

A 'rare and remarkable' resource

WHILE booksellers and bookworms from Truro to Tokyo will be celebrating World Book Day on March 6, Penzance's 'library within a garden by the sea' tries to make every day a world book day.

As Annabelle Read, librarian at Morrab Library, says: "We buy all our books locally and every year our suppliers, Tim and Katherine Wallace at the Penzance Bookshop in Chapel Street, are kind to us and give us posters and books to help mark the day but, having said that, we try to make every day a world book day here."

The library came into being back in 1818 and some 70 years later moved into Morrab House where it is still. It is one of the handful of independent subscription libraries left in the UK.

Although it has been part of the town's fabric for such a long time and is familiar to those who walk regularly through Morrab Gardens, it is often forgotten that the library exists. But this establishment, described as "rare, remarkable and rewarding", is alive and well. In some ways its splendid sylvan setting is a drawback. Lending it a sense of seclusion, it also suggests a certain exclusivity, a feeling that it exists only for the privileged few. This could hardly be farther from the truth.

The library is sunny rather than stuffy and although, as already stated, it is a subscription library for which members are obliged to pay an annual fee of £25, this is the only obstacle preventing anyone from joining.

Such subscriptions are essential for the library's survival, and the returns a member receives for his or her subscription are generous - everything from a warm welcome to access to its stock of some 45,000 books. It also has various collections - from books relating to Cornwall and the other five Celtic countries, to the Dawson collection which has so much Napoleon memorabilia it has been described as "the only great Napoleonic collection in the world".

There is also its splendid photographic

With World Book Day looming, FRANK RUHRMUND visits Penzance's 'Library within a garden by the sea'

archive, made up from a number of collections and containing an astonishing 10,000 glass and celluloid negatives, and black and white prints, which capture all aspects of West Cornwall, its people and places, events and activities, from the mid-19th century to the late 1970s. The photographic archive is available to all, members and non-members alike, from 10.30am to 12.30pm each Thursday.

All this, plus the coffee and tea readily available in the members' kitchen: what more could a bookworm, hungry or thirsty for reading matter, wish for?

The library is renowned for its major annual fund-raising events - its summer fair, held in the Morrab Gardens, and its autumn book fair, held in St John's Hall.

It takes itself seriously, offering facilities for research and scholarship which are without parallel, but also has its lighter side. As Annabelle Read (what better name could a librarian have?) says: "Our crime section, which is second to none, is also our most used section." With a smile, she adds: "I'm not sure what that says about our membership! We also keep abreast of modern novels and books about Cornwall; quirky books also have a place alongside solid academic books and we have a small but beautiful children's section which holds everything from *The Wind in the Willows* to the *Harry Potter* books to *The Dangerous Book for Boys*."

Stressing the importance of the library's membership, Annabelle states: "The library wouldn't survive without their subscriptions. Many of them also help to run it, serving as members of the management committee or by coming in on a daily basis and carrying out all manner of voluntary duties."

"We have a membership of close on 600 at the moment which is pretty good but, at the same time, although I know it's extremely unlikely to happen, it would be lovely if, on next Thursday, World Book Day, or any other day for that matter, another 600, like Tennyson's famous Light Brigade, came charging into the building...but carrying subscriptions rather than lances. I'd be happy to show them around in the hope that they would like what they saw so much they would want it to be their library."

Joking apart, she is only too happy to show anyone around the library.



■ Looking forward to World Book Day are librarians, from left, Annabelle Read, Ann Alexander and Annie Pryor.

Factfile

The Morrab Library is open from 10am to 4pm, Tuesday to Friday, and 10am to 1pm on Saturdays. For further information phone or fax 01736 364474, or go to www.morrablibrary.co.uk