

## Report for British Library and the Society of Chief Librarians

Simon Smith, November 2007

I was extremely pleased to be chosen as the British Library (BL)/Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) sponsored candidate for the place at the 2007 Public Library Authorities (PLA) Conference in Glasgow. I was especially delighted as I also got the chance to visit the British Library at St Pancras and see behind the scenes and how the library worked. Despite being a 'Young Librarian' I can remember the BL site when it consisted of a coach park and some vague plans for a library. To be shown around the site and see first hand how everything works and fits together was a real opportunity and I am grateful for the chance and to the staff who made a really memorable day possible.

I initially met Stephanie Kenna and Loraine Evans of the Regional Library Programme, who then took me through to meet the BL Chief Executive Lynne Brindley, who was keen to talk about my library and the challenges that I faced as a manager. I wouldn't say my branch is quite the size and scale of the BL, but we certainly shared some common issues!

I then received a wonderful tour, from Mark Walton, the Welcome Team Manager. I was shown the entrance hall, which was previously as far as I'd got on other visits, which had mainly consisted of exhibition viewings and events. Immediately someone asked Mark for directions to the British Museum, as they had thought that the Museum and Library were co-located.

We saw Reader Registration where people sign up to join the library, and the systems and procedures for joining were explained. We saw the main reading rooms, both 'front of house' and behind the scenes. A book lying in a tray waiting to go back on the shelves turned out to be a signed copy of Byron's poetry, also including a letter from Byron. A typical item of stock - fairly mindblowing to a branch librarian!

I also met Trish Arathoon, Humanities and Special Collections Reference Manager, who was able to set everything in context for me, as Trish used to work in public libraries in Westminster (with one of my current colleagues). It was fascinating to hear about the challenges of providing services and how the services of the BL are perceived.

Then it was time to begin part two of my library adventure - the tube, train and plane to Glasgow and the PLA Conference 2007, accompanied by Stephanie Kenna. The conference took place in a hotel fairly centrally in Glasgow, and was due to begin on the following day - we arrived at around 5pm, and during the evening we started to meet fellow delegates, including Tony Durcan, of Newcastle City Libraries and the current SCL president.

The Conference itself started with a welcome and then appropriately enough, Glasgow laid out their stall. We were welcomed and the session on governance and structure was kicked off by Bridget McConnell. Bridget

explained the change process that Culture Sport Glasgow had been through, in creating a new, separate, accountable organisation. The Glasgow experience was set alongside a plea to remain publically owned and accountable from a Derbyshire councillor, and the unique view from Diana Edmonds, who managed a library service as a private sector employee but now does as a public sector one. This session was timely and interesting, and reflected the current general discussion about how a library service is best run in organisational terms.

No library conference would be complete without a discussion of how we can measure what we are doing and what the likely future of library assessment will be. The session chaired by Roy Clare of the MLA featured perspectives from Elaine Fulton of the Scottish Library and Information Council on the developed 'Public Library Improvement Matrix' for libraries in Scotland, and also the views of the MLA and the new head of what will be Northern Ireland's unified library service, who is yet to gain her organisation! The Scottish Matrix certainly seemed to be something that could and might be used in England and Wales, and seemed to be a useful tool for authorities and the MLA to develop in the light of the demise of the Standards.

The Public Library Building Awards ended the day, both with a session setting the awards in context and also the Awards dinner to announce the varied and inspiring winners, one of which was a Glasgow library - in Easterhouse, which delegates visited on day two.

Thursday dawned early with an 0800 session from the MLA looking at the future, and was a chance for Roy Clare, the new Chief Executive, to set out a vision for the MLA. With the conference taking place in the week of the Comprehensive Spending Review, money was much on people's minds, and the message was that whilst there wouldn't be new Central government money for libraries, the MLA vision for the future was going to focus on providing the evidence and backing for the sector to make the business case and enable things to happen. There was discussion of Framework for the Future, although this now seems to have been overtaken by events.

