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Anger at library cuts as ministers admit 40 have closed this year

Monday 31 December 2007

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By Ciar Byrne, Arts and Media Correspondent

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The Victorian ideal of the public library as a bastion of culture and learning providing universal access to knowledge is under threat after months of closures, chronic staff cuts and book shortages.

Margaret Hodge, the minister responsible for libraries, has conceded that a net 40 libraries have been closed in the past year. In the West Midlands, Dudley council revealed plans to shut five, prompting Ms Hodge to step in to ask how the needs of residents could be met, although she admitted there was little she could do to prevent the closures going ahead.

This month, protesters gathered in Southampton to campaign against opening hours being cut in five libraries by

an average of nine and a half hours a week. The protest followed a petition of 10,000 signatures by the public service union Unison against proposals to axe 27 jobs and force pay cuts on other library staff in Hampshire.

Waltham Forest council in London admitted in November that it had culled a large number of books from its library stock believed to be nearly 240,000. In Croydon, residents are protesting against cuts by the Conservative council which have slashed 12,000 from the budget



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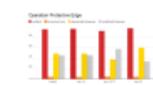
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of their library, leaving it in danger of being unable to buy new books and facing the possibility of further job cuts.

In Dorset, plans to close 13 libraries were dropped when the council decided to keep them open with the help of community volunteers, while in Kent, 77 library staff received letters earlier this year warning them they were at risk of being made redundant.

Government pressure on local authorities to make swingeing cuts has been blamed for the problems.

Andrew Coburn, the secretary of the Library Campaign, a charity which defends the interests of library users, said: "We are concerned that there are net closures across England. Forty closures is not good and there have been more proposed since then."

Roy Clare, the new chief executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, the government agency in charge of libraries, believes urgent action is needed to restore the institutions to their former glory. Just over 53 per cent of people in England use libraries, he said. "I'm not sure we should be happy with that. The mid 19th century idea of a public library was very radical. Libraries need to recapture that sense of radicalism."

The news could not come at a worse time for the Government, which has declared 2008 the National Year of Reading to boost the popularity of reading. Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, said he wants "2008 to be the year of the book" and called on parents to spend 10 minutes a day reading to their children.

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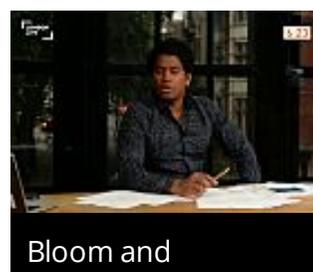


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this year. The Primary Review, an independent study of early schooling, found that reading standards have hardly improved since the 1950s and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study said British children had dropped from third to 19th in international league tables and were spending less time reading for pleasure than ever before.

The importance of libraries for communities has never been clearer, campaigners say, and yet little is being done to prevent their decline. Falling standards are their particular concern. Public library service standards, which authorities were required to meet and report on every year, have been swept away and replaced with one mandatory national indicator which deals with the number of adult visitors to libraries.

The novelist Will Self, who campaigned against cuts to his local library in Lambeth, south London, believes the trend for libraries to have coffee shops, DVD rentals and internet access is a diversion from their primary purpose providing books. "Libraries are the bedrock of literate culture. It's bad the way libraries are forced to compete with Waterstones and Borders with cafes and DVD rentals. The internet has become a stick to beat library loans with," he said.

The writer A N Wilson called on librarians and local authorities to show a bit more "bookishness". Wilson has stopped using his library in Camden, saying: "It's all very well to use a public library as a citizen's advice bureau, but it became only that. There were lots of leaflets on IT and fewer and fewer books and because they cut the staff so badly, our branch was shut for two days a week."

The Library Campaign and Cilip (The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) is worried about the trend towards

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"If users go into a library and ask a question, they want someone who is knowledgeable. There's a concern that's not happening. Reference desk skills are not something you can just sit down behind an inquiry desk and pick up," said Mr Coburn.

Guy Daines, director of policy at Cilip, said: "In the past 10 years there have been staffing reductions of 3 per cent, but over the same period there have been equivalent staff savings of 15 per cent. Our belief is that the skills, knowledge and competencies of a professional librarian add value to the service."

He added: "There's been an underinvestment generally in public libraries. Not enough is spent on all types of resources including books. Not enough is spent on the buildings. There's a great deal to do in bringing the library estate up to standard."



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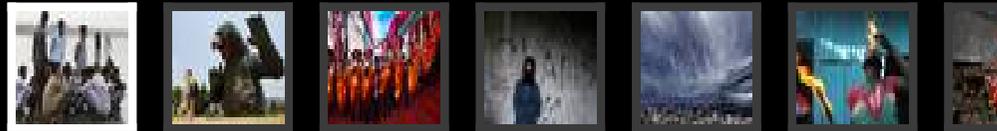
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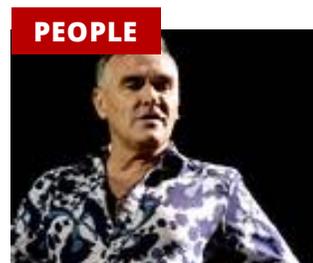
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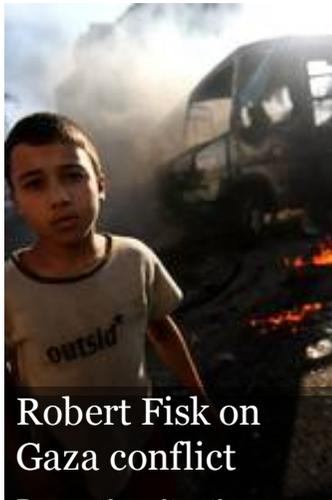
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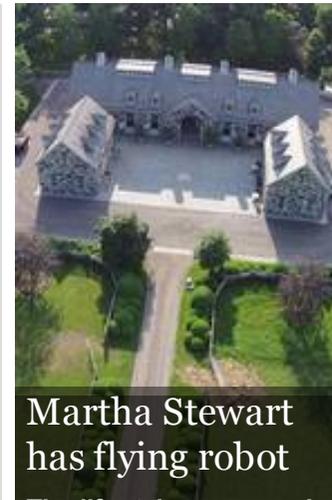
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