

The personal diaries of celebrated children's author, Enid Blyton Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children’s Books

Sarah Lawrance, Collection and Exhibitions Director at Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children’s Books, describes her work with the complex legacy of Enid Blyton.

When talking about Enid Blyton (1897 - 1968), Sarah explains that "There are two sides to every story".

On the one hand a renowned, loved and respected children’s author whose work endures to this day. On the other hand, a woman dogged by controversy for the outdated content of some of her work, and the image she crafted of herself as a perfect wife and mother.

“People come to us with all sorts of questions and ideas... And then you’ve got the Blyton fans who won't hear a word said against her. It's quite difficult to say what her legacy is... you can't describe it in one word, because it's different for so many people.”

But, she says, Seven Stories is in a unique position to present things in a balanced way: “I feel like what we can contribute is a more well-rounded picture.”

Mystery, magic and midnight feasts: a unique collection

You see, in 2010, HLF awarded Seven Stories a grant of £30,000 towards the purchase and preservation of a total of 24 lots at a rare auction of Enid Blyton items.

Sarah explains that they made a plan in advance to concentrate on the type-written manuscripts: “We prioritised anything that was completely unique, that’s why we went for the typescripts, because they’re the original production.

"Enid Blyton did all her work on a typewriter, she didn’t write books out by hand. So this stuff doesn’t exist anywhere else.”

In the process, Seven Stories became the home of the “biggest Blyton archive in a public collection”.

The Blyton typescripts have since been the focus of a major 2013 exhibition at Seven Stories, 'Mystery, Magic and Midnight Feasts – the Many Adventures of Enid Blyton', which then went on to tour the country.

They are accessed on a regular basis by researchers interested in Blyton’s creative process. And as recently as February half-term were at the centre of a week of Blyton-themed activities and events.

What Sarah could not have predicted, however, is what the auction purchases would lead to next.

Personal insights and family support

“After the sale we got in contact with Blyton’s younger daughter (Imogen Smallwood), and granddaughter, to let them know what we’d done, and they were very pleased.

“Imogen then donated – which is really amazing – Enid Blyton’s diaries. She was pretty religious about keeping diaries, and she used to keep two: a personal diary, and a nature diary which she used to make observations about what was coming into her garden.

“We were so thrilled to get those because they give you an insight into her personality, her character, and she comes out of it rather more well-rounded.”

It’s ironic, because in the 1980s, it was the publication of Imogen’s book, ‘A Childhood at Green Hedges’, which, Sarah says “blew the lid on the myth of Enid Blyton as the ideal mother”.

“The book provoked quite a reaction. Some readers were distressed to find that Enid wasn't this perfect figure they'd imagined.

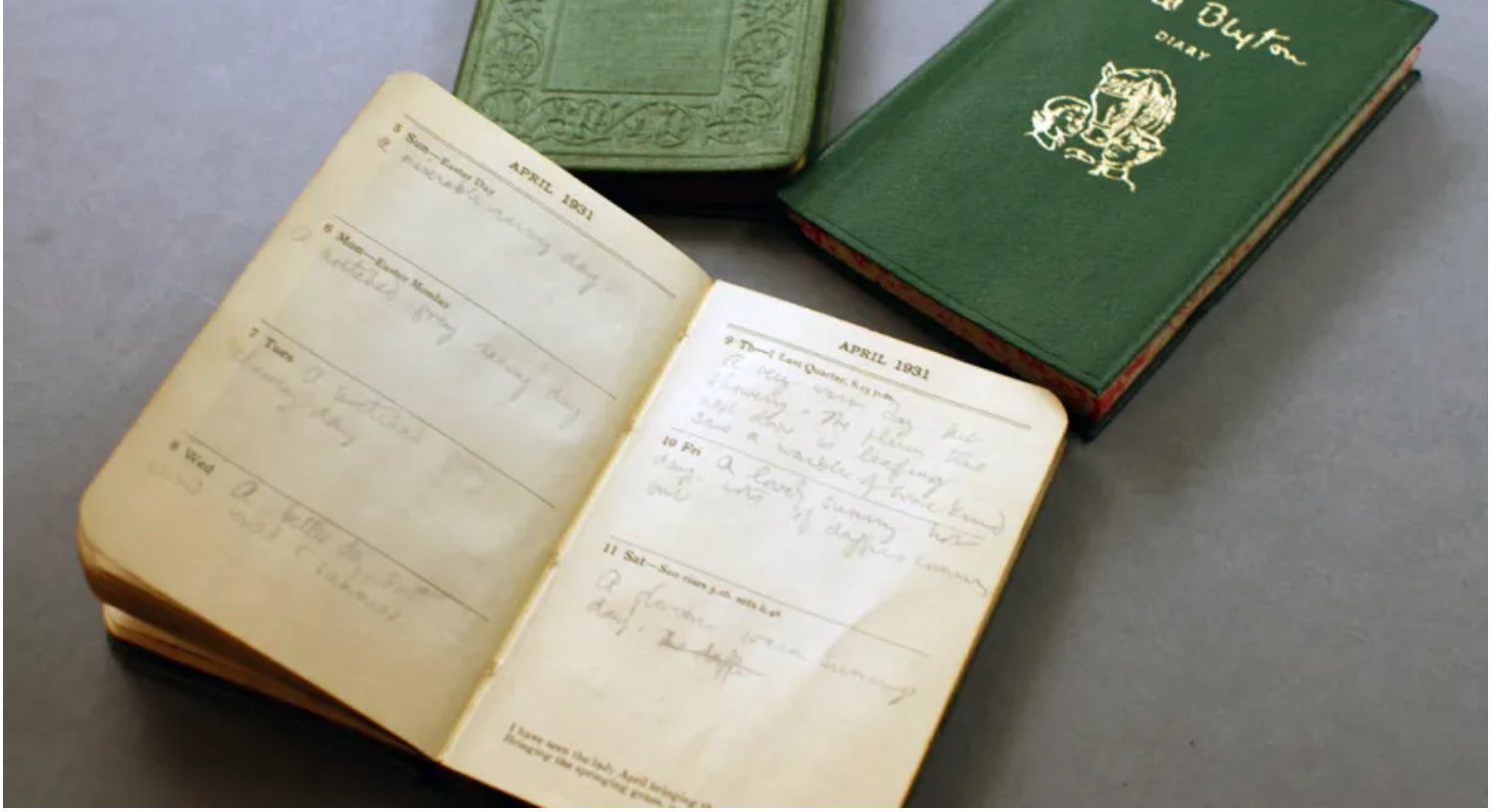
"I think latterly Imogen has been keen to redress the balance; she really does respect her mother’s achievements and is glad that Seven Stories is preserving the Blyton legacy and presenting her work in a balanced way.”

