

A History of the Book Box Service

The Book Box Service was originally called the Family Book Service and it began in November 1954 when the first batch of book boxes left the County Library in Laing Street to be taken by steamer to the residents of North Ronaldsay. The service was the idea of the County Librarian at the time Evan MacGillvray who had become concerned about the opportunities of the people living in the remote islands of Orkney to enjoy the amenities provided by the County Library in Kirkwall. Prior to the introduction of the Family Book Service the outer islands of Orkney were served by book centres which held loanable collections of library books on the island, usually at a school or community centre, and which were looked after by local volunteers. But these facilities had become poorly used because of limited opening hours, poor weather or because of a lack of volunteers to operate the service.

And so Evan MacGillvray began planning a new service that would provide a more direct connection between the Library and the readers living in the islands. He personally visited North Ronaldsay to promote the new service before it was launched and he was determined to keep it as simple as possible; a strong, waterproof box would be sent to each household that requested it containing around a dozen books. Each box would also contain a request card so that readers could ask for specific subjects or titles and a prepaid return label. The cost of delivery and return would be paid for by the library with no cost to the reader.

It was an innovative plan, the first of its kind anywhere in the country and it was an unprecedented success. When the service began in North Ronaldsay it was taken up by 54 of the 56 households on the island and the level of book issues to the island increased dramatically, rising from 3,846 to 57,752 books in the first year alone. Plans began immediately to extend the service to the other islands of Orkney once more containers could be sourced. The

Family Book Service was extended to Sanday in 1955, Stronsay and Eday in 1956, Westray and Papa Westray in 1957 and Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre in 1958. By 1960 there were hundreds of boxes and thousands of books in regular circulation throughout the outer islands of Orkney.



Book boxes in use in the 1960s

The unique service continued to flourish over the next twenty years and by the mid-70s there were over 700 boxes in regular circulation. Though this figure declined slightly with depopulation of the islands the service was still going strong well through the 1980s with more than 600 boxes regularly travelling back and forth between the Library and the islands. In November 1990 following the introduction of roll on/roll off ferries to the south and inner north isles the Library introduced a Mobile Library Service which was also a great success. Then in August 1994 the Mobile Library Service was

extended to Westray, Sanday, Stronsay and Eday which allowed residents of these islands to browse and choose their own books, replacing the need for the Family Book Service in these islands.

Today the Book Box Service continues to serve the islands of North Ronaldsay and Papa Westray. Though new technology means that customers can now choose to go online to browse the library catalogue and choose their own Book Box selection, the service remains virtually unchanged since it was introduced. Around a dozen books are sent out by boat or plane in a strong, waterproof box with a return label and a request card and with the cost of delivery and return paid for by the library.

In November 2014 the Book Box Service celebrated its 60th Anniversary.



Delivering boxes to the boat in the 1960s

ORKNEY LIBRARY BOOK BOX SERVICE

Established 1954

