Redefining our public spaces

The latest WiFi technology is transforming how people connect to the internet without wires or cables – epitomises the way the Library is making services more responsive to a new generation of users. A trial of WiFi furniture with built-in power supplies proved a great success and four designs are now being installed in the Library’s public areas and Reading Rooms. In addition 149 workstations are available to give Readers free web access.

“We wanted to demonstrate that we were responding to our Readers’ needs and the needs of the public as a whole,” says John de Lucy, Head of Estates. “At the same time we have become a popular meeting place. Our cafes, restaurants and public areas are being used by growing numbers of business people and other visitors.”

With the Library’s exhibitions and public events increasingly popular, the number of visitors to the Library has risen sharply. The official ‘footfall’ measure was up from 75,000 to 100,000 a month by the end of the year. The Silk Road exhibition broke all records, drawing over 150,000 visitors to see a wealth of treasures from Chinese Central Asia on show for the first time. Many visitors attended linked attractions, including music on the piazza and a series of workshops and talks. World renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma and his Silk Road Ensemble took part in a special workshop for teenagers from London’s Turkish, Chinese and other Asian communities organised in partnership with BBC Proms. ‘We set out to make people in the UK and abroad aware of the Library as a major public attraction,’ says Heather Norman, Head of Public and Regional Marketing. ‘People involved in 26 Letters found the project changed their view of the Library and helped them to appreciate its true value.’

Through its regional programme the Library has raised its profile at public libraries and schools around the country, reaching out to local people. An exhibition at Leeds Central Library gave a taste of the treasures on offer, including a facsimile of the Lindisfarne Gospels and a kiosk with the Turning the Pages system that displayed ten of the Library’s most beautiful and historic books. ‘The Library is not just the physical space here in London,’ says Stephanie Kenia, Manager, Regional and Library Programmes. ‘It’s a virtual space and a local space too because increasingly people will be able to gain access through their local library.’

The biggest public space of all is the web. Since the Library set up its own website ten years ago it has pioneered new ways of making its resources available online and interpreting them in ways appropriate for specialist researchers, schools and colleges and the public. Demand has reached record levels, exceeding 2.9 million unique users during the year. The new Online Gallery brings together all of the Library’s web offerings for a public audience, including a guide to what is on in the galleries, an opportunity to experience highlights electronically and in-depth information about some of the greatest treasures.

Digital technology is transforming access for both the public and researchers through new initiatives such as the Collect Britain website, which showcases 100,000 items of regional significance. The selection represents a cross-section of the Library’s British collections – from medieval manuscripts and maps to sound clips and photographs. In the Expressions of Faith section, Ravi Shankar and Lord Robert Winston are among prominent people from different faiths and walks of life who express their personal views on a selection of favourite sacred manuscripts.