC for the lease of the building and the Community Library Partnership.

During the early months of 2019, volunteers were recruited and training began for front-line counter staff – the training was overseen by our professional Librarian Sarah Sawyer. On 5 March the Community Library Partnership Agreement was signed by County Council representative Oliver Woodhams and two of the TPLNS Trustees, Mary Reece and Roger Stacey. The 25-year full repairing lease agreement on the building was completed on 21 March.

On 1 April 2019 the library was staffed by volunteers for the first time. The Thomas Poole Library, Nether Stowey is one of only three in the county to be totally volunteer-led.

*Roger Stacey, Chairman, TPLNS*