

Word up

Tracy Spiers sings the praises of Evesham Festival of Words, an all-year festival celebrating words in all forms... written, spoken or sung

WORDS: Tracy Spiers

You know an interview is going to go well when you discover that, if stranded on a desert island, your interviewee would take the same object as you – a pair of running trainers. Not only that, but she has also completed a journey you find yourself on.

Sue Ablett, or to be more accurate Dr Sue Ablett, is down-to-earth, warm, friendly and is passionate about undertaking projects, and doing them well. I am doing a PhD on fun; she did hers for fun. And if there is one object she cannot do without, it is her trusted pair of trainers which have helped her run thousands of miles. This is a lady after my own heart, who is a long-distant runner in attitude no matter what she does. She also happens to love words. Not surprisingly, then, Sue, along with a dedicated group of volunteers, has helped grow something unique for the historic town of Evesham.

Seven years ago, the much-loved Evesham Festival of Words was born. Interestingly, the word 'festival' is defined as an often, periodic celebration or programme of events or entertainment having a specified focus. Unlike literary festivals – which focus on the written word in book format – Evesham Festival of Words celebrates words in all forms, whether it is written, spoken, or sung. So, perhaps the best word to describe this festival, is feastival, because while July 1-3 is when the main 2022 events happen, this is an all-year celebration.

'We don't have huge events; we have smaller ones in smaller venues which means it is more intimate and you can get close



Photo: Ken Doran

LEFT:
Ken Doran with his
Little Free Library

to the author. You don't have to wait a year for the next festival; there is something to satisfy your appetite every month,' says Sue, who is festival chair.

It was in 2016 that the Festival of Words began. It was held over one weekend at the beginning of July, and it was thanks to the late Lindsay Stanberry-Flynn, a

'Sue, along with a dedicated group of volunteers, has helped grow something unique'

local author and founder member of the festival, who knew some key authors and writers, that the event took off.

Lindsay sadly died last May, and as the pandemic prevented the send-off she deserved, her life will be celebrated on Sunday, July 3 as part of an event called *Remarkable Women*. Held at the

Munroe Suite, in The Northwick Hotel, it will be hosted by Derek Taylor, former international TV news correspondent and best-selling historian and acclaimed public speaker. The first part of the evening will be a talk about the late 17th-century traveller Celia Fiennes who visited this part of the country in 1698. In his latest book, *England from a Side-Saddle: The Great Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, Derek celebrates Celia's courage, determination, and curiosity. He has dedicated the book to Lindsay, who will also be celebrated during the evening with music and readings dear to her and her family.

BOOK BENCHES AND LITTLE FREE LIBRARY

As with many events, COVID-19 forced festivals to embrace the digital world, but as a result new and wider audiences have been



reached. As they entered 2020, organisers of Evesham Festival of Words were looking forward to 50 events they had planned for the year.

'It was going to be our biggest festival year and we just cancelled all but three events. We entered 2021 slightly more optimistic, and we moved to Zoom for some events, but it proved quite hard to get audiences to come back. Some of our regulars were still not going out. But 2022 feels a bit more normal, and we have 25 events planned for the year, with some still on Zoom,' explains Sue.

During lockdown, to maintain its presence in the town, the festival commissioned two

book benches to be positioned on the banks of the River Avon, near Raphael's Restaurant. The stunning benches, which capture the countryside and landmarks of the Vale of Evesham, were painted by Badsey-based artist Ian Gibson. Alongside this, craftsman Ken Doran created a miniature book library in the shape of a boat.

This Little Free Library, which is also at Raphael's, is one of over 100,000 situated all over the world. It started in the US by a man who built a replica of an American school house at the end of his drive and filled it with some of his late mother's books. Libraries are now registered, receive a charter

mark and are plotted on a world map on the internet.

Already two sell-out festival events have happened this year. The Bard of Barnwood, Margaret Daniels, who performs in the style of well-known poet Pam Ayres, will be sharing her latest amusing poems and anecdotes as part of Raphael's Easter Charity Weekend on Friday, April 15, at 2.30pm. It will include an afternoon high tea. Throughout the month of May, Severn Quills, a group of local, talented, calligraphers based in Upton-upon-Severn will be hosting a Calligraphy Exhibition entitled *The Written Word*, which is themed around the spoken and written word, and the importance ▶

