Interview with Wes White,
Library Development Officer, Canada Water Library

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Other related files: .mp3 audio file (parent); .jpeg photograph of the interviewee outside Canada Water Library; .pdf of dissertation with research that produced this collection of interviews.
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Wes: So, I first started working here at Canada Water Library and for Southwark libraries generally in April last year, so relatively newly, but I’ve now been here a year and a few months. And before that, yes, I was working in public libraries; I had a part time job in Somerset libraries since 2001, right through until I got here, last year, 2016. And even prior to that I had a certain degree of library experience: I’ve volunteered in my school library when I was there, and then I volunteered in the computer rooms in my university library; I think all that helped me to get a position as Library Assistant in Somerset when I first started working there. I must admit: when I started working in Somerset libraries my intention was to be there for probably about 18 months, while I was doing my MA, and it just; I was happened to fit around it, and; it’s a lovely place to work so I ended up being there a lot longer than I expected. You asked, had I studied Library and Information Science; I don’t have a degree in librarianship or anything like that; I have got a City & Guilds certificate; it was termed ‘library and information services’, and it was very much concentrated on the kind of the vocational side of working in a library in the 21st century. So, geared towards people like the kind of job I was in there, as a Library and Information Assistant, doing a lot of things that people think of librarians are doing, but not having quite as much responsibility for making big stock decisions and those kind of things. So, yeah, some study, but not degree level study of librarianship. Beyond that, my own background is more in what... My academic background is in English and Creative Writing; so it is relevant, there’s a literary angle, but it just... Wasn’t focused on real library stuff.

Mariana: So would you say that you ended up in libraries; that it wasn’t really much planned...
Wes: No, it wasn’t planned, but at the same time it was kind of natural even so, because, like I mentioned, I’d volunteered in my school library, I spent a lot of time in libraries when I was younger, and although I hadn’t necessarily thought that I would work in one, at the same time it is not particularly a surprise to find that this is what I’m doing as my career; because as a user, I’d always loved libraries, and I think that, these days, if I visit a new town, or I’m in a place I don’t know, I’ll look for the library just to get, partly from professional interest, but I think I would have done that anyway. I do really like spending time in libraries.

Mariana: And could you tell us a bit what an average day at work in this library involves? What do you most enjoy doing in your routine? And what is the most important ability that you feel you have to master to carry out your work here?
Wes: Okay, oh, that’s a lot of big questions altogether, so... A typical day, for me, my own role is quite varied, so my job title now is ‘Library Development Officer’, and until quite recently I was a ‘Learning and Engagement Officer’, and everybody looks at me and says ‘What does that mean?’ The two big things with this ‘Learning and Engagement’ title were: delivering the IT sessions, so for people who need or just want to improve their computer skills – and particularly people who are just starting out, so people who are finding more and more that they are being asked to do things online, and maybe haven’t even sat down in front of a computer before, keyboard and mouse are very unfamiliar, and leading them through those things. That was one big part of my learning and engagement role; and the other major part of it was a heritage angle: focusing on the – which is unusual I think in libraries –, because I was focusing on things for the Southwark heritage, alongside Southwark Libraries, this includes the county’s Museum, the Cuming Museum, and also some collaboration with our local history library, and generally seeking to engage the community with the heritage of the area, so... One of the things that you’ve said, ‘What do I most enjoy doing on my routine’, so, I do really enjoy doing these heritage things, and in particular, because this was a new part of the role when I got here, I was able to shape it to some extent, and one of the things I do is to lead Poetry Walks out of the library around the local area; I do this both here at Canada Water and across at Blue Anchor libraries. We just go on a planned route, stop at a number of places...
points where there’s a story to tell about something that happened there, maybe there’s a blue plaque up that I can talk about what’s being commemorated; and then I read or perform a poem that is relevant to that, and people really enjoy it, and I love doing it; apart from anything, it’s getting paid to go for a nice walk, but it’s also... It’s free for members of the community to come, or even visitors can come if they want as well. And everybody says that they’ve learned something, and enjoyed it at the end, and usually I learn more from those people on the walks than they learn from me, because it’s generally all locals who come and tell me lots about the things that we’re stopping and talking about as well, so, that’s probably my favourite thing.

What else did... There was a third question in there that I kind of missed. ‘The most important ability I feel that we have to master’, I guess, ‘to carry out our work here’Well, I had mentioned some things that are specific to my role, but I also do lots of the ‘normal’, in inverted commas, library duties that people expect: so, shelving books; being available for people when there are enquiries; stock movement; moving things around; when they’re needed, do reservations in different libraries and so on. And I feel like the most important thing is being ready to, kind of change your mode at any given moment, because the job is so varied, if you come in and you haven’t got a specific thing to do all day, then your work responsibilities can be six or seven different things through the day, hour by hour; and within that, people can come up and ask anything in the library, because part of the idea is that, you know, we are here to help people find information – that can mean anything. So...

