

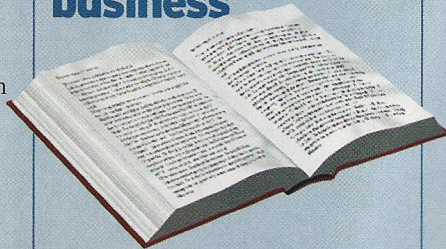
What is a library? Once, the answer was straightforward: a library was a collection of books, and a lending library was an institution that lent books. But these definitions belong to the Victorian era, according to a submission by the Society of Chief Librarians to a House of Commons select committee. A library is rather a place that provides “access for everyone to information and knowledge” – through whatever medium.

That change of focus is clear from the figures. Just 9 per cent of libraries’ budgets is spent on books. There has been a 14 per cent decline in book stocks in ten years, and a 36 per cent decline in book borrowing. The *Bookseller* recently conducted a search for ten popular titles in seven London libraries, and found no more than four of them in any one collection.

Facts such as these have supported a good many damning portraits of the library service. Tim Coates, a consultant in the sector, has been a prominent critic of the way libraries are run; he says that the fall in book stocks and lending is a symptom, along with ungenerous opening hours and unrefurbished premises, of wasteful administration. Even some champions of libraries agree with many of Coates’s observations, although they may not approve of his combative way of publicising them, or his implication that there is little good to be said about libraries at present. There is, as they point out, another story. While libraries stand in need of better management and better stock, they are at the centre of some of the most enterprising work in the book world.

More than half a million children will take part over the holidays in the Summer Reading Challenge, working their way through books on the shelves of more than 3,000 libraries.

the book business



NICHOLAS CLEE on why libraries today are about more than just books

The library sector and BBC Learning are joining forces for three years of literacy campaigns. BBC Radio is to make available its author interviews and book readings to library users. An organisation called the Reading Agency co-ordinates a host of initiatives throughout the service: book clubs, campaigns with prize sponsors such as Orange, partnerships with commercial organisations, research projects, programmes designed to attract adults with poor reading skills.

Ten years ago, publishers showed little interest in libraries. Now, the Reading Agency boasts the involvement of senior executives including the managing

director of HarperCollins and the heads of PR at Penguin and Random House. Certainly, there is self-interest here. The core market of regular book buyers is not expanding. The only hope for growth in the industry is to reach out to the broader population that libraries can still attract. There is a buzz phrase in the sector: “reader development”. Like any buzz phrase, it quickly becomes annoying, but it does encapsulate something that libraries can do that publishers and bookshops, with their increasing focus on the latest marketing hypes, cannot.

By the time this piece appears, David Lammy, the culture minister, may have given his response to the report by the select committee on libraries. He needs to sort out the muddled funding and leadership of the service; and he needs, above all, to answer the question with which I began. Some libraries appear to have settled for becoming community information points with coffee shops attached. Lammy does not have to mention books, those Victorian relics, but a statement that literacy is at the heart of what libraries are for would be welcome.