ABOVE:
Spring blooms
outside Evesham's
Almonry Museum

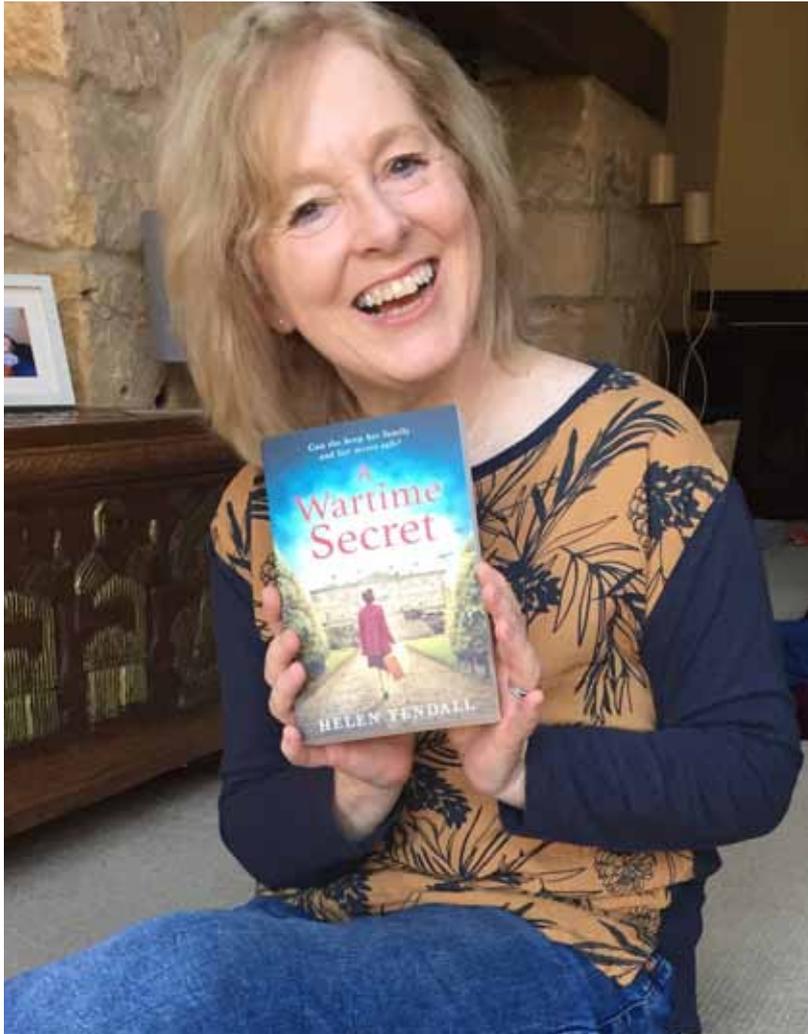


Photo: Helen Yendall

Helen Yendall with her book *A Wartime Secret*

formal education, but he was a free spirit and was able to express himself through his words. I think now more than ever we need those free spirits today to come forward and express themselves,' she says.

'This is a warm safe and friendly environment, where everyone is just as nervous as you may be feeling. I still get nervous, and I have been doing this a long time.'

SHARING STORIES

Another event which was launched just before lockdown and has successfully continued, is Evesham Festival of Words Book Club, led by local author and creative writing tutor, Helen Yendall. Readers give the books they discuss together scores each month, so at the end of the year they can tell which was the most popular and least popular book.

Helen is former Warwick poet laureate, a creative writing tutor, and award-winning published short story writer, and has just had her first novel, *A Wartime Secret*, published.

'I teach three creative writing classes and I always encourage my students to go to festivals. It is really inspiring to sit and listen to other people's journeys, to

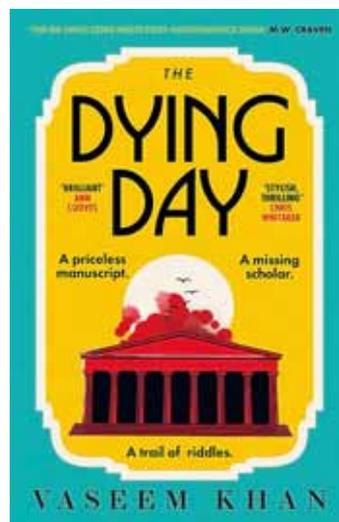
of libraries. It had originally been planned for 2020 and will take place in Evesham Library in Oat Street, from May 1-31.

ONLINE COMPETITIONS

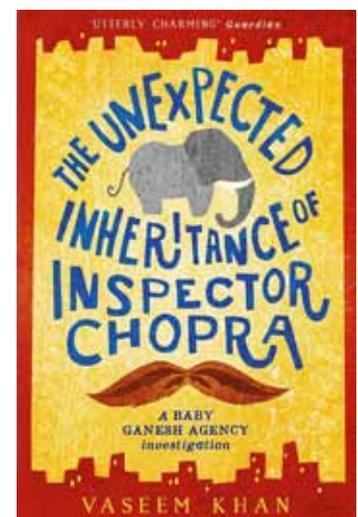
New for this year is an online competition whereby writers are given a first line and challenged to complete the story in no more than 50 words. As well as this, following on from a successful popular online *Poetry Open Mic*, last year, Anna Saunders and Beth Brooke will be hosting another online evening of poetry readings and open mic slots on Wednesday, May 11, 7pm.