Preserving Blyton's legacy for the future

Furthermore, in 2011, when Imogen and her daughter decided to wind up their Enid Blyton Trust for Children, they donated the remaining funds to Seven Stories, which continues to help support their educational work.

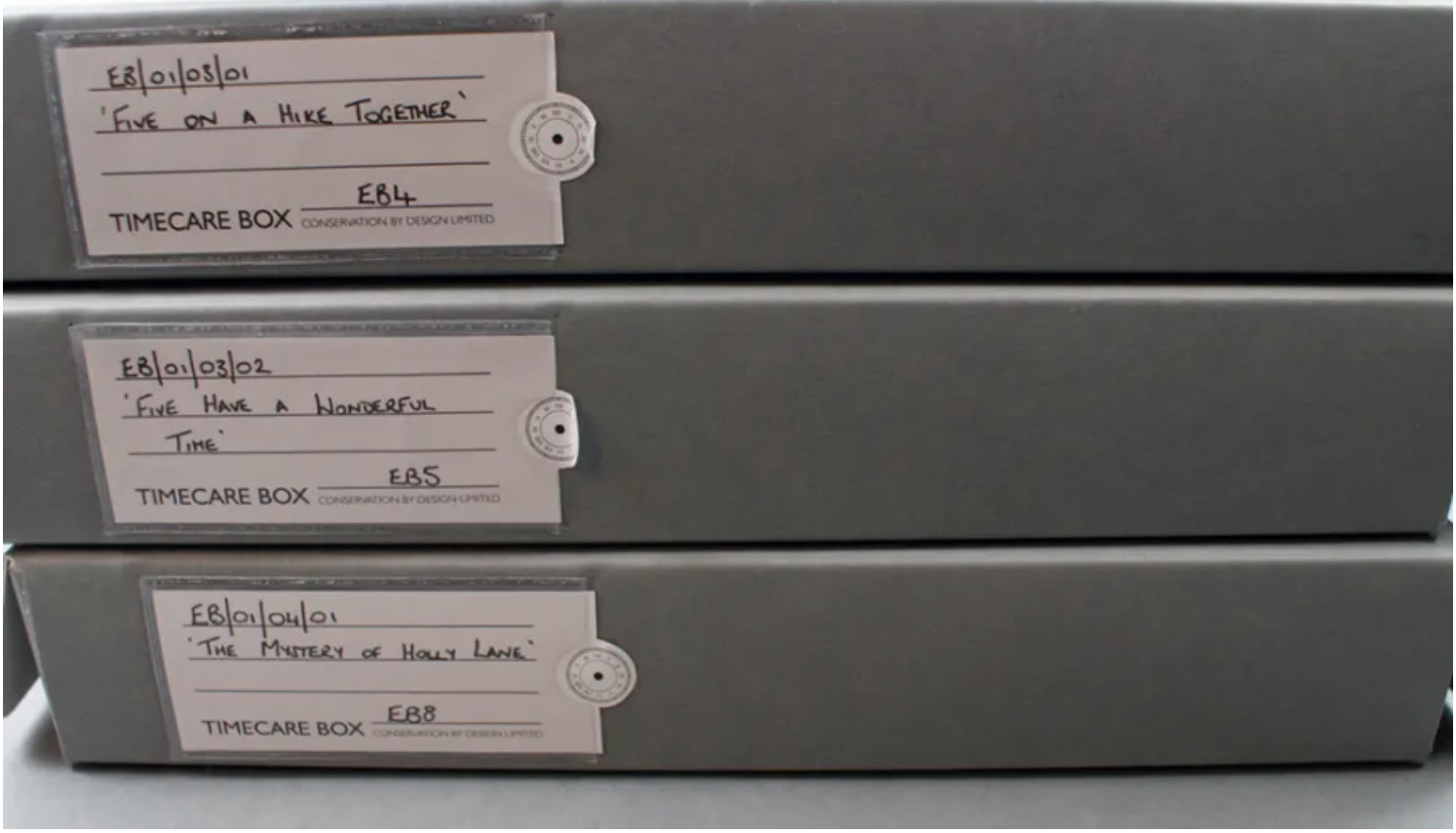
“And all of that came about as a result of the original purchase at auction. The HLF grant has been one of the most impactful pieces of support we've had from an external funder, in ways that we couldn't have predicted at the time.

“It’s a really good story.”





Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children’s Books



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y Seven Stories, with help from an HLF grant

A Jacobean travelling library, affectionately referred to as a 17th century Kindle

Lost and found in books

Seven Stories saves Enid Blyton archive at auction