



Quote Us Freely: British Librarians Speak Out about Recent Cutbacks

City squares attract millions of pigeons. London's Trafalgar Square can be difficult to walk across when its huge flocks take flight, and there is always the risk of being spattered with droppings as one looks up at Lord Nelson's monument or stands beside the famous lions to have one's picture taken. For more than a century, British parents have told their children stories about the pigeons of Trafalgar Square, about how the flocks arrive every morning as Big Ben tolls and the double-decker buses roll down Whitehall, about how pigeons meet their mates (friends and spouses) beside the fountains and spend the day scrounging for bread crumbs from generous strangers.

At night, the pigeons fly home. And where is that? Children insist on knowing, and parents tell them that some fly to the treetops in Hampstead Heath, and others to the chimneys of Notting Hill and Holland Park, and others to Kensington Palace, where they roost in the eaves and coo contentedly till dawn.

"At our reference desk I used to get asked about where London's pigeons went at night," says Connie, a public librarian. "Now things have changed. Many questions concern technical matters that I find difficult to deal with. I'm from a generation of librarians that dealt with pigeons and other wildlife, not mobile telephonics and apps."

Cooking with new technology

With obvious embarrassment, Connie recalls a patron's request for information regarding recently available apps. She assumed that the patron was interested in new recipes for appetizers, and directed her to the cookery books.

"It takes so much time to keep up to new technology, and the terminology drives me mad," she says. "And it's not because I'm older than most of my colleagues. Even the younger librarians complain that they must struggle with all the technical material that comes their way."

Not only must British librarians contend with recent technological developments, they are also faced with



Photo credit: Deborah Johnson

After a hard day at Trafalgar Square, it's good to find a comfortable niche.

increasing demands for services and the resultant strain on resources.

"You notice a lot more wear and tear in libraries these days," says Stanley, a London-based consultant to public and academic libraries. He notes that facilities are not as well maintained, and that collections are deteriorating.

"With larger numbers of patrons using our libraries, you see more damage to furniture and equipment," he says. "What appalls me is the state of keyboards. Generally they're filthy, but they often wear out before libraries see fit to have them cleaned. And sometimes it takes weeks to have them replaced because of budget cutbacks. In 35 years of professional practice, I've never seen more problems arise owing to cutbacks, not even during the Thatcher years."

Grime

Stanley worries that declining facility maintenance standards will discourage people from using libraries. In particular, he suggests that the grimy exteriors of many central libraries and branches will give the public the wrong idea about the quality of collections and services.

“People are less inclined to enter a building that looks run down,” he says. “It’s a natural tendency, and librarians should be more willing to acknowledge it. You see museum curators and art gallery managers demanding funds for the cleaning and restoration of building exteriors, and their boards will usually support them. We librarians should be more assertive about keeping our libraries attractive. Nobody wants to visit a dirty-looking building.”

For British librarians and others involved in library services, the issue of maintenance can lead to discussions concerning the closure of libraries across the country. The British government has determined that deep budget cuts are necessary to control deficits and the national debt, and believes that it must reduce the size of the public sector. No ministry or department is untouchable. Even the revered Royal Air Force will lose personnel and other resources over the next few years, and the National Health Service is undergoing constant scrutiny to find opportunities for cost savings. Although acclaimed authors such as Alan Bennett and Philip Pullman have condemned recent cuts to library budgets, loss of funding appears to be inevitable.



Photo credit: Deborah Johnson

Seeding the way: A future ornithologist learns the importance of resource distribution.

The rebellious spirit

The discussion concerning these matters can become passionate. The justification for a library’s survival might run as follows. A certain library is in serious decline. Its collections are out of date and battered. The reference department is understaffed, and the librarians receive numerous complaints about inadequate services. But one day in the dingy children’s section a little girl discovers an old book that covers the history of Britain from days of the Beaker People to the years after the Second World War. There is a chapter on Boadicea, the tribal queen who led a rebellion against the Romans in 61 AD. The little girl is inspired by Boadicea’s example, and takes an interest in history. Eventually she studies it at Oxford. Later she goes into politics, and becomes Prime Minister. Such success is due in part to the library that, for all its weaknesses, was nonetheless able to provide one young patron with the material that inspired her to get an education and go into politics.

“Sentimental twaddle,” says Stanley. “Chances are that the little girl will not find anything in the library that catches her interest. The battered books are not nearly as much fun as the computer games that entertain her at home. The generally poor quality of the library will be a big turn-off, and she won’t want to return. That library actually works against patrons’ curiosity, and shutting it down, while an unpopular move, is probably a good one, especially if the funding that allowed it to stumble along can be applied to



Photo credit: Deborah Johnson

The campaign heats up!

