

# Seven Stories:

## Newcastle's National Treasure



*The Seven Stories site before work began.*

**Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books, was ten years old in August, 2015.**

It began life in 1996, its founders Mary Briggs and Elizabeth Hammill working tirelessly on the tiniest of budgets to prove that dreamers of dreams may become movers and shakers, creating a national centre to celebrate the best of children's literature, preserving original manuscripts and artwork for all time.

They founded the charity because they believed Britain lacked a centre to collect, champion and celebrate children's literature. They wanted to base it where it could make a real difference to the lives of local children and families, knowing that early experience of books and stories is vital to child development and aspiration.

Passionate volunteers, local author David Almond, as well as public and private sponsors were drawn to this vision of what could be. Families and friends gave their time and expertise to make, market and help curate exhibitions, offering everything from carpentry skills to piracy expertise for six-year-olds. Even before there was a building, picture book authors, Colin McNaughton and Sano Yoko, were among the first to exhibit their work, in local museums and art galleries, as a taster of

what could be since it was necessary to prove that the budding charity, given a permanent home, could build and host ground-breaking exhibitions. Children, families and schools came curious, and left, often as determined supporters and enthusiasts.

Teachers, librarians, authors, illustrators and publishers, including the redoubtable David Lloyd of Walker Books, who became a Trustee, all worked to publicise, garner financial support and charitable support for the project. The Arts Council and Newcastle City Council, whose financial support and advice were invaluable, were important early admirers together with a local building society, several trusts and generous private individuals.



*Back of Seven Stories on the Ouseburn river.*

At last, in 2002, an ancient seven storey warehouse was found in the Ouseburn Valley, then, an unloved post-industrial area ripe for cultural regeneration, close to the River Tyne. It had holes in the roof, a top floor accessible only with ladders and hard hats, a cellar with pigeon guano in industrial quantities, and a stream full of tyres, supermarket trolleys and assorted footwear. But, Mary, Elizabeth and their growing band of believers were on board and were not to be deterred.

In August 2005 the artfully converted, quirky building was opened by Jacqueline Wilson and Nick Sharratt as Seven Stories – a new home for British children's literature. Books and stories are now enlivened by interactive exhibitions, performances, author events and learning programmes designed to promote reading for pleasure. Outreach work in schools and local venues takes the message out into the

*Seven Stories – as it is now.*





Kate Edwards, Seven Stories Current CEO

community. There is also a state of the art bookshop, a child-friendly cafe and wonderful views over the former industrial landscape.

Kate Edwards, who worked for Seven Stories even before becoming Chief Executive in 2007, explains, “We set out to raise the profile and appreciation of children’s literature, by celebrating the talented authors, illustrators and makers of children’s books. A children’s book is a piece of artwork we can all own. Seven Stories was founded to showcase and celebrate the important contribution that children’s books make to our cultural life in Britain.” In ten years Seven Stories has founded a national children’s literature archive, professionally curated, temperature and humidity controlled. It includes the work of over two hundred authors, as diverse as David Almond, Enid Blyton, Judith Kerr and Philip Pullman. It has produced twenty-seven inventive, groundbreaking exhibitions, many of which have gone on tour around the UK to reach increasingly wider audiences. The Collection is well used, Kate explains, “We draw on this amazing archive to make beautiful and interactive exhibitions with original artwork and manuscripts displayed alongside playful exhibits that invite children of all ages to step into a story, to make up their own and to discover how their favourite books came into being.”



Over ten years, more than two million people have enjoyed Seven Stories exhibitions and activities. In 2010 it won the Eleanor Farjeon Award for its contribution to children’s literature. In 2012 it was awarded National status by the Arts Council, recognising the national and international status of its work. In 2013 it was voted The UK’s Favourite Education Project, receiving a welcome National Lottery award. Mary and Elizabeth have become MBEs and the centre has hosted royal visitors, most recently the Countess of Cornwall.

Sir Quentin Blake, long-time supporter and outgoing Patron of Seven Stories, has donated a brand new illustration for its birthday. He is full of admiration for, “its journey from an idea to an important national institution that has given children’s literature a home, and is changing the lives of so many children and families.”



Judith Kerr with the tiger who came to teal

Congratulations to Mary Briggs, Elizabeth Hammill and all their believers and supporters, and to Kate Edwards, who continues as Chief Executive, combining the roles of manager, marketer, enthusiast and visionary, and demonstrating that holding the many reins of a substantial organisation can be successfully combined with a sense of fun and a clear purpose.

Happy Birthday, Seven Stories, a beacon of optimism in the world of children’s literature and in many ways a dream come true.

*Tina Massey*

Left: Jacqueline Wilson and Nick Sharratt

Seven Stories is a charity. All money earned and raised is used to safeguard the magic of children’s books for future generations to enjoy.  
[www.sevenstories.org.uk](http://www.sevenstories.org.uk)