

European Neighbours' Day 27 May 2008

**Gateshead Council
Libraries & Arts Service events
Gateshead
England
UK**

This is the first year that Gateshead has participated in European Neighbours' Day and key events were staged at libraries across the borough.

My Sunderland Road, past, present and future

Sixty-one people from The Readers at Home Service (elderly and housebound local people) and older people from the Sunderland Road area came along to the library to celebrate European Neighbours' Day.

The purpose of the day was for this group to come together as neighbours' and to get involved with a community project, which school children from the area have been working on. The children have been researching the history of a demolished estate on Sunderland Road, and have also been involved in naming the new streets of the development recently built on the site of the old estate. Reminiscence work and celebration of the development of the local area were the key features of this special inter-generational activity.

The key aims of the activity were to engender a better understanding and mutual respect between younger and older people living in the same community, forge new relationships, leading to greater involvement in community life and opportunities for inter-generational learning about the community history and events.

The day started with a refreshments and the group watching a slide show (put together by library staff) featuring bygone images of the Sunderland Road area. This proved an excellent way to jog memories about what life was like in the area during the last century.

After the slide show the older people were split into groups around tables to make it easier for them to look at a collection of old photographs, talk to each other and for staff to interview them and record reminiscences of their life in days gone by. They shared stories about their families and friends, the war - they vividly remember the blackout, being evacuated and going to dances and the picture. They described their school days – their teachers, the local 'bobby' who was tough but fair - and lamented the fact that corner shops aren't there anymore and that the sense of belonging to the community just wasn't the same.

Whilst looking through the old photographs, one of the group, June Prytula, who has lived in area for all her 76 years, spotted her father. He was David Carr Oven, born in 1910 and attended Sunderland Road School Football team 1923-1924 at the time they won the Elliott Shields football cup.

As part of European Neighbours' Day, the group shared a lunch and refreshments in celebration of the event- the same as many other neighbours in cities across Europe.

Throughout lunchtime everyone was still buzzing and chatting to each other about old times. Many expressed that the day had a real community feel to it. Some members of the group reunited with old friends. Others found out they went to the same school. Some made brand new friends. Some of their comments were quite moving:

'It's lovely to feel wanted again'

'This was the best day out that I've have out in a very long time'

'I've loved every minute of my time in the library today'

'This feels like the old days'

A follow-up event will be held on 2 July, where the children will present their completed work to the Readers at Home Group. This will provide a further opportunity for inter-generational discussion about the community in which all the participants live.

European Neighbours' coffee morning – Blaydon Library

Prior to 27 May, staff in Blaydon Library gave out special European Neighbours' Day postcards, for customers to give to their neighbours, inviting them to come along to Blaydon Library for a special coffee morning, to meet new people, and to see what their local library has to offer.

The day was intended to create a community experience for local people, within a highly valued neighbourhood service, to highlight the fact that the libraries are a community space that all can share. It was also intended as a socially inspired activity to introduce local people to the library service who had either never used the library, or were lapsed users.

Over 50 people of all ages came along on the morning, where they enjoyed a range of European biscuits and pastries and a chat with neighbours (old and new) and library staff. Some of the visitors were introduced to the library for the first time and were able to see the range of services available for them as local

residents. Customers also learned about events within the library service such as the Reading Group, Local History Month events and Rhymetime.

Many positive comments were received about the idea behind the event and how much people enjoyed it. The day also proved to be an excellent way to showcase what our Library service has to offer to residents and visitors to the area.

Our Belgian Neighbours – Birtley Library

Birtley Library celebrated European Neighbours Day on 27 May with a talk by local author John Bygate.

John has published several books about the Birtley Belgians - First World War wounded soldiers who came to Birtley with their families to escape the war in Europe. The soldiers worked in the munitions factory helping with the war effort. John entertained the audience of 25 people with excerpts from the Belgian newspaper, which was published especially for the workers. His talk gave everyone a fascinating insight into the everyday lives of our European allies who showed true neighbourly spirit in the face of great adversity and suffering.

Little remains of Elisabethville, the “Belgian” village in Birtley, which housed the soldiers and their families, but you can read all about it in John's latest book “Of Arms & Heroes” available to borrow from your local library.

In true neighbourly fashion the audience enjoyed a cup of tea and a Belgian chocolate biscuit after the event!

New cooperative partnership launched

European Neighbours' Day also saw the launch of a new cooperation with Chemnitz. A German British Society holds monthly meetings in Chemnitz City Library, where members are very interested in cooperating with users of Gateshead Libraries on anything to do with the English language, culture and literature. We plan to link up our reading groups and stage other mutually beneficial activities, which help our respective customers to develop their foreign language skills. There is lots to discuss before we can start to make formal plans, but this new relationship with Chemnitz has the potential to be a very exciting and life enhancing opportunity for Gateshead Library users.

Future co-operation with Portuguese school

Contact was made by the Libraries & Arts Service with a primary school in Tomar, Portugal, which is currently working with St Joseph's Blydon primary school on a Comenius-funded project. We focused on literacy and the school decided to read some Hans Christian Andersen stories, which they knew would be available in English, so that there was common ground for discussion. They asked neighbouring classes for reading recommendations for each other and

also invited their neighbouring municipal Court House and public Civil Registration service and another school to join in. Lawyers and magistrates from the Court House and the Registration Service and a teacher from the other school visited the school on 27th to talk to the children about their jobs. The children also introduced themselves then the visitors read the Andersen stories to the children. Photographs were taken, which will be forwarded, and the local press were contacted with details of the event and the link with Gateshead.