Fulbourn Village Library – Past and Present

How to run a volunteer library? First, find some premises,
Second, find some volunteers,
Third, find some books.

If only it were that simple…….

For me it all began in March 2003 with an innocent looking flyer landing on the doormat, asking if I could spare a couple of hours a month to help in the Library. I wasn't even a Library member but, as a relative newcomer to the village, I saw it as a good way to become involved in the community.

What I didn't fully appreciate was that the flyer was the unhappy result of several years of campaigning and fundraising by The Friends of Fulbourn Library, a group which was set up in 1995 when 20 libraries were identified for possible closure. Fortunately Fulbourn Library was saved that year but the threat never really went away, so The Friends continued their activities. According to records, there had been a library in Fulbourn since 1878 so to remove this facility after all these years was inconceivable to many.

However, early in 2003, The Friends lost their battle: Fulbourn was amongst 10 libraries to be closed by the County Council. The villages were offered a weekly visit from a mobile library, but in response to protests, the County Council challenged residents to come up with a business plan for a community run library. Naturally The Friends rose to this challenge and together with the Parish Council and Fulbourn Primary School Governors, they formed a Consortium which drew up a 3-year business plan for a volunteer-run library, and after a lot of hard work the first Service Level Agreement with the County Council to run our volunteer Library, named a 'Library Access Point' by the Library Service, was signed.

Those who had responded to the aforementioned flyer were invited to attend a meeting in June 2003 and the beginnings of our new Library began to emerge. I must add at this point that there were no librarians amongst us. Prior to opening, each volunteer had to be CRB checked and 12 of us attended a one-day training course on the County Council's Library Management System, 'Cambook'. The County Council gave us £3,000 as a start-up grant, one computer for book issues, 2 computers for public use (all with broadband connection) plus 1,000 brand new books, with the promise to rotate these books throughout the year with another Library Access Point. They also left us with the books in the Local Studies and Reference sections. The County Council run Library closed in October and we re-opened it on Saturday 22 November 2003, following many hours of organising the shelves, sorting through all of the donated books and sticking date labels and bar codes into them. A member of the County Library Service came to talk to us one afternoon to guide us on our way and gave 3 of us about 15 minutes training on how to accept the County books into our Library and how to catalogue our donated books using Cambook. Luckily she left us with a set of instructions!

And so we began our exciting new venture: operating from the same premises, The Old School Building in School Lane, continuing the same opening hours, 13½ hours per week over 7 sessions every day except Sunday, but sharing the room with a class from the Primary School.

We got off to a slow start during the winter months, learning as we went along, but as our stock grew with the constant stream of donated books and word got round that we had

better books than the Library Service had been providing in recent years, our visitor and borrowing figures gradually increased. We spread the word by leafleting every household in Fulbourn and advertising in neighbouring villages and in 'The Mill'.

As we hadn't had a 'grand opening' we decided to celebrate our 1st birthday by holding a social event with a variety of guest speakers and entertainers. We also had a private celebration in The Six Bells for volunteers plus partners which has become an annual event as it is such a good opportunity for us all to get together. It's amazing how much noise a group of 'librarians' can make!

After sharing our space with the School for 18 months we were really excited in March 2005 when the School group moved upstairs in the building, enabling us to occupy the whole of the Library space. We were able to purchase more shelves to accommodate our growing number of books and to provide a few comfortable chairs for reading and relaxation.

However, early in 2006 the situation didn't look quite so rosy. Although the School were meant to be managing the Old School Building, negotiations were still taking place over its transfer from the County Council to the School. The County Council were also threatening to close more libraries, and possibly Library Access Points, if the Council Tax rise was not high enough. Fortunately for the Library, although not so good for Council Tax payers, the rise was sufficient to avoid any closures and we then received news that the County Council were willing to renew our Service Level Agreement for a further 3 years, subject to an acceptable business plan.

Life in the Library continued as normal and in July 2006 we were faced with another big challenge; the introduction of a new Library Management System, 'Unicorn'. Eleven of us went to Cambridge Central Library for 3 hours training; then we were let loose on our public, once again with a set of instructions. We are very fortunate in Fulbourn to have such understanding customers who supported us then with the anomalies of a new computer system and continue to do so when we don't do something quite right.

As we were about to sign our new 3-year Agreement with the County Council, 2006-2009, we received the news that the School wanted to hand back the management of The Old School Building to the County Council as the running costs were too high. We did, however, have a little breathing space as the School were persuaded to continue until September 2007, so the Agreement was signed and numerous meetings followed regarding the future of the Library. It seemed the County Council had no further use for the Old School Building and were concerned about the condition of the central heating boiler and the general state of the roof and brickwork.

Just when we were beginning to think things couldn't get much worse, there was a fire at the Library one Sunday afternoon in April 2007. It began in an outhouse and fortunately the alarm was raised very promptly preventing it spreading into the Library. The roof of our storeroom was affected and the smoke damage was quite extensive. But with a lot of hard work and cleaning, we were open for business as usual by 3pm the following day. The smell, however, lingered for months!

