



CHILDREN'S BOOKFEST

Chichester Festival, Autumn 2023, Final Report

Our Chichester BookFest was jam-packed with intrepid authors who battled rail strikes and traffic jams to get to their designated schools. We are in awe of the huge amount of determination and commitment shown by not only the authors, but also the heroic teachers and our remarkable volunteer stewards, who all went above and beyond in an effort not to disappoint the children. In total 33 authors visited 30 schools and we bought and donated 3,939 books, an increase of 400 on 2022.

AF Harrold and his book, *Welcome to Wild Town*, arrived with a bang, filling the room with his poetry and personality. Children from Year 1 right through to Year 6 at West Wittering and Singleton Primary Schools were thrilled, with Talitha in Year 3 commenting 'I like that he was really loud,' and Sammy in Year 6 saying, 'He's so funny, this is the best assembly ever!'

Fellow poet **Roger Stevens** took more words than seems likely to Bosham Primary School, and gave a lively masterclass, including the joyful reminder that poems don't always have to rhyme. Teacher Michelle Earnshaw said, 'The children were thoroughly engaged and haven't stopped talking about their author visits since!'

We also had several author/illustrators this year too, otherwise known as the double threats of the Children's Literature world. The Queen of Kitlit herself, **Cressida Cowell**, landed in Chichester like the most magical of any of her dragons and spent the day lighting up every room she walked into. Her sense of playfulness, love of story, belief in the power of words and her generosity of spirit will stay with everyone she met for a very long time to come.

Jenny McLachlan is a sensational entertainer as well as a great writer, and brought a bag load of magic, charisma and puppets with her to charm the children. The extraordinarily talented **Joe Todd-Stanton** introduced scores of children to the latest of the beautifully illustrated and truly fantastic treasures found in Professor Brownstone's vault and **Matt Carr** visited three different schools over two days, taking his *Captain Looroll* costume and scatological wizardry with him. I think the children at Southbourne Infant School spoke for all of us when they said they, 'loved the book especially the page where is said bum!'

Ed Vere was cheeky and playful and a big advocate of embracing mistakes and learning from them. Mrs Udell-Hart of St Joseph Infant School declared Ed's visit a success, saying the children, 'are all buzzing and so excited about drawing and reading now! It's so inspiring!' **Gary Northfield** brought a touch of the Viking to North Mundham, as he entertained the children with tales and drawings of his wolfish hero, Leif the Unlucky Viking, and **Tim Tilley** kept teachers and pupils spellbound with a presentation full of a true understanding of story and place, and tips on how to impart that joy to others.

Our Key Stage 1 authors were full of the energy and enthusiasm on which Years 1 and 2 thrive.

Jeanne Willis, **Ruth Doyle**, **Smriti Halls** and **Simon Philip** did a sterling job talking about their books, which covered everything from identity to penguins playing hide-and-seek, all wrapped up in the most gorgeous illustrations and words.

And our Key Stage 2 authors were no less extraordinary. **Lucy Brandt** brought her A game along with her very special toy otter, Twitchy Nibbles, to meet the children, and was such a big hit that one child went straight to the library to ask if they had any more of Lucy's books she could borrow. **Iona Rangeley** enchanted the children of Chidham with her indomitable penguin detective, Einstein, and **Emily-Jane Clark** brought her 'Knobbly Bottom' to the Chichester Free School, causing a tidal wave of hilarity and enthusiasm throughout. **Ali Sparkes** was, as ever, a consummate professional, fizzing with energy and fun, and had the Aldingbourne audience eating out of her hand - and **Vashti Hardy**

brought a brilliant burst of colour and light to Fishbourne, as well as several multi-coloured wigs and a map-drawing exercise or two!

Iszi Lawrence impressed the children at Parklands Primary School with her encyclopaedic knowledge of dinosaurs, and ignited a love of history, time travel and creativity with every word she uttered. She did a marvellous job of 'shouting at short people,' and the teachers thought she was, 'truly fabulous.' Fellow history enthusiast **Ally Sherrick** spent a super busy day with the children of Kingsham Primary, talking about her latest book, 'Vita and the Gladiator,' and we hear that lots of the children finished the book over half-term, good work all round!

David Owen, author of the Alex Neptune Series, inspired the children of Rumboldswyke and Kingsham Primary Schools to imagine what kind of creatures live in the deepest darkest depths of the oceans and **Zanib Mian** treated the children of Southbourne Juniors to props, stories and laughter, giving each and every one of them enough time to chat over the book-signing.

So many of our authors write for all age groups, and we asked some of them to speak to different year groups across the day. **Patrice Lawrence** was one of these heroes, and her huge heart, infectious zest for life and infinite imagination made her a huge hit with the March Primary School, whose pupils said she was, 'the best author we've ever had!'

Ross Montgomery took his huge enthusiasm for the creativity of youngsters and how to translate that into stories to Funtington Primary School. **Nadia Shireen** spent the day at Lavant Primary School, and was such a success that Ali Totman, teacher and champion of CBF later told us that the children continued to draw Nadia's characters throughout the following weeks. Not only that, but one of the children was so overcome by receiving a book, he cried tears of joy!

Josh Lacey spent a wonderful day at Tangmere Primary School, and children across the age groups smelt their book, cuddled it, and dived into the Roman Empire with their pet potatoes. **Helen Peters**, with her book, *Friends and Traitors*, spoke to both primary and secondary school children, and effortlessly crossed the divide, adapting her delivery style and content to perfectly suit her audience. Jacqui Dommett, Head of Boxgrove School said, 'the book buzz here was amazing with some children heading off trying to read their books as they walked home!'

Tolá Okogwu made a lasting impression on the teachers and children of Seal Primary School, bringing beautiful presentations and a whole lot of inspiration with her. And Lucy Bailey captured the importance of one of the key elements of the whole BookFest experience saying, 'It always makes my heart sing to see the children leaving school with a book. . . they were delighted that she had taken the time to put their names on it and sign it.'

The final event of this year's Chichester BookFest took place on 30th November, when the one and only **SF Said** brought his beautiful book, *Tyger*, to Portfield School, and supercharged the whole of Key Stage 2 with the magic and electricity of words.

But as well as the festival, during the year we continued to buy and donate books every month to the local food banks in Chichester, Bognor Regis, Selsey, Petworth and Midhurst, altogether over 2,000 books this year! And with the Bognor festival in February 2023, and Outreach work during the year, we have bought and gifted over 7,000 books to children, an increase of 1,700 on the previous year!

CBF's overarching mission is to address worrying statistics such as this, from the National Literacy Trust; 'Nearly 1 in 10 (9.7%) children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs) said that they did not have a book of their own at home compared with 1 in 17 (5.8%) of those who do not receive FSMs'. The associated benefits of literacy and reading for pleasure are legion, and access to books plays a vital part. CBF goes straight to the source by bringing books directly into schools and to date has brought more than 90 different authors to schools in the Bognor and Chichester areas and purchased books for over 16,000 children.

A huge thank you to everyone who came together to make it possible for so much goodness to be shared across so many schools during this year's Chichester Festival, and our earlier festival in Bognor in February.