

Case Study: Christine Campion, Head of Teaching and Learning, Halberton School, Tiverton, Devon

Shirley's Library - The story of how a small team created a woodland-themed library

"Teach a child to read, and keep that child reading, and we will change everything. And I mean everything." On a course earlier in the year, the words of Jeanette Winterson echoed through Christine's mind as she searched for inspiration, trying to think of a vision for the library at Halberton Primary School. What sort of special environment could the school create for its children, to encourage them to read and to keep them reading? Christine had never done anything like this before. She contacted a library design company and asked them to inspire her with their ideas; to say she was underwhelmed at their response was an understatement. She knew they could do better.

This is the story of how a small team created 'Shirley's Library'. The spark for which came when Christine saw a picture of some wooden shelving at local bookstore, Liznojan. It looked great – natural, ethical and sustainably-sourced – and she wondered if it would be possible to create a library based around the same theme. After a productive Pinterest session, she had created a woodland-themed library inspiration board. The next step was inviting parents to get involved and Christine was delighted when interest was shown, particularly by a parent and member of the Liznojan team - Will Diggle. A library group was formed, an action plan was created and a draft timetable thrashed out for the vision to become a reality. Will explained: *"Mine and Kayleigh's involvement in the project would be for a number of reasons: We are parents of children at the school and preschool. I went to the school myself (I remember helping paint the same room probably 20 years ago!), and 3 generations before me – Leo 5th generation, so it's a very special place for us all; we feel a responsibility to support it. We are lovers of books (hence Liznojan) – books about the natural environment, natural building methods, recycling, education – so have combined all these things on the project. The shop is very*

much about providing the books and all the courses we offer are to kick start people into doing 'useful' things with their time. The library will hopefully have a similar effect on the children's learning and awareness. We hope that it inspires the children to firstly learn and to care for the environment, and for them to learn in such a wonderful space is such a lovely thing for them, so they are very lucky. We understand that school budgets are very tight, which restricts the opportunities for such projects, and as parents we can offer our 'skills' to make these things possible. I hope that this inspires other parents to get stuck in, depending on their varied skills. I have a vision of what the school could gradually become – it would be amazing if we can achieve it! I think the way everyone has worked together shows what can be achieved; it strengthens the school community. Everyone's a winner, as far as I can see!"

As soon as the summer holidays started, work on the library also began. The room was stripped of all furniture, books and carpets. It became a shell, soon to be painted with green shades of 'Fiddlesticks' and 'Sunday Stroll'. The paints predominantly used in the library were 'Earthborn' – derived from natural materials, water-based and safe to be around during and after painting. Who knew vegan paint was a thing? The shelving was created using scaffold boards. The ones used were a waste product from the construction industry – they were deemed no longer safe for scaffold use – and have now been recycled by reusing them as shelving. Coated with oil, they provide a rich focal point for the room and, importantly, they display the books. In-between the shelves are tree trunk 'risers'; these were created using local ash trees showing early stage symptoms of 'ash dieback'. The trees were carefully selected and thinned from local woodland to have minimal effect on the woodland as a whole. The trees would have not otherwise reached maturity so were put to beneficial use. The library was a big space to fill and the group wanted green to be a prevalent feature in the room. The green sails add colour and warmth while making the space more intimate without compromising the mural details on the walls. Inspired by nature and keen to get

the children involved with the project Liznojan owner and parent, Kayleigh Diggle, suggested creating a murmuration of origami birds to feature in the library. With a team of parent helpers leading the activity, every child in school created an origami bird. These have been suspended with fishing wire from locally-sourced twisted willow branches, and it's beautiful to see them dance when a gentle breeze passes through. Constructed by parent and builder, Ian Awcock, the treehouse made use of surplus posts and artificial grass from the outdoor playground development at the federated school, Uplowman Primary. Parent Governor Ali Awcock explained: *"Ian and I wanted to get involved as we were keen to give something back to the school having had all of our children go through Halberton. We loved the ethos of the library plan, using as much sustainable, eco-friendly and reclaimed materials as possible, and wanted to support such a positive learning space for the children. We feel that funding constraints mean that we can suffer as a small school, so parental help and involvement is so important and can have a huge positive impact on the school."*

