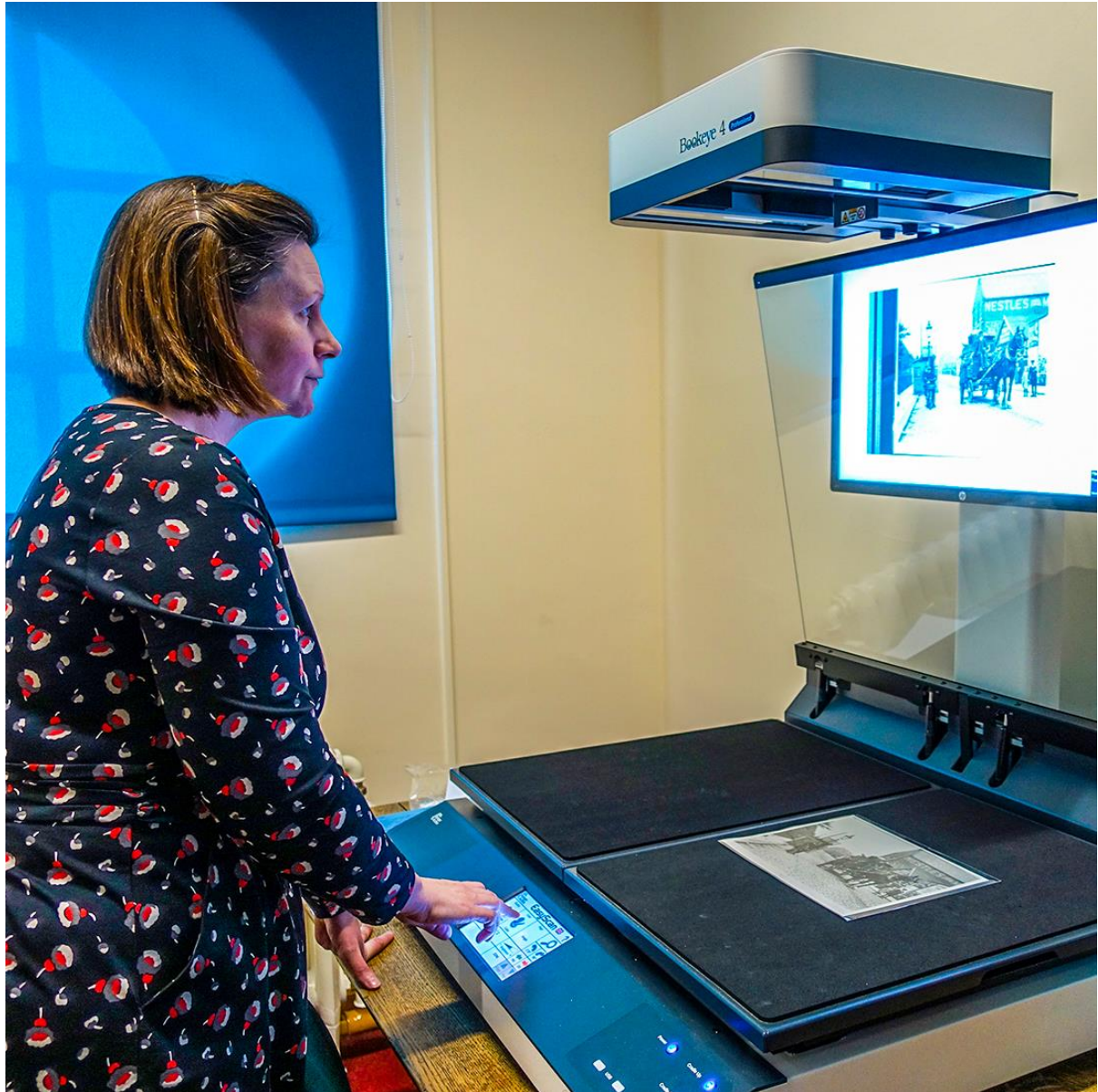


## My Town, My Future

### Interview with Ruth Cull



**Ruth Cull** works as **Library Development Officer** for Middlesbrough Council at the Central Library. She manages the project **My Town, My Future** and agreed to be interviewed about her work and the project.

**Q:** Hi Ruth, the project **My Town, My Future** looks at the past, present and future of Middlesbrough. Can you tell us something about how the project began?

**Ruth:** This time last year we were waiting to hear about our bid for funding from Arts Council England from the Libraries Opportunities for

Everyone Innovation Fund. All local authorities in England could apply, but only 20 would be funded. So we were very excited and even more busy once we heard that we had been successful. The project began in April and it has two main aims.

