Introduction

Even before the drastic public spending cuts that began in 2010, the public library service in England was in trouble. While it had been well funded by the state for many years, successive governments had called upon libraries to offer such a variety of social services that their whole sense of purpose had been lost. The once famous and treasured book collections had been allowed to dwindle to the point of uselessness, if not extinction. Book lending—the libraries’ main function—had halved. Visitor numbers had fallen.

All those attempts to attract a wider audience through “diversification” had diminished the reputation of the public library service. Two generations of citizens (that is, almost everyone except the smallest children and the oldest adults) had come to wonder if there is really a reason for libraries to exist. In turn, this loss of relevance to many people led to a loss of support and funding from the local government officials, councils, and councillors who used to provide so generously.

But this situation can be changed, with the combined efforts of community leaders, librarians, educators, authors, and readers of all ages and interests. In England, we are in the early stages of an effort to restore our public libraries. I was a bookseller for many years and became involved when I innocently stepped in to offer solutions drawn from my experience creating successful bookstores. I believed that there were fairly straightforward solutions to the problems faced by libraries, solutions which can be used anyplace, in any country, by anyone who wants to make their library a popular and valued place. I believed then, and still believe today, that the library service can be restored and made sustainable through proper planning and management. The Good Library Manual contains examples of my work in England as well as photographs of successful and beautiful libraries in the United States.