The search for new premises continued and we were so lucky with the timing of the regeneration of the Windmill Estate as this provided us with the only realistic option for re-housing the Library. By the end of 2007, thanks to the Parish Council and Accent Nene, a new home had been secured in the community building to be built in the first phase of the

redevelopment, now known as The Swifts. Our visitor numbers and books issues increased during this year due to our higher profile in the village news and to the temporary, although lengthy, closure of Cambridge Central Library. We were so pleased that the community were supporting us and providing proof that we were a valuable resource that they did not want to lose.

Apart from continuing to run the Library in an eerily empty Old School Building, where the County Council agreed we could remain until the end of 2008, that year was spent discussing the design of the new building and Library, and securing funds for the new shelving and furniture. None of which went particularly smoothly. I do not mind admitting that is was a hard slog for me as firstly I had no knowledge of the design and structure of buildings (although I am a little wiser now) and secondly I had little control over anything that was happening. There were so many people involved and it wasn't an easy task keeping up with what was going on, or not going on in some instances. I just kept my fingers crossed that I had made everyone aware of our requirements and that we finally got a workable Library.

Unfortunately our new building was not going to be ready by the end of 2008 as we had originally thought and the County Council seemed reluctant to allow us to stay longer in the Old School Building, but following intervention by the Library Service and our County Councillor, the County Council were persuaded that the building wasn't about to fall down in the next few months. We celebrated the news by planning a birthday party for our Library in the Old School Building – its 5th!

In May 2009 our long-awaited move to The Swifts became a reality. We were only closed for 2 days – one to pack and one to un-pack - and we had a huge amount of fun. Our volunteers really excelled themselves, with over 5,000 books being packed into boxes in 1½ hours and being re-shelved the following day within 4 hours. County staff thought that our moving schedule was far too ambitious, but they did not appreciate what a great bunch of volunteers we have. The IT staff who were present when all of the activity was going on, could not believe how so many people could work so harmoniously within a relatively small space. Our counter was moved on the morning of Monday 11 May and we were ready to open at 3pm that day.

Reaction to our new premises was really positive, making all the planning and effort worthwhile. We overcame the fresh challenges presented to us in a new building, and adapted really quickly to our changed environment. The design of the new Library meant that bookcases and furniture had to be moved at the beginning and end of each session, but fortunately that task did not prove as difficult as we had imagined and did not take as much time as we had anticipated. Just to keep up on our toes, later that year we had to produce another business plan and our 3rd Service Level Agreement was signed with the County Council for 2009-2012.

Rather naively, we hoped that all our challenges were behind us, but in 2010 the threat of County Council cuts faced us once again and it seemed there was little room for negotiation this time. Fortunately the value of volunteer-run community libraries was recognised by the politicians, so we live to fight another day with a reduced level of service from the County Council.

We have accepted these unavoidable cuts with grace as experience has taught us to continue running the Library whatever is going on around us. Since we began we have had a dedicated and enthusiastic volunteer force of over 40 people, sadly some move on

and some pass on, but new people continue to join. Many of us have been involved since the very beginning. We aren't professionals but we try our best to provide as professional a service as we can.

Each year we promote the National Reading Challenge which runs over the school holidays and is enjoyed by all the children participating. Over the years we have held many events; author talks, family history evenings, poetry and writing events, either independently or as part of Fulbourn Arts Festival, and we have produced an anthology to celebrate the life of Charles Darwin. We are really fortunate to have the support of the community who continue to borrow books from us and continue to donate books to us and with their support we hope to continue for many years to come.

The Friends of Fulbourn Library have continued as a separate group, running their monthly book sales as they did before the County run library closed. They sell all of the donated books that we do not need for the Library and all of our withdrawn stock. The funds that they raise help to buy new books for the Library and these are much needed now that the County Council is no longer supplying us with new books, except for large print titles. As we receive fewer donations of children's books the funds from the Friends are essential to ensure that we maintain an interesting supply of books for our younger generation.

Due to our success and the financial climate over the past few years, we have been regarded as pioneers in our field. After helping to establish 10 Library Access Points, the County Council became very proud of our achievements as several counties expressed an interest in the volunteer libraries. We have had enquiries from people in Lancashire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Dorset; a member of the party from Dorset County Council did a live telephone interview on Radio Solent whilst he was in our Library! National interest has heightened once again with the 2011 County Council budget cuts. Now some of the enquiries are coming from closer to home, Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, but we also received an email enquiry from someone on the Isle of Wight.

So, we are now in our 8th year of running our volunteer Library and if I could have looked into the future when that innocent little flyer dropped onto the doormat, would I have responded so readily…….? Possibly not, but then I would have missed out on a lot of fun, missed out on all of the friends I have made and not got involved in our village community, and that would have been a real shame.

Kathy Attmore
(with thanks to Ursula Lyons for the historical facts and to Jill Woolley for the poem)

Let's save the Library said the Friends
So we all thought we oughta
Teachers, radiographers, housewives too
And someone else's daughter.

We've had some fun the past few years
And come through fire and water
Congratulations everyone
We've achieved all that we fought for!