Also, sometimes, there are... There’s a difference in the kind of quality of the information, in terms of, sometimes people are looking for things like, you know, it might be something lighthearted, or in inverted commas, ‘trivial’, you know, something just on the spot, ‘What’s this’; other times it’s a really big deal and people need things urgently; so you have to be really ready to just switch up to whatever thing it is that people are looking for at that moment. So really, flexibility is the big thing there. Yeah, which is... It can be challenging at times, but it’s a really nice thing to be able to have in a job; it’s not just one thing all day long.

[08:33]

**Mariana:** This is a very new library, opened just in 2011; it was purpose-built and has a very unique design. It is also one of the busiest libraries in London, if not the busiest. So how much of it do you think is due to the characteristics of the library building? How important do you think is the architecture of a library to people’s experience of it?

**Wes:** Well... in some ways this is a little bit hard for me to say because I’m relatively new staff here; so before Canada Water library was here, there was the Rotherhide library that was serving the area; and I suppose one thing to look at would be the difference between how many people were visiting when that library was here, and with this new, as you said, relatively new build. And I’m not sure what that is, but my hunch is that this is a lot busier than the previous Rotherhide library was, which suggests in itself that the characteristics of the building have to have a lot to do with that. I mean, one thing about it is it’s very striking, a striking building from outside; we do get comments, not infrequently, that people don’t realise that it’s a library until they’ve had to come in here and find the thing that they were looking for. And we are looking in future to make it... The funny thing about that is that there are letters about ten-foot tall along the glass entrance that say ‘library’ on them; but I admit that even I didn’t realise that until I’d been here several months; it’s something about being on the glass, you just miss it; so we hope that we’ll have clearer signage in future, and that that will be in keeping with what the architects intended for the building.

So, yeah, it being so busy, like you say, according to some sources, the busiest library in London, certainly up there in the top public libraries in London. I think it’s partly the fact that it is so obvious from outside, it kind of makes you want to check out what’s here; the tube station which is directly underneath us is incredibly busy. And I think that must be a factor; once people realise there’s a library above them, there are so many people passing through, that a certain proportion of them are just going to come out and explore sometimes. And then also, once you’re in the library, in Canada Water, it’s a lovely space to be in. I think particularly the great big spiral staircase that we’ve got up in the middle of the building; I always enjoy just going up and down here, so...

For me as well, the first time I came here, I have to admit, I didn’t realise, when I was in the ground floor area, talking to the member of staff on reception, my first impressions were ‘Wow, this library has been really
stripped down!’, because there’s a bank of Classics, there’s this Reservations, there’s like some kiosk to take things out and return, and a café, and... It was only when I had stopped to think about it for a few minutes, I said, ‘There’s more library upstairs, isn’t there?’; I mean, from outside that’s actually really obvious, but until you kind of realise that the whole building is a library – well, and including the theatre space that we have here as well; yeah. Now, if I’m joining new members when I’m sat on reception, I always say to people, ‘Make sure you go upstairs, that’s where most of the library is’; because people could miss it otherwise; they could go straight through and think that we were just the most stripped down library in the area.

[12:25]
Mariana: What are your impressions of the library collection? You are a member of the staff, but do you also take advantage of the library as a user as well?
Wes: Yes, I do; well, so I checked, actually, when I saw this question in your printed list of questions, and I’ve got twelve items on loan at the moment; some of those I’ve had for ages and keep renewing – the kind of thing that I sort of feel a bit ashamed of, that I’ve had these books out for so long. Although they’re a mix; when I looked at them, they’re about, half of them are books that I’ve taken out for work projects within the library service, and half of them are kind of personal interest. Also, a couple of weeks ago, my wife and I hired the Game of Thrones boxset DVDs, because she needed to catch up for the next series, so yeah. And you said ‘What are my impressions of the collection’; well, when I was working in Somerset, I was working in a much smaller library, and there had been big budget pressures on the stock; well, actually, on the whole service there, as a lot of public libraries are experiencing at the moment; well, really, all public library services are, and public services in general have been for years – but the service I came from, and the library that I’ve worked in, we’d been conscious for a long time of a lot of pressure on the book stock. So when I got here – and this is, coming from a small local library in a rural area to a flagship library in quite central London –, I was... my overriding impressions were just how jealous my colleagues back there would be of what we had here. So yeah, it is really an impressive book collection, I think. And I think people would be; there’s such a range, and so many books housed here, that I think that people would be hard pressed not to find something that would interest them, if they just spent a little time exploring. Yeah, I think it’s a great collection – even just on its own, our graphic novel collection is comparable to a lot of comic shops, I think, and that goes for various other areas of the stock as well, yeah...