The following sessions were among the best of the conference - starting with the anticipated debate around deprofessionalisation - Tom Forrest, an independent consultant and John Dolan of the MLA on one side arguing against the professional librarian being best placed to deliver benefits to libraries, and Bob McKee (CILIP) and Martin Molloy (Derbyshire) advocating professional librarian skills. Throughout the discussion and questions, many cases and arguments were made both for and against the motion, but it seemed few minds were swayed, as both before, and after, a majority were in favour of the 'deprofessionalisation' motion. A general amendment, that a wide range of skills were needed got universal support.

This discussion was followed by three really interesting insights : Liz Cleaver from BBC Learning updated us and told us about the vision for the future of the partnership between public libraries and the BBC, which has already

achieved a substantial amount and does really seem to drive people into libraries at a local level. The future does look promising. As indeed it does for the relationship between public libraries and the British Library, as Jill Finney outlined - it is clear that there is a real emphasis at the BL on working with and supporting local libraries, and offering great opportunities, both for staff to go and visit the BL and for authorities to contribute to digitisation programmes or host touring exhibitions. The BL and local libraries have a 'shared passion and mutual interest' which is being encouraged to develop further. Tony Durcan of Newcastle's session, entitled 'Remember to celebrate the large public library' made the point that whilst attention is often focused on community libraries, with central libraries maybe having resources diverted from them, they are hugely powerful buildings and can act as focal points to a town, city or whole region. Whilst they may be resource intensive, they provide reserve stocks, special collections, local collections and knowledge. The talk was interspersed with pictures of some of the classic main libraries around the country - and the argument that with new Newcastle and Birmingham libraries on the way, we could be seeing a renaissance of such buildings.

There was then a chance to visit three of Glasgow's libraries - the Mitchell (which had provided an inspiring backdrop to the speakers on the stage at each session) which is Glasgow's central reference library and has had spaces opened up to encourage use and a rethinking of what the library can achieve ; The Gorbals Library which is a beacon for learning and development and features a wonderful IT suite which is heavily in demand ; and the stunning Bridge (Easterhouse) which won one of the Building Awards and also won the Prime Minister's Award for Better Public Buildings on the day we visited. The awards are well deserved - a fantastic combination of buildings on one site make up the complex, with the library being the area (the Bridge) between a school and swimming pool, with a performance space thrown in. A tricky shape but brilliantly designed, with huge amounts of natural light and excellent lighting and shelving, the Bridge is definitely worth a visit and deserves to be as iconic a modern library building as Peckham or Brighton. The numbers of visitors and the success of the library in attracting new library users means it has been a great success for Glasgow, and one that other authorities should be looking to emulate.

The conference ended with a focus on reading and access. With the National Year of Reading in mind a session featuring Penguin, The Reading Agency and author Kate Mosse was there to energise and remind everyone that at the heart of the library, and the reason for most library visits lie books. However not all current and potential users can make best use of collections, as representatives of the Vital Link and RNIB library reminded us, and we were challenged to go back and do more to open up access for emergent and VIP readers alike.

And then it was over, a few words, a quick lunch, and then a final look round Glasgow, before heading for home via the airport. A wonderful experience, a whistlestop tour of Britain's national and effectively local libraries, in the space of a few days. My reason for attending conference

was to try and see the future direction of movement in the library world. The areas discussed at conference will be the ones that I will have to engage with and develop at a local level in the weeks and months ahead. Attending was vital, and the experience comes recommended to anyone who gets the chance. The submissions for the 'New Librarian' awards, which I read over the conference as a judge, were also inspiring, and I hope that some of those chosen will be at PLA 2008 in Liverpool, telling everyone about the amazing work they do.

Thank you to everyone who enabled the above to happen, especially Stephanie Kenna and Loraine Evans at the BL and Tony Durcan for SCL. Special thanks to Stephanie for accompanying me and making sure people knew who I was!

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