

# The Park Bench

## Annual Report 2006



Registered Charity No. 1111578

Web Site [www.theparkbench.org.uk](http://www.theparkbench.org.uk)

Trustees Steve Witt (Chair), Heather Lister (Secretary), Stella Wintle,  
Richard Drake (Treasurer).

The Park Bench is a voluntary charitable organisation which aims to provide access to a lending library service for people in Bristol who find it difficult to register with the Public Library.



# Thank you!

**For donations, encouragement and support, thanks go to the following –**

Quaker Homeless Action for start-up funding, and in particular Gill Lowther of the London Mobile Library for homeless people, for continuing encouragement and supplies of books.

Bristol Libraries, for much help, donations and loans of books, and access to large print books and “Quick Reads.”

Woz, and the staff and clients at New Street Day Centre, for their hospitality and help.

Books for Amnesty Bookshop, Gloucester Road.

The Big Issue, for encouragement and storage space.

Everyone who has donated books – staff, borrowers and others who have heard of us!

To all our borrowers, whose enthusiasm has kept us going.

To Bill Drake, for our logo.

To St. Nick’s for the parking space

To all our volunteers who have run library sessions, come to meetings and sorted books – a big thank you!



## Chair's report

The first session of The Park Bench Library was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2005, and the library has appeared every week since then, with the single exception of one week over Christmas 2005, when there were other activities at the Centre.

The Park Bench Library is a registered charity run by volunteers. We are not aligned to any other organisation, but we gratefully received some start-up funding from Quaker Homeless Action, a group which runs a mobile library service in London – our original inspiration. We maintain useful and friendly links with this group, who have continued to supply books for our library, some of them new from the publisher.

We have also had many personal donations of books, and some charity shops are able to let us have their surplus. We are constantly astonished at the number of good books lying on shelves or in boxes unread, and it gives us all immense satisfaction to bring them to people who enjoy reading.

We continue to have good links with Bristol City Library. When our service started Asif Khan was the outreach worker, and was very helpful in visiting our project, raising awareness, and bringing posters, bookmarks and book-bags. His role was taken over by Chris Brown, who also has an interest in Adult Education. As well as searching out unusual requests, Chris has supplied us with large print books and “Quick Reads” for less confident readers.

It has been extremely satisfying to see how our tentative project has branched out in so many directions, without great expense, and without burdening volunteers too much. One of our first contacts was with Claudette, of the Jamaica Street Hostel, who had started a small night-time Book Club. This has grown into a library service known as “The Twilight Zone,” and in the midst of all the changes going on at the hostel at the moment, its future seems assured. We have given surplus books to Claudette to help fill the bookshelves at Dean Crescent women’s hostel. We have replenished book shelves and book boxes at The Julian Trust night shelter, at One25 women’s drop-in and at The Well and Lazarus House, which are shared housing projects. We have links with The Big Issue offices, where we have useful storage space.

What about the future? We started as a low-profile organisation with modest aims, and persevere in avoiding setting grandiose targets, spending a lot of money, or piling stress on anyone involved. Occasionally needs arise or suggestions are made, and we try to see how we can help. Not everything has been successful – it was thought that a reading or writing group might thrive alongside the art group at New Street, but although there was some initial interest, this has not taken off. One or two people, however, have written reviews of the books they read, and we hope more will do so

We had also hoped to involve more service users in the running of the library, but because of the lifestyles of most homeless people, any help given has been of the kind that does not call for regular commitment. Many willingly help with carrying books, though, and encouraging others to borrow.

Our main hope for 2007 is that we will continue to be valued where we are, and become more widely known as an organisation that brings books to people whose conditions of life are improved by having something to read.

## Facts and Figures

We do not judge the success of Park Bench by counting numbers of books and borrowers: even if only two or three people had had their lives enriched by The Park Bench it would have been a success. But we think it is useful to monitor the service, so that we have some helpful statistics for users, members, volunteers, trustees, people who have funded us and anyone who may be thinking of setting up a similar service elsewhere.

So we have kept a computerised record for the weekly Friday morning library service at New Street Centre since January 2006, when the service had settled down and been established for a few months.

Here are some facts and figures for the year January - December 2006.

### **How many people used the library?**

A total of 139 individuals used the library for the first time during the year. Some may have borrowed books only once; others several times and some became 'regulars'. The total number of visits from new and established borrowers in the year was 397.

