

PORTRAIT OF A BOOKSHOP

In the first of an occasional series of visits to established bookshops, our new staff member in our membership department, Pippa Halpin, meets the manager of Sarum College Bookshop, Jenny Monds.



Sarum College is part of The Close, a stunning historic square in the centre of Salisbury overlooked by picturesque Queen Anne style houses covered in roses, museums and Grade I listed buildings. It feels a world apart from the more modern town centre which sits just the other side of The Close's historic walls. Rising from the park in the middle of The Close, stands Salisbury Cathedral. It is a spectacular location for a bookshop.



However, as Jenny, the college's bookshop manager, mentioned in our interview, the location has its challenges: 'It's a lovely place but you've got to know we're here', she said, smiling. 'We're not on the high street, we haven't got a front window – we can't even put signs out on The Close. And once you get here, there's a big front door and you've got to be quite brave to push your way through it.' The bookshop is inside the red brick college building: as you walk in, it's the two rooms and downstairs section immediately to your right.

So how do they draw in their customers?

Whilst the college students are the core (their set reading lists are stocked by the shop), along with clergy from the Diocese and local church members, I was impressed to hear Jenny explain how very involved the bookshop is within the wider local community. 'We've joined the Salisbury Independents [a local scheme to promote the value of 180 independent businesses]: if they're doing something, we'll join in. For the first time this year they had the Independents Week and we joined in with that even though the week before was the BA's Independent Bookshop Week! So one lot of bunting came down and another lot went up!' This was Jenny's top tip: 'Join in with everything! That kind of thing is worth doing – getting your name out and being a part of the community... Remind people that you're there.'



They also take part in the Salisbury International Arts Festival, Small Business Saturday and all the BA's national campaigns (Books are My Bag, Independent Bookshop Week, Civilised Saturday). 'Sometimes you think "Gosh something else happening: what can we do?!" but you can do something very simple: put a bit of bunting up, put the odd special offer on, it doesn't take a lot. Or a quiz... Why not?!' I was struck by Jenny's energy: she seemed ready to be involved with everything.

In addition to harnessing external enterprises to support their publicity, Sarum College Bookshop also organises its own personalised events: on average one author event a month. This is Jenny's passion: 'I like bringing authors and readers together... One of

the events I really enjoyed was Malcolm Guite – he's a priest but he's also a poet. He recites his own and other people's poetry really well. People get very into it.'



Observing that Amazon is the biggest challenge facing physical bookshops today, Jenny's attitude was shrewd and pragmatic: 'Why would people come into a physical bookshop when they can probably find the same thing online, cheaper, and coming the next day? I should think a lot of customers do use Amazon as well as us...

You have to provide something that Amazon doesn't. Amazon's fine if you know what you want... What we do, that they don't, is provide something to browse: that's where we come into our own.' She also cited customer service, knowledgeable book recommendations, physical displays and author events as unique selling points for physical bookshops.

'Try to think of a unique angle... something that's going to make people come back in that's going to be different. Perhaps have an easy chair or two so people can linger: looking at the Booksellers Association Fitness Programme Report, it looks as though bookshops with cafés do the best.'

Sarum College Bookshop's niche is academic theological books and merchandise but they also sell general fiction, local history books, poetry, gifts and attractive cards: this entices people to 'wander in if they're in the area'.

Unlike most bookshops, Sarum College Bookshop has a wider end goal to drawing in customers: 'We are a way in to the college. So sometimes people might come across our website or find us on Twitter, become customers and then end up doing a course or staying in the bed and breakfast.' They embrace both this aim and the challenge of their sequestered location with a verve and vigour which, quite frankly, puts the comfortable hour I spent in their armchair drinking tea to shame.

For further information on all the BA services mentioned, please contact pippa.halpin@booksellers.org.uk

Fact sheet

Type of bookseller:

Christian college bookshop

Location: Salisbury town centre, within 'The Close'

Age of bookshop: 25 years old

Who works here: Jenny (manager – 8 years), Emily (assistant manager – 4 years), Ann (sales assistant – over 10 years!), Jill (part-time sales assistant – 5 years) and various volunteers

Most helpful BA service:

Batch Returns

A Successful Bookshop Event: Jenny's Top Tips

Spend time getting the right author (usually someone who has just had a book published)

Advertise (posters around town, local radio/newspapers, the BA's Caboodle website, Twitter, Facebook)

Provide refreshments (tea and cake/wine)

Charge (to give the event value and to help with catering numbers)