

The perpetual library



Tom Tivnan assesses library e-book loans, and test-drives his local branch's offer

For about a year and a half, I've been a member of the Idea Store. No, that's not a think tank, a literary salon or regular meeting of a café philosophy society. It is the Blairite/Orwellian repackaging of the Tower Hamlets council library system.

Still, despite the frankly risible name (or frightening if you think the notion of a library becoming a "store" goes against the very spirit of what libraries should be all about), the Idea Store does the business. The central Whitechapel Library is one of the best modern public libraries I have been in—the building opened in 2005 and was nominated for the Stirling Prize in 2006. My local branch, Bethnal

Green, in a charming Edwardian building (built on the site of a Georgian insane asylum—the green space in front of it is still known locally as "Barny Park") is well stocked, has friendly, knowledgeable staff and, with its book clubs and frequent art and local history exhibitions, has a real sense of community.

The Idea Store is also at the cutting edge, among the first wave of libraries in the UK to have started lending e-books to its members. In December 2009 it, along with 10 other London library systems, launched its service via Overdrive, the Cleveland, Ohio-based company that has been providing libraries with digital

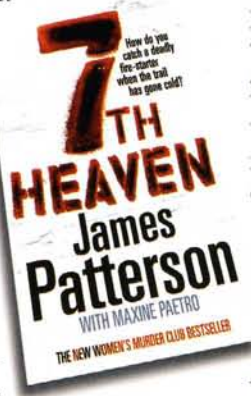
Surfing the web at the Idea Store, Whitechapel (above and below, left)

products as far back as 1986. Each of the participating local authorities purchased around 2,000 digital files (both e-books and digital audiobooks), with the products made available on each library's website and Overdrive's own site. At the Idea Store, just over half (1,100) of the files purchased were audiobooks.

ONLY THE BEGINNING

Steve Clarke, the Idea Store's stock development manager, reports that between launch and 23rd August, there were 649 download loans for the audiobooks, 591 for the e-books. Usage of the files can be recorded and, interestingly, of the people who downloaded audiobooks only 64% actually listened to the file, while 70% read the e-books. Clarke concedes the numbers are not stratospheric; by comparison, Tower Hamlets libraries averaged almost 83,500 physical book loans per month for the fiscal year of April 2009 to March 2010.

Yet Clarke emphasises that it is early days. "I think we all feel that we wish to monitor the whole initiative after a year has elapsed," he says. "However, the premise of working with Overdrive was to use a digital alternative to hard copy books and audiobooks. I personally believe that all interested parties in this debate—librarians, booksellers and publishers—feel that at the moment the e-book revolution has only just begun. As sales of Kindles, iPads etc, increase, so will library customers wishing to download e-books. I also believe that there is still a place, and will always be, for hard copy items.



James Patterson has two of the top 10 most downloaded e-books in Tower Hamlets libraries

DIVISIVE

Despite this low take-up rate the issue of free-at-the-point-of-delivery e-books has caused quite a bit of concern within certain sectors of the trade. Both the Society of Authors and the Booksellers Association earlier this year have raised a host of concerns about free e-books in libraries, saying the model



IDEA STORE E-BOOK TOP 10

1	In Their Footsteps/Thief of Hearts	Gerritsen, Tess (Mira)
2	Presumed Guilty/Keeper of the Bride	Gerritsen, Tess (Mira)
3	The 5 Keys to Value Investing	Jean-Jacques, J Dennis (McGraw-Hill)
4	100 One Night Reads,	Major, David C (Ballantine)
5	16 Lighthouse Road	Macomber, Debbie (Mira)
6	7th Heaven	Patterson, James (Century)
7	8th Confession	Patterson, James (Century)
8	Accelerated Project Management	(McGraw-Hill)
9	The Afghan	Forsyth, Frederick (Corgi)
10	Windows Vista Bible	Simpson, Alan (Wiley)



had vast implications on issues including author royalties, Public Lending Right payments, and the viability of local booksellers, and that driving library members online might have a devastating effect on libraries themselves.

In March, Booksellers Association president Tim Godfray wrote to the then culture minister, Margaret Hodge, to express concern about the issue. "The free loan of e-books is very different from the free loan of printed books," Godfray wrote. "It is not appropriate simply to extend the existing library lending of print books so that e-books are included, as the consequences are likely to be very different." Godfray highlighted what he believed to be the lack of controls libraries have on their digital infrastructure, which could lead to piracy.