The average number of borrowers each week was eight, but this ranged from the quietest week with only one to the busiest with 15. As well as 'old' clients, on average there were three new clients each week, but there were as many as six in a busy session.

We also have contact with people who do not borrow books: they may visit the library to renew books, talk about reading or simply have a chat. This, too, is part of our service and in December we started to monitor the number of 'non-borrowing' people we met. On average, there were two a week.

### **How many books were borrowed?**

There were 548 book loans in the year, with an average of 11 books borrowed each week. Again there was a wide range in the number of books borrowed each week, with 21 books borrowed in the busiest session of the year. Nearly half (44%) of all books loaned were returned. This is totally acceptable as it is often difficult for borrowers to return books and our book stock is easily replenished.

### **Could we spot any trends in usage over the year?**

We thought that there might be a marked seasonal variation in library use but in fact it has been fairly steady over the year. We have busy weeks and quiet weeks throughout the year but there does not seem to be any discernable pattern in these week-to-week fluctuations. Often our numbers simply reflect how busy the Centre is as a whole.

Detailed statistics can be seen on our website:

<http://www.randh.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/TheParkBench/TheParkBench.html> and follow the link to 'documents' and 'monitoring report'.

### **How much does it cost to run the Library?**

We received a grant of £1500 from Quaker Homeless Action to start up the library and have spent about £1,000 on initial materials, the largest single expense being over £500 on a sturdy wheeled display unit. Otherwise there have only been minor expenses and we still have £458.94 in the bank.

## Borrowing books

The Park Bench Library, described by one borrower as “the best library in Bristol,” has a great range of books, from Harry Potter to True Life Crime, including popular authors such as Stephen King, J.R.R.Tolkien and Martina Cole.

Our figures show that numbers of borrowers have remained generally constant over the year, and it is particularly encouraging to see the numbers of new borrowers.

There is a solid core of regular borrowers who read voraciously, bring books back in good condition, and express great appreciation of the service. There are those who borrow books and are never seen again, some who fastidiously renew their books, and some who keep books for several months, giving us progress reports. Many more browse, without borrowing, or wander past for a chat on the safe topic of reading. The surprise on people’s faces when they are told that ours is a free service, with no fines or hassle, is very telling.

We have had requests for an amazing variety of books, from the Krays to St Thomas Aquinas. Fascinating conversations take place as people measure their own experience against what they had just read. One man was ecstatic when we got hold of a book that he remembered being read to him in a children’s home (our own pleasure in this was a bit dampened when we learnt this book was the story of the last man hanged in England – presumably a cautionary tale!)

Another man specified he needed books about 3 cm thick – he needed them to prop up his bed! We supplied them, and he returned later to thank us.

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Book Review of

### The Forbidden Planet by Richard Bowker

Earth is visited by a strange Blue Pyramid that comes from a planet light years away.

The government of Earth are desperate to get their hands upon the secret of faster-than-light travel. The aliens are amazed by Earth’s technology – cars, planes, computers etc. How can such an unadvanced people travel all over the galaxy?

A crew member defects and seeks sanctuary with the catholic Church – he belongs to a banned religion whose leader, just like Christ, was killed and came back to life.

The visitors threaten to annihilate an Earth city if their crew member is not returned. This would be certain death for him as the members of his religion are being executed for their beliefs.

Only the Pope himself can save the situation....

I enjoyed reading this book although there are not many thrills. It is more philosophical than adventurous, but keeps you in suspense until the end.

**Tom D.**

### **AGM – 31<sup>st</sup> January 2007**

Please accept this letter as the formal notice to all members of the charity that we will hold our AGM at 7:30 pm on Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2007 at Trinity Road Library.

The agenda will be

- 1) Welcome, opening remarks and apologies
- 2) Chairman's report
- 3) Treasurer's report
- 4) Questions to the Trustees
- 5) Election of Officers and Trustees
- 6) Refreshments

While we hope the meeting will be fairly informal and not onerous, our constitution requires that  
17 (1) The Charity in general meeting shall elect the Officers and the other trustees  
17 (3) Each of the Trustees shall retire with effect from the conclusion of the annual general meeting after his or her appointment but shall be eligible for re-election at that annual general meeting.

The current Trustees and Officers are

Steve Witt, Chairman; Heather Lister, Secretary; Richard Drake, Treasurer; Stella Wintle

All the current Trustees and Officers are willing to stand for re-election at the AGM, but nominations are invited from any members who wish to stand for election as Trustees and a nomination form is enclosed. There is no upper limit to the number of Trustees.

