

Annual Report

July 2025 – June 2026

In this, the National Year of Reading, our role as a literary festival in upholding the value of the written word and our duty to support new generations of booklovers has never been more relevant.

As a charity it is our mission to provide education through a literary festival. This festival year, which covers Winter Festival 2025 through to our Spring Festival and Schools events in 2026, has been a year of inspiration, not only from the dazzling array of authors who have graced our stages, shedding light on the themes woven through each festival, but additionally from the growing ambition of our outreach programme.

“There was that blast of magic - when the chemistry between speakers is perfect, the audience are completely absorbed and something happens that makes you see the world a little differently.”



Key Achievements for the Year

Our Winter and Spring seasons achieved spectacular success, with just some of the key highlights of our year being:

- **A new partnership** with The Arts Theatre Cambridge, with our Spring Festival culminating in three gloriously sold-out events at the venue.
- We **delivered 92 dynamic events** featuring 113 authors and 38 chairs across both festivals.
- We secured our **first full feature in *The Guardian*** following a sold-out event with Zadie Smith.
- We deepened our local impact by bringing the festival into the Cambridge Central Library for free events for young children, and **launched a new initiative** working with three Partner primary state schools.
- We **hosted a free Children's Festival** for families from across the region, and put young voices first by launching the Children's Choice Award.



Our Winter & Spring Festivals

The National Year of Reading inspired a new series of events for the bibliophile. In our series **The Books that Made Me** we invited great writers to discuss the sparks that lit up their literary lives; and the value of reading was explored in a **Writers on Reading** event featuring major figures from the worlds of publishing and broadcasting.

Superstars of the written word lit our imaginations throughout Winter and Spring. Booker Prize-shortlisted **Andrew Miller** opened the Spring festival with his spell-binding novel set in the bitter winter of 1964; **Zadie Smith**, **Irvine Welsh**, **Ian McEwan**, **Jung Chang** and many more transported us to myriad places and times in riveting conversations with interviewers who are stars themselves.

We provided a platform for three rising literary stars, selected in partnership with our friend Tom Gatti, now Literary Editor at *The Observer*.

The **Cambridge Series** brought four world-leading academics to our audience. **Bonnie Lander Johnson** and **James Fox** each took us to meet some of the last remaining craftspeople retaining ancient knowledge that we are in danger of losing; **Clare Jackson** introduced us to a highly unusual 17th century monarch, and **Tim Minshall** showed us the impact that our manufactured lives has on communities and the environment.

Living through what can feel like a never-ending series of political dramas and global disasters, we know that our audience likes to dig into the detail, reflect on our past, and explore the solutions. We invited lawmakers, politicians, historians, and journalists to make sense of these troubled times. **Lyse Doucet** took us to her favourite hotel in Kabul to tell us the story of Afghanistan – a group of Afghan women livestreamed the event from the Cambridge Union to their homes and were able to take part in the event.



Our Winter & Spring Festivals

Ed Stourton and **Philip Coggan** unpicked the story of Trump and his presidency, **Lady Hale** laid out why the law matters for everyone; we looked at Brexit, the UN, the General Strike, populism, and leadership. We left no stone unturned. With the very sad news of the passing of Ed Stourton, we feel deeply honoured that we were able to welcome him to our Spring Festival for one of his final literary festivals.

We added to our **annual lecture series** with a third event: the State of Nature lecture. **Caroline Lucas** inspired us to strive for a healthier planet, **Rachel Clarke** moved many to tears in her State of the Nation address, highlighting the importance of acts of care in our battered world. **Deborah Levy** will complete the trio at our forthcoming Winter Festival in November with her **Room of One's Own** lecture.

Anniversary events of literary marvels provide a fresh excuse to invite a panel of experts for a deep dive. This year we featured events on Agatha Christie, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes*.

Writing this report during a record-breaking heatwave summer, it is clear that a **climate theme** is essential to inform and educate us on this monumental issue. Five events interrogated everything from the economy, energy, the oceans, and humanity's role both as perpetrator and problem-solver.

We are proud to continue our partnership with the British Academy, hosting two of their book prize shortlisted authors, **Lucy Ash** and **Sophie Harman**. The British Academy book prize focuses on outstanding books in the humanities and social sciences that matter today and change the way we see the world.



Our Winter & Spring Festivals

Our long-standing media partnership with the **New Statesman** continues to flourish. This year we were delighted to welcome the new Editor in Chief **Tom McTague** to an event with **Marina Wheeler** on the future of the UK/EU relationship. The annual sell-out **New Statesman Debate** motioned 'This house believes that Britain's best days are behind it' and lost to a more optimistic audience; **Breakfast with the Editors** was held again in the comfort of our partner hotel the University Arms chaired by the NS Britain Editor and podcast host **Anoosh Chakelian**. We continue to welcome a steady stream of incisive New Statesman journalists who chair events throughout the festival.

The Spring Festival closed with three sold-out events at The Arts Theatre Cambridge, with **Elif Shafak**, **Jung Chang** and **Zadie Smith**. This new partnership with the re-developed Arts Theatre is a wonderful opportunity to open some of our biggest events to a larger audience and enjoy a new partnership in the city.



Free Children's Festival

2,040 tickets were allocated to our annual free Children's Festival in April.

