

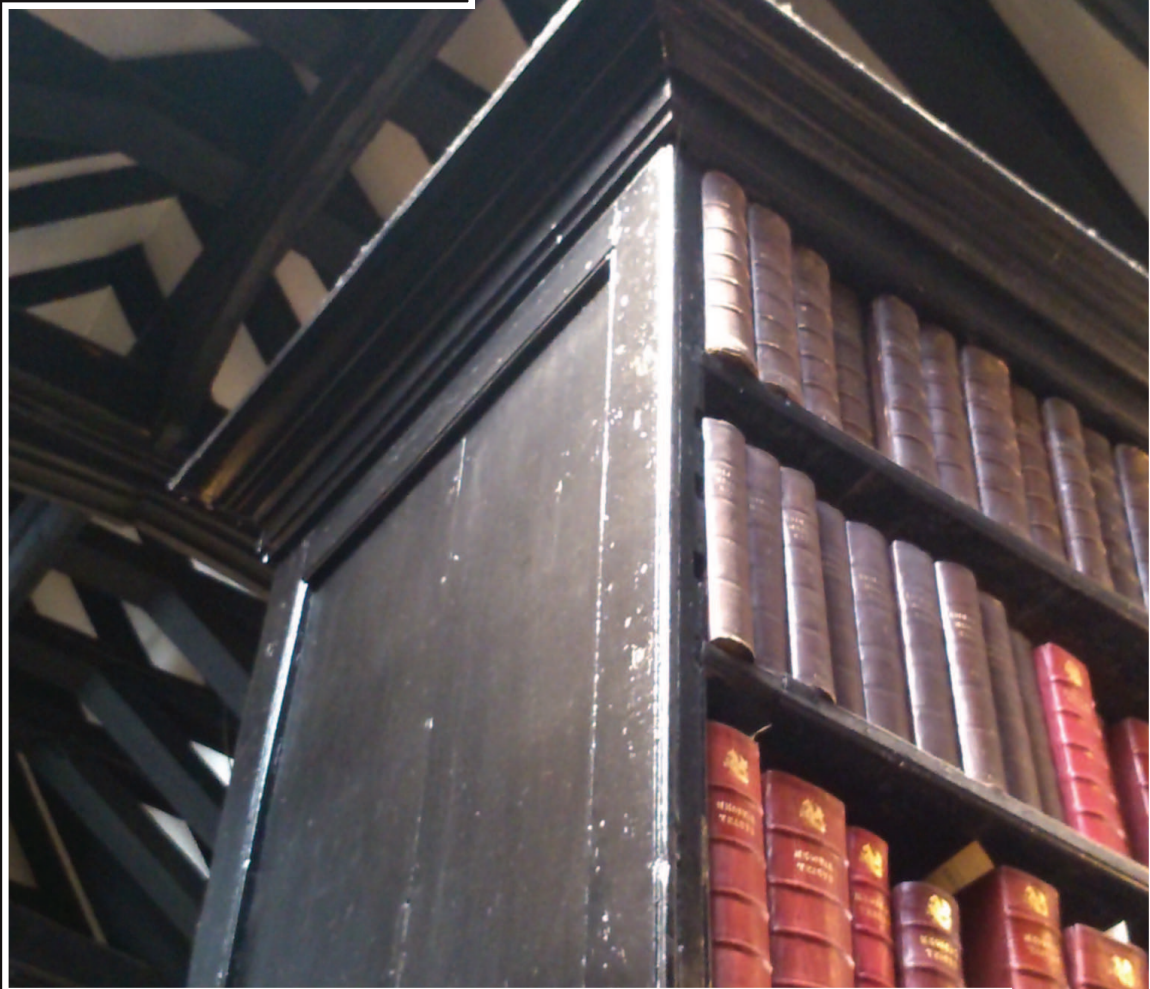
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Email: mensanow@gmail.com

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Libraries Reborn

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Taken to Book

Mike Cummins investigates what's happening to our local libraries?

Over two hundred public libraries closed for good in 2012. Five hundred more are under threat. But against this bleak backdrop two of the North West's most notable libraries have been transformed to become beacons for the future of British libraries.

Liverpool Central Library – Britain's first purpose built public lending library – opened its doors in 1860 before adding the domed Picton Reading Room in 1879 and the Hornby Library in 1906. All three of these structures are Grade II* listed. The same protection would never be given to the concrete extensions grafted on in the 1950s and 1970s. So they have gone. Demolished.

In their place stands a new atrium with criss-crossing staircases seemingly floating on air. Four floors above you the new glass dome draws you skyward onto the viewing balcony with stunning views of George's Hall.

Beyond the architectural splendour – worth a visit in itself – lie some inventive new approaches to what a twenty-first century library should be. The books are still there but are joined by a zone for listening to music and playing games. There are also banks of computers and iPads. Bibliophiles need not worry; they have the restored Picton Reading Room to concentrate in. Below the Picton is now a dedicated children's library. The cost of this renovation was a cool £50 million.

So if libraries are so popular – it is expected that Liverpool will see a million visitors a year – why are so many under threat? Whereas local authorities see the benefit and glory of a major, headline grabbing refurb, they are less keen to keep the little local library open. These libraries – where generations learned to read – are often open limited hours and double as community centres. Many need their own refurb. Add to this the cost of staffing and it becomes easy to see the flawed logic of councillors who want to close the doors, board them up and get the mobile library to pay the occasional visit. But these little huts and bunkers form a key part of the nation's education system



and deserve the same protection as their big centralised brothers. It is these little libraries that kept the people of Liverpool well versed during the three years that the central library was closed for renovation. Fifty miles to the east it was a similar story for Mancunians during their four year wait to see their own central library reborn. Again costing £50 million, this has involved less demolition than Liverpool but more restoration and expansion. The actual building is much younger than its Parthenon design would have many believe, originally opening its doors in 1934. Its magnificent dome dwarfs that of Liverpool's Picton Room but by 2010 even that was looking shabby (not to mention asbestos ridden!). Seventy per cent of the library was off limits to the public; the restoration has reversed that figure. The domed reading room has been restored and – arguably – improved by acoustic engineers. No longer will somebody putting down a pencil on the far side of the room sound like a clap of thunder! Like Liverpool, Manchester Central Library now boasts music and video games areas. But it is local history and genealogy that dominate the ground floor with spectacular displays and computerised access to documents and film. Also like Liverpool, Manchester Library is worthy of a visit in its own right. So what should people make of these



confusing messages about the future of public libraries in Britain? There are almost 250 billion books loaned out through our libraries every year – so there is clearly demand. But all libraries are more than book banks, they are social places, thinking spaces and cathedrals of wonder and innovation. Local libraries in particular are a lifeline for people who cannot easily travel into city centres. Forward thinking authorities are already embedding new local libraries in local regeneration projects and combining them with other services. Elsewhere, protest groups (usually called 'Friends of ... Library') are fighting the cuts. Online maps let users see what libraries in their area are under threat. So although they may be consuming more than their fair share of the libraries budget, the newly restored central libraries are here to stay. New users and borrowers will be drawn to these rejuvenated temples of knowledge for generations to come. And that alone will ensure that public libraries will endure.