Director of Cheltenham Poetry Festival, Anna has had seven books of poetry collections published and has been running poetry workshops for the past 15 years for all ages. 'Poetry is for everyone. One of the greatest poets, Dylan Thomas had no

'Now more than ever we need those free spirits today to come forward'



LEFT:
The Dying Day by Vaseem Khan



RIGHT:
The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra by Vaseem Khan

get ideas and meet authors. It is lonely being a writer, so I guess this is the more glamorous side,' she admits.

'We always have a couple of workshops and this year we have got a travel-writing workshop and one on how to write funny. It is a great opportunity for people who cannot get to a class or be part of a writing group to come for the day and meet like-minded people. They will go away buzzing with lots of ideas. It is such a fun thing to do.'

Writing Funny with Fran Hill is on Saturday, July 2, 10.30am-12.30pm at 117 High Street, Evesham; and *Travel Writing: Destination Publication with Simon Whaley* on Sunday, July 3 at Hampton Community Hall, 10.30am-12.30pm.

Helen will be joining forces with fellow writer Jane Bettany, who has been on the same journey as her. Jane wrote short stories for over 20 years before winning a writing competition which propelled her into becoming a novelist in 2020. She has just published her third novel.

They share their story on Friday, July 1 (2pm-3pm) called *It's Never Too Late*, at 117 High Street. This will be followed at 3.30pm with an interview with Amanda Reynolds whose bestselling debut, *Close to Me*, published in 2017 by Headline, has been adapted as a six-part TV



Photo: eveshamfestivalofwords.org

Evesham's bell tower and Abbey Park



Photo: Bob Lockwood/mikron.org.uk

Floating theatre-makers Mikron Theatre Company brings *Raising Agents* to Evesham in September

series based on the book, starring Connie Nielsen and Christopher Eccleston. Helen will also be hosting a *Festival Quiz Night* with Chris Cherry at 7.30pm at Raphael's Restaurant.

The following evening, Saturday July 2 at 7pm, best-selling crime writer Vaseem Khan will take his audience on an exhilarating journey from the last days of Raj to the heart of modern India. He will examine the setting of his new novel, *The Dying Day*, in 1950s Bombay, just a few years after Indian independence, the assassination of Gandhi, and the horrors of Partition. Vaseem will also discuss one of the world's great treasures, a 600-year-old copy of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which is stored at Bombay's Asiatic Society and



Photo: eveshamfestivalofwords.org

ABOVE: The River Avon running through Evesham. The waterside Rowing Club is another festival venue

vanishes at the start of *The Dying Day*, leaving behind a trail of cryptic riddles and dead bodies. This event, entitled *Killing Gandhi, Dante's Divine Comedy and India at the Crossroads* takes place at the Rowing Club.

Looking forward to the July weekend, festival chair Sue Ablett, will host an illustrated talk called *Shaking the Family Tree*, with Noelle Chambers and Galen Bartholomew at 117 High Street on Friday, July 1, 10.30am-noon. She says there is something for everyone. This event is a departure for Sue who usually opens the main weekend with a travel talk that has a literary twist.

'We believe in celebrating words in all their forms which gives us freedom to host all kinds of events whether that is author talks, plays, concerts, open mic poetry, quizzes and writing competitions such as short stories, haiku, six-word stories, photo captions and even creating a new word,' says Sue.

'We have put together what we think is an exciting programme of

events for 2022, and we hope that festival fans will come along to support us as well as enjoying our lovely town of Evesham. I love Evesham, I was born here and there is much to see and appreciate in this historic town of ours.'

And once the main festival weekend is over, there are still fun events planned for the rest of the year, including Mikron Theatre Company's performance of *Raising Agents*, on Sunday, September 11, celebrating 100 years of the Women's Institute. It's an outdoor event at Raphael's Restaurant and will guarantee to entertain and bring cheer and laughter with their story of friendship.

In a sense, the Festival of Words is a compilation of stories. Each person who takes part whether he/she is hosting a talk, organising an event, or participating in a workshop or part of an audience, has a story to share. Words are so powerful. I was always told I would never be a journalist as I wasn't hard

enough. I never wanted to be hard. For me, like Sue and her team, words are tools to encourage, inspire, motivate, educate, and they unite us.

So, as I conclude my interview with Sue, I take a few words of encouragement away myself and like her, I know that in a few hours, we will both be pounding the canal paths and roads with our trusted trainers, no doubt thinking up new projects. I leave the final comments to the festival chair.

'When I was doing my PhD, I was running a clinical psychology department and one of my colleagues asked me why I was doing a PhD for fun. Then he realised. He said to me: "You are a project person and give everything to what you are doing." And he is right. After my PhD I redesigned my kitchen, even undertaking the plumbing. I guess the festival is a project and one which I really enjoy.' ♦
To see the full programme, visit: eveshamfestivalofwords.org/programme