

Morrab Moments

Mary Gabriel

The letter from Lisa Di Tommaso, Chief Librarian of the Morrab Library, telling all Members that the Library would be closed 'until further notice' at 4.00 pm on Friday 20th March 2020, brought people into the Library in anxious numbers. The house buzzed with distracted Members.

Then, as I stood in the Fiction section, choosing six books to take away, I heard these remarkable words from Lisa: "Take as many as you like," she said, from her position behind the desk. "They are no good on the shelves!" Such words from a librarian were startling evidence of the uncertainty of the times.

Grabbing the opportunity, I gathered in sixteen books, feeling very richly endowed with words to fill the void of the coming days. Another Member, with a retired father in need of 'Who Dunit' material, took home more than sixty. Lisa's bold and generous dictum made many a household better able to cope with sequestration.

Finally, with as many books as possible carried away home by grateful Members, the Library closed its doors, and lockdown began on 23rd March 2020.

The house dozed its way through the following weeks. All the blinds were drawn and it looked bleakly unused. However, Lisa wrote to us on 6th May 2020 to say that: "I'm popping into the Library each week to make sure that everything is OK, and I'm happy to report that all is well in the building, although I get the feeling it is missing you all, as do we."

The weeks passed in bright weather, and with high hopes that the lockdown would put paid to the COVID threat. The books scattered so vigorously about the district did much to encourage Morrab members to look forward to a re-opening of the Library, and their chance to replenish their supply of reading material.

So Lisa's letter of 26th June 2020, welcoming us back, albeit by appointment and in limited numbers only, was received with enthusiasm. Members flowed back in again, to find Lisa there to greet them at the door and one or more Librarians at the desks within, guarded by acres of clear plastic on an elegantly carpentered frame. Books were deposited for quarantining for seventy-two hours and new ones chosen and carried away. Tuna, housekeeper extraordinaire, who had always kept the house sparkling, was able to return.

The summer went on blithely in this 'new normal'.

Then, a Newsletter from Lisa in September read:

'Lockdown Stories

We thought we would like to capture something of the spirit of this unprecedented time. The longest period the Library has ever been closed in its 202-year history. We'd very much like to hear your lockdown stories.'

To which I replied with the following verse:

Lisa's Book Amnesty

"Take all the books you like," she said,
"Really indulge yourselves.
Better they're out and being read
Than sitting on the shelves."
So far and wide the books dispersed.
The shelves showed empty spaces.
'Til now, at last, the trends reversed
And they've regained their places.
And Morrab House is all a-gleam
And sanitised and glowing,
Cherished by Lisa and her team,
Who kept the whole thing going.

5th September 2020