Godfray, says that it is still a hot button issue. "The BA believes that there is the potential for the commercial bookselling sector to be seriously undermined if borrowers are able to access or download e-book content without charge. We remain concerned over this issue and have urged the culture minis-



The Idea Store, Whitechapel

ter to introduce appropriate measures to ensure that booksellers are not disadvantaged by an unfair competitive advantage given to the library sector."

The new government, however, has yet to take any firm line on e-books in libraries. In response to a query, the office of current culture minister Ed Vaizey said that digital "will be very much a part of libraries in the future", and any decision over the degree of investment in e-books in libraries will only be made when there is a "deep consultation with all parties".

IDEA STORE ONLINE: THE TEST DRIVE

To start downloading e-books in the Idea Store's eLibrary I needed my library card (and accompanying PIN number), a bit of kit at home, software that supports Overdrive Audio books and Adobe Digital Editions to read the e-books. Fairly straightforward. But to make it a truly mobile experience for e-books, the only devices supported (that retail in this country) are the Sony Reader family. Unfortunately, my mobile reading devices are an iPhone and iPad, so I was stuck reading on my computer.

Still, the Digital Editions is decent e-reading software, smooth and easily navigable and I was able to click through Bronwyn Scott's *Libertine Lord*, *Pickpocket Miss* quite happily—though, of course, having an E-Ink screen would have made it far more enjoyable. An Overdrive audio app is available on the iPhone, which is brilliant, once you get it working. I am fairly handy with these techie things, but it took me about three hours to get it synched in order to get the audio file from computer to my phone. Perhaps this is a reason for the relatively low (64%) usage for library members who downloaded an audio file: probably they simply couldn't get the damn thing to play.

With only about 2,000 digital files at the moment, choice is relatively limited. Still,

there is a decent range of classics, thrillers (loads of libraries' favourite James Patterson) and even some illustrated titles and graphic novels.

A frustrating thing for the reader is, unlike when one is purchasing e-books, there is a finite number of e-books that the Idea Store can loan out. Of the top 20 e-books, only three are "in stock", though the user can reserve a copy for when the e-book file becomes live again, or add it to a "wish list", to be informed when it becomes available.

Overdrive, is a Cleveland, Ohio-based company and a few of the "what the hell?" selections indicate some of the e-books may have been part of a package from across the pond. Under the suggested titles page Marty Appel's *Munson: the Life and Death of a Yankee Captain* (Knopf) is featured prominently. Do you know who Thurman Munson was? I didn't think so. He was the catcher for New York Yankees in the 1970s who died in a plane crash during the prime of his career. I am not sure too many Tower Hamlets residents are putting that on their wish lists. It's like putting Jamie Carragher's memoir into a library in Dubuque, Iowa.

Finally, the really great thing about Idea Store digital products: they disappear off your computer after 14 days. No mess, no fuss and no overdue fees.

iPadding the figures

Simon Scarrow takes issue with Steve Jobs, and argues that the trade should stick to proven business models, not be dazzled by the newest gadgets

I read the recent feature on the iPad and e-reading in *The Bookseller* ("Reading lessons", flagship feature, 17th September) with a growing sense of bemusement. While the results of the YouGov survey of iPad owners are fascinating, some of your data and the conclusions require closer scrutiny.

Let me first declare that I have been an iPad owner for two months and I am in your key demographic for consumers of this device. As an author I was keen to see what the iPad offered as a reading experience and one of the first apps I downloaded was iBooks. It's very impressive and I immediately downloaded the samples of my own books (mostly to have something to see on the rather charming virtual bookshelf) and then some classic texts which were free—some eight in all. I even began to read one of them. So, that's a dozen books downloaded towards Steve Job's five million downloads in the first 65 days and not one of them paid for.

DODGY MATHS

Even if we accept Jobs' figure, I'd love to know what proportion of those downloaded books were rivals for real book sales (can we start calling them r-books, please, since they "are" books and not mere text files?). Especially as the top-selling e-book app sold 220 copies a few weeks ago when the top-selling title on BookScan was selling over 50,000 copies. If the bestselling e-book app sells 220 copies, and the rest of the chart tails off in roughly the same manner as it does with BookScan, then the iPad sales account for less than half of one percent of the market, and Jobs' five million downloads represent less than 25,000 paid-for books. Not so impressive, then. In this context *The Bookseller's* recent