[14:59]
Mariana: How have new digital information technologies affected this library, and also your work? Of course, this is a very new library; there are self-service machines...
Wes: Yes, so... this is something that... self-service machines were just coming in to the authority that I worked in before, and actually they were just arriving at this specific library that I worked in before, as when I left there and came here; so from my personal perspective, all the staff here were generally very used to the self-service machines, and that was something that I had to get used to. But actually I find it quite natural, and I think that... It’s surprising to realise, considering how many people are very happy to use the machines to take their book out and bring them back, and also deal with some of their account queries, we still do talk to a lot of library users; not only because of queries with the machines but also generally about, enquiries about the local area, about our policies and services, and... So, but on top of that, I already mentioned that with my own job being a lot about helping people to use the internet and use computers; when I first started working in libraries, we did have public use computers. But there wasn’t nearly as much expectation that we would be providing a service that would guide people through getting started with them; they were available for those people who wanted to use them; but at that point – we’re talking about 15, 16 years ago – it tended to be, there was still much more of a division between people who were already wanting to use the PCs, and people who were just interested in browsing the books and so on; whereas now, there are a lot of services that the council and other organisations provide, that they are encouraging people to, well, encouraging, stroke in many cases, insisting on people accessing those services online, so, filling forms in online, and we feel that we have the responsibility as
information providers and helping people to access information, as well as, as part of the council service, with these public access computers, where people being asked to come and complete these tasks, to help people to understand how to do it; so yeah, that’s changed very much while I’ve been here; and I’d say that library staff member going back another 10, 15 years, very often you wouldn’t have even had PCs as a default part of what you’re offering in libraries. We also routinely get people coming in to do prints, and what I’ve noticed more and more recently has been a lot of people coming in and expecting to be able to do a print quickly in the library, who haven’t yet acquired a membership, and our system doesn’t allow for that; you have to have a membership to sign in to do the print; and people do get annoyed with us about that sometimes. But then I think, well, we’re here providing the services, that’s why you’ve come to us; it only takes a few minutes to sign up. What can you do? You can’t please everyone, I guess...

[18:54]

Mariana: Regarding the library users, do you see many of the same faces each day? Is there any specific library user that you are usually in contact with? Are there any groups of people that you especially enjoy working with?

Wes: There’s a real mix in terms of – I kind of hinted at it in the answer to the last question –, sometimes the people we see might only be in the area for that day, or just passing through; and they’ve seen the library and realise that it would be a convenient place to get certain things they need done. Actually, I didn’t mention with that: the Wi-Fi is another thing that people have realized, that they can get free Wi-Fi in libraries, and that brings some people in as well. But, in terms of… So, those people, we might only ever see once, because they happen to be here, but we also have regular users; yes, there are certainly some people who are in pretty much daily. And… The people that I, if I’m going to see anyone on a regular basis, it’s most likely to be a computer learner who is needing a certain degree of ongoing support; so the idea is that we try and make sure that they’re learning in each session, but naturally because we will often have older people to deal with, we’ll try and help people in situations where people might be referred to us with learning difficulties, so it might take them a lot longer to pick up some task that, otherwise, we could do in just one or two sessions even sometimes. So, yes we have some of these computer learners whom I probably sit down pretty regularly with, and… Again, I’m sometimes helping them with specific tasks. Beyond that, do you said ‘Is there a favourite group of users that I have’; I really like when… I suppose because I like delivering the heritage tasks, I like when members of the community do engage with that; so when I do my job well, and do manage to connect with people, then that’s always fun.

I mean, one thing that I haven’t told you that I do, is I, once a month I have a thing called ‘mini museun!’, where I’ve got a box that we have artifacts from the Cuming Museum, just available for people to see in the lobby downstairs. But because a lot of them are unique artifacts, they need to be supervised, so I stand with the box, and I’ll talk to people about the things in there; and, yeah, I really like when people come up and check out what’s going on, and they’re interested in share things with me there; yeah, that’s great.

[21:41]

Mariana: What do you think is unique about public libraries, and maybe about this library in particular? What do you think makes people value them?

