

24 islands/24 hours: something for everyone

Between 11 and 12 September, Orkney and Shetland Libraries organised 24 events on 24 islands in 24 hours, with the help of author Ann Cleeves. **Stewart Bain** and **Karen Fraser** report.



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Orkney

Stewart Bain: IN January 2014, I sat beside crime writer Ann Cleeves on an eight-seater plane returning from the island of North Ronaldsay after an event to celebrate 60 years of the Orkney Library Family Box service. Following a day of books and chat, we were full of enthusiasm (and home bakes), and decided we should do a similar event soon. I'm still not quite sure how the idea to do one event turned into 24 events on 24 islands in 24 hours, but Ann certainly lays the blame on me.

Finding the funds

Having persuaded our neighbours in Shetland to get involved, we started to think how a project on such a scale would work, and more importantly, how we were going to pay for it. When you are a small authority, budget is always a concern, but we were able to secure eight sessions of Scottish Book Trust Live Literature Funding.



Ann Cleeves and Lin Anderson at the Orkney Fossil & Heritage Centre where they had a joint event.



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Shetland crime author Marsali Taylor 'launches' her new book into the sea off Vementry, Shetland.



Fran Flett Hollinrake waiting to entertain the crowd outside St Magnus Cathedral with ghostly tales.

This allowed us to invite the authors Lin Anderson, Louise Welsh and Zoe Strachan to join in the fun. Flybe and Northlink also helped with sponsored travel, which meant that although we spent more than we normally would on author events for the year, costs were not prohibitive.

Help from our friends

We were astounded by the generosity of local authors, storytellers and organisations who gave up their time and services to be involved in 24 Islands/24 Hours. Orkney Arts, Museums and Heritage helped out with staff and venues, meaning we could put on late-night ghost stories in St Magnus Cathedral. I also had someone approach me at the issue desk and say 'I've got a yurt you can use', which doesn't happen every day, but it made a wonderful location for a Story Blanket session with pupils from Evie Primary.

Getting out and about

The aim of the project was to get away from the main library buildings and visit places where we had never done events before. We had such a positive response from all the islands involved, and many of them took on much of the organisation, expanding on our original ideas and making it a major occasion involving the whole island. In Eday, the locals turned out to share their favourite poem with Alison Miller, and our Principal Librarian Karen Walker was texting me in amazement from Papa Westray as the audience numbers at the event kept increasing throughout the afternoon.

Happy staff

A huge benefit to come from 24 Islands/24 Hours was the positive impact it had on our staff. Everyone played their part in

some way, whether it was in the organisation beforehand, working extra shifts or picking up authors from the airport. Where possible, we tried to send someone from the library to every event. This meant some people were slightly out of their comfort zone, possibly being directly involved with an author event for the first time. Despite some initial apprehension, the feedback from staff afterwards was overwhelmingly positive.

Something for everyone

24 Islands/24 Hours had something for everyone; there was poetry, history, crime, storytelling, a new book group, and much more. We covered all age groups, with a Bookbug session at the nursery in North Walls and Lin Anderson visiting the senior citizens club in Westray. We gained new members, lapsed members re-joined, and attendance at our reading groups has

increased since.

There was a lot of interest and coverage in local and national press. Joe Haddow was in Orkney and Shetland to report on the project for Claudia Winkleman's BBC Radio 2 Arts Show. Overall, I feel that 24 Islands/24 Hours was a great success, but I think we might stick to running one event at a time in future.

Shetland

Karen Fraser: WE already had a busy year planned when Orkney hatched the 24 islands idea. Exciting as it sounded, we couldn't afford to put resources into a new project unless it fulfilled service objectives. So said I, po-facedly.

A good fit with our goals

When we thought it through however, the project tied in well with our service plans – improving community access; promoting e-services; a membership drive; wider early years outreach. Our library services have to be flexible to cover remote scattered communities. Some small island book collections are looked after by volunteers; some of our school libraries are open to the public; our mobile libraries are nippy enough to make house-to-house stops in scattered villages. This was a chance to promote all the different strands of our service, with the help of the community contacts and goodwill that makes things work day to day.

Good partnerships

Partnership work with Orkney is always fruitful, as we have much in common and love to steal each other's good ideas. Travel to other library authorities – even Orkney



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The Gruffalo travelled around Orkney and Shetland on the mobile library van.



Poetry on the pier at Skerries.

– is very expensive, so we value opportunities for our staff to spend time together. Business sponsorship secured by Stewart (from Flybe and Northlink Ferries) helped make this possible.

Local agency Shetland Arts worked with us, which allowed us to encourage creative writing too – writers did workshops in schools, and we sent a poet to do a ‘one-day residency’ on Papa Stour, one of our loveliest islands. Children’s author/illustrator Debi Gliori did a webcast for primary schools, and Ann Cleeves made the scripts for her Shetland murder mystery event ‘Murder in the Ravenswick Hotel’ freely available to libraries around the UK who wanted to join in with 24/24.

Willing participants

Some events needed little input from us: author Marsali Taylor came forward to offer a literal ‘launch’ of her new book at sea, which was a great way to kick off 24/24. Folk on the tiny islands of Skerries offered the use of their kitchen to run an e-book workshop, as they had the best wi-fi! Our long-suffering library staff were prevailed upon to do an outdoor poetry reading there too, as Skerries has two islands and we wanted to count an event on both towards our target.

Two days with the Gruffalo

The initiative and enthusiasm of our staff

was all-important. Most of us, including admin staff and our caretaker contributed – we have folk who are lively, interested and fazed by nothing. They understand perfectly that their job is going out to people rather than waiting for them to come in, and it is really a joyful attitude to work with. Senior Library Assistant Catherine Jeromson spent two non-stop days with the Gruffalo round Orkney and Shetland, even sourcing a native Shetland Gruffalo when his travel arrangements from Orkney fell through.

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Shetland hospitality

Julie Thomson from Unst, who can revel in the title ‘Britain’s Most Northerly Library Assistant’ and runs both a school and public library there, set up the climactic events of 24/24. The welcome in Unst – where Ann Cleeves set her latest novel and chose to have its national launch – was full of warmth, enthusiasm and good old Shetland hospitality. Most of our participants, including Bookbug and the Gruffalo, converged there for the finale!

A whole lot of goodwill

So although 24/24 was maybe a bit gimmicky, it fostered interest and goodwill and it didn’t use a disproportionate amount of time or money. We were just doing the things our libraries should do anyway, but concentrating it into a ridiculously short time period to get more attention. We reached more people, forged useful new relationships, joined up new members, got great feedback, increased our Facebook and Twitter followers, and it was great staff development. And there’s an insatiable demand for return visits from the Gruffalo! [1]

More news and photos from 24 Islands/24 Hours on the libraries’s website and Facebook pages.

- www.shetland-library.gov.uk
- www.orkneylibrary.org.uk