



Looking back over the last 10 years since our first Container Library & Learning Centre: Story 4

If you don't Ask....

The year is 2016. March 2016 to be precise. I've been back from Kenya for eight months, long enough to forget the 'fun' I had with the first library and I am gearing up for the next one. The first time we've sent 7,000 books and we have done so with the help of the National Police Aid Convoy based in Nottingham. Seven thousand books fits, only just, into a standard garage that we had in Stevenage Town Centre. But it is amazing how much our name grew in only just 12 months. In March we realised that one garage isn't enough, two garages in different locations are impractical. So, what next?

You ask around and you are lucky enough for someone to suggest a local storage company called Dollimore and Christie. You screw up all the courage you have. You knock on the office door and you ask Mr Christie if they have a container they could let us use. For three or four months. You promise. One quick look at their container map and we shake hands. It doesn't take long for us to become right at home. In June 2016, we and the staff from DCs load our first 40ft container in our new home. This time, we have loaded 12,000 books and library furniture. But we also shipped stuff for other charities.

I followed the container to Kenya and after I came back I went to see the guys at DCs to close down the borrowed container. What I didn't know is that people started delivering books to DCs and they happily organised them and stored them in the same container. I am tired and I am overwhelmed by the number of books, but also by the scale of the project. It is amazing, but also expensive. I am losing (and enjoying) three months each year when I am personally overseeing the building of the libraries in Kenya and so I am basically working on a nine months year. In the nine months I have to raise £15,000 and get together at least 10,000 books.

I just can't do a library every year. It is not possible. But people are incredible. Despite the increased number of books we received since moving to DCs, I made the difficult decision not to ship in 2017. 2017 became the year for us to think. The Board had a decision to make: trying to grow; or scale it down. Easy to discuss sitting around a table with good coffee and cake, but little bit more difficult when the books just keep arriving. OK, we will grow.

A library was planned for 2018 and we get the best news ever. The UK Aid Small Charities Fund gave us £50,000 for the construction of two libraries over two years. And so, spurred on by the success and having some financial stability, we have launched into book collection and with that our number of volunteers tripled. Before long, the free storage container wasn't big enough, so we asked for another. At one point we had three

containers we were using. We shipped 30,000 books in 2018, but it still left hundreds of books in the storage. One afternoon, after a packing session, and again over a nice cuppa and biscuits, James (another Mr Christie) says to me “why don't you take over the shed we don't really use?”

Why don't we? I am thinking. With a bunch of volunteers we dismantle the metal shed, we do some gardening and we get the site ready for the delivery of our first stationary container. We are raising funds for the second one totally and blissfully unaware of what is round the corner. The second container arrives two days before the entire world shuts down. As soon as Covid restrictions are lifted, with yet more volunteers we join the two containers with a wooden lean-to type of construction. Now we have almost 100ft of space.

In 2022 we start, with the help of, yes you guessed it, volunteers but also DCs we begin to insulate the ‘working 40ft container’ and start processing 80,000 books. Except, the books are now pouring in and we, occasionally need yet more space. DCs come to the rescue yet again. We borrow, and this time we stick to our promised number of months, container or two when we need them.

In the late 2023 we get into an amazing partnership with a shipping company. While it is an incredible deal, it does mean that we need to ask DCs for yet more space. We need to position our two 20ft containers that we use to shuttle to and from Kenya while we load them in the UK and wait for the ship to be available. So, that is 100ft of permanent space, plus 20 or 40ft temporary space. How lucky was I back in 2016?! And how little did we know then how much we make ourselves at home at the premises of Dollimore and Christie. Without them we would never be able to do what we do today.