**Q:** So Middlesbrough has done well to be included in this national scheme – what are the two main aims of the project?

**Ruth:** First of all we wanted to copy our archive of photographs into computer storage – that's to say, to digitise them. The Library service has about 5000 in total; some of them are very old and no longer in very good condition. Digitising them means we can preserve them and also make them available on-line to the public.

**Q:** What equipment is involved and how did you choose the best?

**Ruth:** Well, by myself I would find that very hard, but my colleagues in the council IT service have been very involved and we now have a state-of-the-art machine – a Bookeye scanner. You can see it in the photograph at the start here. Once we had the machine installed and working, I advertised for volunteers to come and work in the Central Library and was delighted at the response. A wonderful team has worked hard through the year and we have just about finished scanning all the photos. The team is now creating posts to be added to the website.

**Q:** This is quite an achievement, but I think you said it's only part of the project – can you say a bit about the second aim?

**Ruth:** The digital record came first, but we also want to involve the people of Middlesbrough in telling their stories about the town. So we designed a set of workshops where participants could take inspirational photographs and write creatively about what Middlesbrough means to them. I also worked with colleagues in our digital media team to develop a web-site where everything can be seen.

**Q:** Is that where Mark Williams and Natalie Scott come in?

**Ruth:** Yes, they have run eight sets of workshops across the town, which have led to the production of some really interesting work. These began in September and the final four groups are running at the moment. Everything that is created is put on the web-site, which you can see at

<http://www.mytownmyfuture.co.uk/>

We also regularly post updates on our facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/BoroLibraries/>

**Q:** So what happens, now the digital record is complete and once the workshops have produced their work?

**Ruth:** Everything will be ready by April this year for us to roll out the results in a variety of ways. I've been working with a company that specialises in exhibitions and we shall have a number of activities.

These will include displays of the work in different locations and I'm discussing with a local publisher the production of an anthology from the workshops. We've already had a number of postcards showing the work done so far and all participants have had sets of these to share with family and friends. These may be going far and wide: I know one that has been sent to Australia.



**Q:** I can see so much has been done by those who've taken part already. Is there any more you hope will be achieved?



**Ruth:** My work in supporting communities is to raise awareness and involve more people in the opportunities offered by our libraries and museums. There's a wide variety of activities taking place in all our Community Hub Libraries, ranging from coffee mornings, knit and natter and craft groups, to reading groups and for young people and families, Lego and chess clubs.

A library is much more than a building containing books – it's a place where people can get help and advice to find work, set up a business, improve their health, meet and learn new skills. Trained, skilled library staff make this difference; they turn a building into a thriving community hub.

**Q:** That's a terrific picture of the project and how it fits into the overall provision of community services in Middlesbrough. Can we move back in time a little bit now and would you tell us a bit about your career and how you came to be here at the Central Library in Middlesbrough?

**Ruth:** After University I worked as a secondary school teacher for a year before deciding that my real interests lie elsewhere. I became an Outreach librarian with a role to encourage more people to use libraries and their facilities. I worked at the Acklam Library and one activity I set up there is still going strong, the Acklam Walking Group.

You can see more about them on-line at:

<https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/content/acklam-library-walks>

Now my role is as Library Development Officer and I really enjoy setting up events such as the Harry Potter programme which began last October

<https://www.facebook.com/events/220223838513606/>

and the Crossing the Tees Book Festival, which runs every June:

<http://www.crossingthetees.org/>

Other activities are listed at

<https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/leisure-events-libraries-and-hubs/community-hubs-and-libraries/library-events>

and

<https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/leisure-events-libraries-and-hubs/community-hubs-and-libraries/your-library-services/reading-groups>

while you can see more about local history at

<http://ctlhs.co.uk/programme/>

and perhaps take part in the **Local History Month** – which is May.

In working on this project I appreciate very much the chance to co-operate with colleagues in all sorts of areas, especially ICT and digital media who not only have set up the specialised equipment and created the website, but also provided ongoing support for staff and volunteers. It's also been great to work alongside Mark and Natalie, who have inspired everyone who has taken part in a course.

Ruth Cull – thank you very much for your time today and here's hoping the next stages of **My Town, My Future** will be as successful and rewarding as its journey so far has been!

If you've read this far, perhaps you've found information about an activity that interests you. I do hope so and don't forget that if it involves taking a photograph or some writing then we'd love to see your results on the web site!

<http://www.mytownmyfuture.co.uk/>

Francis Annett  
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