



Loo-se yourself: The toilet wall has been papered with individual paperback covers.



Window seat: Louie Young enjoys a book.

Pictures: Graham Young

Lose yourself in rural book maze

DaysOut GRAHAM YOUNG VISITS ASTLEY BOOK FARM, NR BEDWORTH

ONE of the most frustrating things about this time of year is that so many attractions are closed because of the weather.

And with good reason given the ice, snow, frost, fog, rain and general gloom we've had to suffer recently.

So it's time then, perhaps, to lose yourself in a good book or two.

Or, if you go to Astley Book Farm near Bedworth, 75,000 good books.

As we entered Astley Lane, my children were somewhat incredulous when I finally revealed where we were going.

If I've always told them that

money doesn't grow on trees, then why should books?

But by turning some old agricultural buildings into a giant, labyrinthine bookshop, the owners here can justly claim this really is a 'book farm'.

The difference such a rural location makes to the exciting world of books is amazing.

Unlike the Waterstone's and WH Smith stores on every high street and retail park, this is one shop where you won't be falling over stacks of money-making celebrity 'reads'.

Instead of the entrance being half-blocked with Jordan's air-brushed features on a pile of her latest 'books', the first thing you'll see are the welcoming

faces of friendly owners Vivienne Mills and Sarah Exley.

They work right at the front door of this seven-year-old business, offering an instant welcome with impartial advice.

Beyond their busy counter, hardly a spare inch of space seems to have been wasted in what they claim is 'the largest secondhand bookshop in the Midlands'.

As the Victorian author Samuel Butler once said: "The oldest books are only just out to those who have not read them".

Even the roof space is a children's 'hayloft' to encourage a literary sense of adventure.

While the farm's shelves are easily searchable, the whole layout of the place has a deliciously higgledy-piggledy nature, too – at odds with the way school children today are often told exactly what they will learn and when.

Having the time to explore the world at random like this is an increasingly scarce commodity, yet it's surely at the root of real discovery.

The farm deals with large collections and has many rare books kept safely, including first edition copies of works by Charles Dickens (Little Dorrit) and local author George Eliot (Middlemarch) who was born on the farm's wider estate.

If some of your own treasured books need repairing, visit the

farm's hand book binding expert Judith Sherwood.

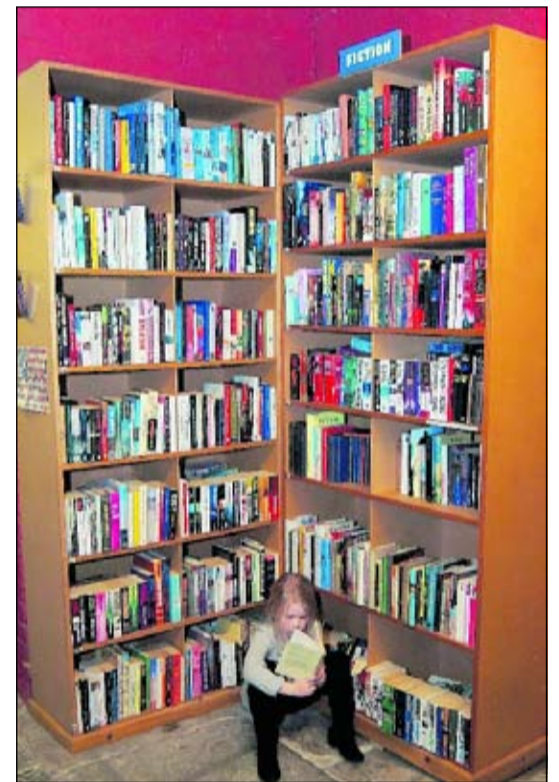
We left Astley with a foot-deep pile of books which cost less than £20 – and £10 less than I paid for just one more specialised new book in Waterstone's the following day.

One of my finds was a four-year-old pristine copy of Winston Churchill: The Photobiography, a collection of more than 200 rare and previously unpublished photographs revealing many aspects of his life. And the price? Just £4.75.

Biscuits and tea/coffee are available today, but a new coffee shop, featuring goods supplied by a local 130-year-old bakery, will be opening at Easter. That really will be the icing on what is already a delightful cake.

VisitorInfo

Astley Book Farm, Astley Lane, Bedworth CV12 ONE. The farm is just five minutes from the M6 J3 or go via the A45 towards Meriden and then take the B4102 back road through Fillongley towards Astley. Tel: 02476 490235. Website: www.astleybookfarm.com (15,000 books are available to purchase online). Open: 10am-5pm daily except Christmas Eve, Boxing Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. All major credit cards accepted.



Book corner: Madison Young takes her pick of fiction.



Literary leanings: Holly Young is engrossed.



High brow: Madison Young in the children's hayloft.