“Whether we want to admit it or not, some of our public libraries are substandard, and have been so for decades,” says Stanley. “Their facilities are poor, and frankly their collections are dreadful. Staffing levels are inadequate in these libraries, and patrons are dissatisfied. But according to those who are dead set against any cuts, there is still a chance that patrons will find what they need, even in the worst library. And therefore it is worthwhile to keep that library open.”



The results of the Blitz, 1941. When the going gets tough, the tough get browsing.

other branches, and keep their services at an acceptable level. We must face the fact, whether we like it or not, that not all libraries are worth saving.”

Caveat: Maggie

Stanley finishes by noting that Boadicea’s rebellion eventually failed, and that the Romans managed to control Britain for centuries thereafter.

“And what if that little girl grew up to be Margaret Thatcher?” he says with perverse glee. “Many British librarians would not be delighted with such a result. The point is that we should accept the loss of our weakest links and try to shore up those libraries that are doing a better job. Every other area of public services in Britain is getting hit with cuts. We must learn to deal with ours realistically, without resorting to rubbish about imaginary patrons. In the end, that won’t save us.”

Of course many librarians disagree with this view. Winifred has worked in public and school libraries in England and Scotland, and is currently an information manager for a London architectural firm. In her opinion, British library cutbacks are deeper than necessary and occurring too quickly.

“Most British librarians admit that the Great Recession hurt our economy,” she says. “We were prepared to accept cutbacks, but were surprised when the government imposed them so quickly. A gradual approach would be more prudent, and not cause so much pain. As for chopping inadequate libraries and branches altogether, I consider that to be

shortsighted. Neighbouring libraries cannot always take on patrons who have lost their old facilities. In short order, the added strain on operations can reduce a solid and well-resourced library to something much less attractive and efficient, and then nobody will be satisfied.”

Angry students

Winifred notes that cutbacks in academic libraries are equally hard to justify, especially when students must pay substantially higher tuition fees. With the increasing cost of textbooks and various living expenses, students are assuming more debt during their post-secondary education than ever before.

“Students at our universities will expect campus libraries to cater to them,” she says. “Unsatisfactory services could lead to more than grumbling. If students suspect that they’re being short-changed in any way, at the very least they will complain loudly. We have already seen mass protests by angry students in our cities. We could see more. I’m not suggesting that students would engage in protests about bad collections or long queues at reference desks, but these factors could contribute to student fractiousness. This is something that our university administrators must recognize.”

Betty, a public librarian in Birmingham, agrees. She fears that long-term economic factors will not allow library services to recover once they have been cut. According to her, once a facility is shut down, the loss is permanent. Hoping for renewed services when the economy improves is unrealistic.

“As for the little girl who is captivated by Boadicea, I can understand why people might dismiss her story. But in a competitive society, children must be given every possible opportunity to learn and be inspired. That child might not grow up to be a politician, but she might become a medical researcher who discovers a new treatment for cancer. She might become an aviation engineer who designs a safer aircraft. Or she might simply grow up to be a decent human being who will fight against oppression. All this could spring from a visit to a run-down old library with a wretched collection. I’d say not only that it’s worth the cost of keeping that library open, but also that it’s a wise investment to improve that library in any possible way. Such an institution is hardly a frill.”

Perseverance

Not surprisingly, British librarians will frequently mention their ability to “muddle through” despite negative circumstances. Older librarians might refer to the Blitz, and Mr. Churchill’s resolve, and swear that they will persevere in the same spirit.

“After all, what else can we do?” says Colin, a recently unemployed librarian in his mid-sixties from Leeds. “I refuse to give up altogether, and I don’t want to relocate to America or anywhere else. Besides, North American libraries face the same problems; it’s not as if Canadian libraries are enjoying big budgetary surpluses. The situation is worse in Europe, and I’ve heard that the Asian job market is tightening up for librarians. Japan was once an economic powerhouse, but it’s definitely in decline, and the last earthquake and tsunami have made things worse. I can’t see libraries flourishing in Tokyo and Osaka. So I might as well stay in Yorkshire, where I speak the language and know where to look for work whenever it’s available.”

Damn the pigeons

Muddling through will also include measures such as media campaigns against cuts and closures, fundraising projects, consideration of resource- and job-sharing, and more part-time positions.

“It’s better to have any sort of library job than no job at all,” says Colin, who retains his sense of humour despite hardship. “In fact, old librarians don’t die, they simply work increasingly part-time.”

Talking to librarians in British towns and villages as well as in the major cities, one understands that although they are discontented and worried about how cutbacks might affect them, they have lost neither their gumption nor their idealism; nor are they without hope, no matter how low the pound sinks or how high the percentage of unemployment rises. One assumes that they will continue to speak out in support of their libraries, no matter how many pigeons come home to roost. 

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