Percy the Park Keeper (aka Nick Butterworth) drew an audience of all ages, **Cressida Cowell** entranced a younger audience, **Louie Stowell** was awarded a new award – The Children's Choice Award (see below). Every author held our audience spellbound with interactive events that will nurture a new generation of booklovers. We welcomed a party of eager 'young journalists' to interview authors for their school newspaper.

The jewel in the carnival crown of children's events was our new Children's Zone, brimming with storytelling, games and craft activities throughout the children's festival. Kevin the Bear roamed the nearby streets to welcome 250+ visitors into the space.

“This is perfect. And is it all really free?”



Our Enhanced Outreach Programme

It is heartening to learn from the National Literacy Trust that there has been a modest rise in children's reading engagement since the start of the National Year of Reading, for the first time in five years. Although levels remain concerningly low, the figures suggest that interventions make a difference and change is possible. At CLF we know that we have an opportunity and a responsibility to support this progress. Behind the scenes, we have been proudly delivering a stronger outreach programme this year in addition to delivering our annual Free Children's Festival.

“ *A godsend.* ”

Three Partner Schools in Cambridge have joined the festival family – these state schools will work with us to develop new projects and improve access to the festival in the wider community.

The Children's Choice Award (CCA) was created, putting the voice of primary schoolchildren from Cambridge at the heart of the festival, by voting for the winner of this new award. Children presented the winner **Louie Stowell** with the award onstage at the Cambridge Union/TTP stage. The CCA has popularised school book clubs and teachers report how 'reading for a purpose' has encouraged children's reading engagement in participating schools.

Author visits to schools was a new activity for us this year. Award-winning author **Onjali Q. Rauf** visited 360 children at our three Partner Schools. We held free Relaxed drop-in events at **Cambridge Central Library** over half term for younger children with local authors who may not gain spaces at festivals, but whose writing is of high calibre. 40+ visitors attended each event. The events were designed to be accessible for all children, including those with special needs.

Our free annual Schools Day in May was attended by **780 children** and students in the historic Cambridge Union. **30 additional classes** livestreamed the primary event, reaching nearly 1000 children remotely across Cambridgeshire and beyond. Authors **Matt Goodfellow** and **Jackie Kay** inspired young minds; questions from the audience challenged any conceptions of the scope of young thinking, and all attendees received a free book.

Concessions, Free Tickets & Free Books

We continue to offer a minimum of 10% of all our tickets at a concessionary rate. We joined the Cambridge Sanctuary Network, welcoming new groups to the festival with free tickets. We always welcome approaches from community groups who request free tickets.

160+ books were donated to Cambridgeshire libraries, in addition to 110 books to local primary school libraries. We handed 780 books to children and young people on the Schools Day. At least 30 pre-loved books were donated to visitors to our Spring Festival Children's Zone.



“This makes for a wonderful time for adults and for new discoveries for children.

“Please do it again!

“It's a brilliant complement to the book events.

“My oldest has dyslexia and loves writing stories, I know it meant the world to him to see such a wonderful and prolific writer who struggled with writing as a child.



Festival Funding & Support

Cambridge Literary Festival is a registered charity (1153944). Our objective is the advancement of education for the benefit of the public by the promotion of literature, language and the arts, in particular through a literary festival in Cambridge. We are registered with the Fundraising Regulator, and we follow the Fundraising Regulator Code of Practice. We have a mixed funding model that includes ticket income, sponsorships, donations, memberships and grant funding. This diverse range of income enables the festival to provide a high-quality range of events, widen access to culture and develop a growing programme of outreach activities.

We are deeply grateful for the loyalty and good will of our 135 volunteers and many partners who play a vital role through in-kind support.

We could not deliver our core festival or essential outreach activity in Cambridgeshire without the generous support of our sponsors, our donors and our partners, to whom we are extremely grateful.



Our Winter & Spring Festival Bestsellers

Winter 2025

Lyse Doucet | A People's History of Afghanistan
Ian McEwan | What We Can Know
Natalie Haynes | The Myth of Medea Retold
Tom McTague, Marina Wheeler, Andrew Marr | Europe
Nicola Sturgeon | The Person Behind the Politics
Mick Herron | The Slow Horses are Back!
Philippe Sands & Juan Gabriel Vásquez | Light in Dark
John Cleese | Fawlty Towers: Fawltz and All
Wendy Cope | Collected Poems



Spring 2026

The New Statesman Debate
Edward Stourton | Made in America
Zadie Smith | Dead and Alive
Elif Shafak | The Books That Made Me
Jung Chang | Fly, Wild Swans
Cressida Cowell | Which Way to the Future
Louie Stowell | Loki! Live
Mary Berry | My Gardening Life
Rachel Clarke | The State of the Nation Lecture
Caroline Lucas | The State of Nature Lecture
Sophie Raworth | Running on Air
John Kampfner | Braver New World
Nick Butterworth | Percy the Park Keeper
Jude Simpson | A Noise Annoys
Athena Kugblenu | History's Most Epic Fails



The Festival in Quotes

“*I have never been to a festival where I have felt so welcome.*”

“*...there was so much hope in [the] rooms, so much desire for change and for better. A **wonderful example of why book festivals matter so much** - and the ripples they can spread through the world.*”

“*One of Britain's freshest and friendliest festivals.*”

“*It's a miracle how you keep the festival so full of **outstanding talks** and such a friendly atmosphere.*”

“*It was simply brilliant.*”



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