Totnes community bookshop launches crowdfunding bid to secure its future

Saturday 29 July, 2023

Totnes, Devon, UK ? Castle Books in Totnes, Devon, has launched a £135,000 crowd-funding campaign to acquire its premises at 4 Castle Street and secure the future of its community bookshop and outreach programmes.

With the building up for sale, and the shop's lease coming to an end, the future of the historic and much-loved shop is in jeopardy. Now Castle Books' dedicated team of volunteers are calling on book lovers from Totnes and around the world to support its campaign by visiting its crowd funding page, making a donation, and helping to spread the word on social media.

For over 50 years, readers, writers, and book collectors living in and visiting Totnes have made a beeline for the second-hand bookshop, located a few steps from the high street in the shadow of one of England's best preserved Norman castles. The shop has changed hands just once in five decades, and since 2016 has been owned by a Community Interest Company (CIC). It is operated entirely through the good will of a its volunteers who also organise regular literary events for the community, including a monthly Book Group and Poetry Open Mic (without the mic!) There are no paid staff. Any profits from book sales are channelled back into the local community to support local literary causes.

Among the beneficiaries are Totnes Library, which has received over £5,000 from the shop since 2021. The library staff have used this to help install a new 'teen hub', with the support of KEVICCs students, and to create a versatile and welcoming space for community groups and those seeking company and shelter during the energy and cost of living crisis. Eve Ashton, Centre Manager for Torbay Libraries commented: **"**We cannot thank the Totnes Community Bookshop enough for their kindness and generosity. The projects their funding has enabled have had such an impact on the thousands of people, of all ages and backgrounds who use the library."

Another regular recipient is Grove School, Totnes, whose Headteacher Hilary Priest said: "The Totnes community bookshop at Castle Street has been a godsend to us over the years helping us to buy new books for our children. The donations they give have meant that our children are really supported in their love of reading and their readiness for secondary school."

The story of Castle Books began in 1969 when Belle Collard bought 4 Castle Street and opened Totnes's first vegetarian and wholefood café. In 1972 Belle put a shelf of books in the upstairs dining area for her customers to enjoy. An advert described it as "The only restaurant in Devon where you can buy a first edition with your first course, and a print with your pudding."

Gradually the books took over from the food and Belle began to put all her energies into buying and selling stock – so much so, that in 1975 the restaurant gave way to 'Collards Books', filling all three floors of the building.

As Belle got older, she found climbing the stairs increasingly demanding and in 1991, aged 72, she took the decision to limit the shop to the ground floor where she continued working two or three days a week for another 20 years, with the help of some trusted volunteers.

When Belle sadly passed away on 15 September 2013, she bequeathed her entire stock of books to her volunteers who established a community interest company (CIC) to continue the shop's operation. Her daughter Jennie, who inherited 4 Castle Street, generously granted the newly formed CIC a 10-year lease on the ground-floor shop before selling the building – and so Castle Books was born.

Castle Books continues to be run by a 20-plus team of committed volunteers and held in warm affection by both local customers and visitors to Totnes. The range, quality and affordability of the books are as notable as ever, with regular acquisitions backed by generous donations ensuring the stock is always fresh and relevant.

"We recognise that it is a big ask in these difficult times, but we want to do all we can to secure Belle's legacy and keep Castle Books as a thriving literary and community hub for Totnes – hopefully for another 50 years!" said volunteer manager Francis Checkley. "Too many independent, community minded shops are disappearing from our high streets. Purchasing the fabric of the shop will allow us to secure our future for new generations of book lovers and ensure our community bookshop remains a vital part of Totnes's

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heritage."

If you would like to help secure a 'happily ever after' for Castle Books, its volunteers, and the community they serve, visit the shop's Crowdfunding page to donate and help spread the word via social media. "Customers from all corners of the world seek out (and stumble upon) Castle Books for our wonderful choice of books and friendly welcome. We're sure many of them would be willing to contribute – if only they knew about our campaign," said Francis.

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