Wes: It’s interesting, that question, ‘What makes people value them’ because… Again, that puts me a little bit in mind of my previous place where I was working, simply because, not to say, I mean, it’s obvious here that people really value their library, but what really highlighted it for me there was some of the libraries were threatened with closure, and there was a big community response, and it was really striking; actually, as member of staff, it was quite emotional to see people stand up in the way they did to protect their library… And that made me think about what is it that people are valuing; of course, we try and do a good job, but there are lots of places where you try and do a good job where people wouldn’t protest about you being closed… So I think that for a lot of… I think that people tend to value the fact that it is a space where we try to welcome everybody; within certain behavior rules, you know, people need to respect each other and the staff, but
practically everyone does do that here, which is great... And I think also, it’s there aren’t many various places where you can go to now and find something that can be really entertaining, really informative, where you have a huge amount of choice, and you can access it at that point for free, and go away with it; you know, if it’s a bookshop, then you’re paying for it; if it’s... I suppose a comparable thing would be another public service like the NHS, but people don’t tend to use the health service for fun, so that’s a real thing that I think that people do value, that it can be... That there’s a lot of choice involved here; people come and either browse or come with something in mind, and hopefully go away with what they were looking for. And to have that, and it’s paid for in advance, okay, you probably paid your taxes towards it, but everybody does that as a community effort, and then shares it as a community as well. I hope that people find it a very welcoming environment; and we try and be friendly -- well, hopefully we don’t have to try and be friendly, but we hope that were friendly, and, yeah... I mean, as I’ve said earlier in the interview, I’ve always enjoyed going to libraries myself, so it’s not hard for me to... In a way, it’s harder for me to think why people would not value libraries; it seems like an obvious free place to go to just spend some time in what is generally a relaxed environment, and, where you’ve got some space and time to think; not too many other expectations. You won’t get rained on like you would in a park as well, so...

[25:10]

Mariana: This is a new library, and it proved itself extremely popular. But many other councils are not managing to maintain its libraries open -- as we’ve talked a bit already. What do you think goes missing when a public library closes down? How important do you think this library is for this local community?

Wes: Well, I’m really biased since my job depends on this library being here; and also, bear in mind, like I said, I got here last year, so I shouldn’t comment too much on how the community that is more established here might see things, but that said, with those caveats, to me it really seems like a big focal point, this library here, and I think that the community, in the area, is generally proud of having it here. It’s a big thing to have a library that the council considers a flagship library in your area, and it does make a difference, from having this to having a smaller local library, where it might be harder to find the thing you’re looking for, you might need to request it. Of course we need to request things here sometimes, but when you’ve got 40.000 books it makes it more likely that you’ve got the thing that people are looking for.

‘What do I think goes missing when a public library closes down’... If we think about the fact that people tend to see, hopefully, but that -- this is my experience -- that people see the libraries as places where they can go when they’re stuck for information, and when they... or to ask us all kinds of things for a really wide range of purposes, be leisurely, be entertainment, through to important, essential information; if that central point, that welcoming point goes, then you’ve lost that, and that’s a big thing to lose; it’s an access point to much else in culture and society. And I think that that’s why people do standup when they perceive their libraries are threatened; I think it’s why you see in areas where council funding is removed, a lot of communities doing their best to keep their library open through volunteering, because those things, yeah, people know that they’re important to keep present.

So... and for me... I’m trying to think, if I wasn’t a library staff, and I was, say, just in my area where I live, if the library went away... Suddenly access to a space where I can go and browse literature, and chance upon things without feeling any concern that the person behind the counter is hoping that I’m going to buy the book, or wondering how long I’m going to thumb through it before I decide to buy it or not, none of that is in the library; it feels strange if people didn’t feel able to just browse here. And funny thing is actually, some of those IT things are more and more important; I think, for me as well, I don’t have a printer at home, so my local library is one of the first places I think of to go when I need to get something printed out. Actually, very specific example of that... In a situation when my wife is a non-EU citizen, so she’s from America as it happens, and one of the things that you have to provide to sponsor a non-EU citizen to live with you as a family member here now is lots of evidence of your relationship, so I needed to go -- and you do this in paper form --, so I had to print out lots of evidence of conversations that we’d had online, screenprints from when we were chatting on as it was Google Hangout, so what people think of as Skype, and it was my local library that I went to to print all these
things out. So actually, for me, my local library was crucial in terms of helping to get my wife over to this country, so this is a big life event that it really played an important part in. And sure I would have found other ways to do it, had it not been there; but I think it’s telling that it was my first point of call, and the one that I actually used.

[30:37]

Mariana: And finally, what does this library mean to you personally; what part does it play in your life?

Wes: Actually, not unrelated, strangely enough, to the answer I just gave, because... the other aspect, the other aspect of... One of the other things that the government requires to Sponsor a non-EU spouse is a certain income requirement, so the reason I moved from a rural area to London libraries is that the London weighting got me over that threshold that allowed me to sponsor my wife. But at the same time, I applied for this job because I thought this was a very attractive job in itself. And for me this stands for a really big change in my life, actually: from coming away from my hometown where I had lived pretty much the whole time until I moved here, or moved to London, and then coming and working here, and having a lot more responsibilities in this job, and helping to shape some of the things that I do in the job. And then also that thing of, it actually stands for, having been able to get my wife to this country, so that’s a massive thing for me. Probably not a very usual response to that question that you’ll get, but that’s definitely my answer, yeah... It’s a big thing for me. And I’m sure, when at some point later on, I move on from Canada Water library, whenever that is, I’ll remember it very fondly for all of those reasons.