The beautiful artwork that adorns the walls was painted by local artist, Jamie Whyte: *"I was asked to paint a woodland-themed mural in the library. Knowing that I would have only seven days to complete the mural, when I first saw the room I was daunted by the size of it - and having measured up I discovered the wall-space amounted to around a thousand square feet. In order to cover it I painted three layers of trees, in a simple illustrative style, working some more detail and texture into the foreground trunks, using household emulsion mixed with acrylic paint. I used the branches that form part of the beautiful bespoke bookshelves as reference for the bark. The end effect is light and, hopefully, evocative of a spacious glade, rather than the depths of Mirkwood."*

Despite teaching children all about measurements, scale and multiplying and dividing by 10, Christine was a little surprised to receive a package of wooden letters measuring 10mm in height, rather than 10cm! However, a flash of inspiration resulted in the letters being put to good use, with poignant quotes from texts and writers being written on various shelves around the room. Secreted on the top shelves is a bamboo diffuser, containing a concoction of essential oils to

permeate throughout the room. Qualified aromatherapist, Ali Awcock recommended the organic scents of orange, juniper berry and bergamot essential oils to create our specially-scented environment. Orange functions as a mood booster, woody juniper is calming and grounding, meanwhile bergamot is uplifting and refreshing. All the oils are great for protecting against colds and flu. What a perfect combination! The library's very low energy A* rated lighting is dimmable, with a warm white colour to make the space glow; this creates a lovely environment for the children and staff. The jute cabling was made using natural fibres and the lighting will consume half the energy of the old library lighting, which will save the school money in electricity costs.

The old lighting and shelving from the library was reused, and the other materials such as the carpets and general waste that wasn't recyclable was incinerated at Exeter energy plant rather than going to landfill. Any offcuts of wood were used to supply a wood burning stove that heated local homes. The library was fortunate to have shared some really superb books with the pupils and Christine wanted a space to showcase books, to celebrate and inspire the children. The floating shelf was designed to do just that.

The original bland library design was ineffective in terms of securing funding but the eco-friendly vision had more success; the school were delighted and appreciative to receive in excess of £5,000 towards the library from local trusts such as the Norman Trust and Gibbon's Trust, the Make the Connection grant, and also their very own HPSA.

Sitting in the corner of the library, as you enter, you will meet Ben. Ben is a 2-metre high Ficus Benjamina tree, sourced for the library by George Douglas of Urban & Rural Plants (Exeter). The Ficus Benjamina and tree supplier came highly-recommended by friend and former Head Gardener at Kew Gardens, Stewart Henchie. Stuart explained: *"The tree is a forgiving plant and it will make a nice addition to the library. The children will be able to help look after it by using a small mister and a wet sponge to keep the leaves free of dust."* The woodland-themed library was further enhanced by the use of artificial grass transforming the room into a lush environment.

So who is Shirley?

Shirley Davey recently retired after 43 years working at Halberton Primary School and Preschool. Everyone who lives or has been educated in Halberton knows Shirley and what a kind, thoughtful and gentle lady she is and much she cares about the children who have had the good fortune of being educated by her. Shirley has always felt strongly about children having the opportunity to read, especially those who perhaps do not get the same opportunities to read outside of school and what better place to commemorate her than with a library?

Paramount to all these plans has been Health and Safety. Before, during and after the library project took place, the school have been fortunate to have the wisdom of parent, Governor and Director of 'The Outdoors Group', Shevek Pring, who provided advice and guidance throughout the work, to ensure it complied with Health and Safety regulations. Shev explained: *"As the school governor with responsibility for health and safety I have been involved in checking the project along the way. I am extremely proud to have been able to help facilitate a project as creative as this and to have been a part of shaping something so valuable for the learners at the school. Hopefully this will help to inspire reading and creativity in the children for years to come. This can be counted as a huge success for the whole federations learning community."*

The untreated pine timber (certified eco-friendly by the Forest Stewardship Council) used for the platform contains no nasty preservatives. It's all screwed together and so could be easily reused in the future. It was decided that the most suitable product to construct the curved platform and provide a strong base was plywood. Although plywood contains formaldehyde, the Ficus Benjamina will absorb airborne formaldehyde, so this will offset the emissions into the air. Surplus wooden posts and artificial grass from the Uplowman playground development were used to strengthen and support the structure. The new USB plug sockets have leads which link to tablets cradled in sustainably-sourced bamboo tablet holders; these tablets will be solely used by children to quiz on when they complete an AR (Accelerated Reader) book. Christine wanted to minimise digital

technology in the library, and maximise opportunities for children to develop a love of reading books.

Throughout the construction of this amazing library, Christine has tried to champion the businesses and skills offered by the community and this project would not have been possible if it wasn't for the fantastic team that worked together to make it happen. This library could change everything. And I mean everything.