

Lancashire Council libraries provides 24/7 access to The Times Digital Archive

The group of libraries

Lancashire County Council serves a population of 1.1 million people throughout its 74 public libraries. As part of its commitment to widening access to information, Lancashire County Council has extended the reach of its services with the introduction of a well-stocked digital library. Its wide membership policy allows Lancashire users to join online and access resources from anywhere. The online presence allows people to view their library account, search and reserve books, access digital resources and for those with Lancashire postcodes, download fiction and non-fiction audio and e-books.

Six years ago Lancashire County Council's libraries embarked on an expansion project to build their digital library. [The Times Digital Archive 1775 – 2006](#) (TDA) from Cengage Learning was a key resource introduced to the selection for its in-depth historic and news elements. As one of the most highly regarded history sources for the 19th - 20th Centuries, the TDA allows an unparalleled opportunity to search and view the best-known and most cited newspaper in the world, online in its original published context. As a window to the past, the TDA has captured the most iconic events across many key areas including science and technology; politics, war, tragedy, sport, economics, business and culture. The TDA transports users back in time to observe the most historically significant eras witnessed by humanity over the past two centuries such as the end of the cold war, the rise of global terrorism, the growth of China, the rise of Microsoft and much more.

Paul Hatch, Virtual Librarian at Lancashire County Council was tasked with the job of building and enhancing the digital library, promoting even greater access opportunities for Lancashire's diverse library members. A former reference librarian, Paul has witnessed the evolution of the digital age through the transformation of his role into digital resources. Here, Paul discusses how the Times Digital Archive is taking accessibility a step further and bringing the library to its members.

The challenge:

The digital library was established to meet the demands of the growing population and to extend the reach of our services and resources to the Lancashire community. It was important to invest in resources that would cater to the needs of our diverse members - comprehensive enough to be used academically whilst highly appealing and appropriate for the general public who enjoy reading for leisure.

Prior to the introduction of our digital library, people who wanted to access archives faced many hurdles in accessing information and documents that we, in the digital age, now take for granted. Due to limited storage capacity, hard copy resources such as newspaper archives were stored in one location at our Preston library, and with only one copy of each resource, gaining access to documents was an involved task.

To access the archives, users typically scheduled a booking, searched through the manual index to locate the item and once found, scanned through the document using our microfilm reader. In effect, this meant that only one person could use the resource at a time.

Consequently, users with mobility issues and people who found the library's opening hours inconvenient struggled to access our resources. Ultimately we were faced with the threat of excluding a large population of potential users who could benefit from using our services.

Introducing our members to the digital library

With digital resources, comes greater accessibility, flexibility and convenience. The driving force behind the expansion of our digital library was to optimise our content by sourcing the most highly sort after and information rich resources. The edition of the Times Digital Archive 1775 – 2006 has proven to be highly popular amongst our members. On average, 18,000 sessions of the TDA are recorded per month with about 90% accessing the system from a remote location, outside of the library. These figures demonstrate how this resource is offering greater convenience and widening access to the community.

Although our staff are always on hand to assist people, one of the greatest benefits of The Times Digital Archive is its ease of use, making searching simple, convenient and efficient via highlighted search results. As a user-friendly system, it promotes independent learning for users of all levels, freeing up staff time and allowing the library to minimise administrative costs.

Our members who use the Times Digital Archive particularly enjoy the family history element. Many people use the TDA to satisfy their natural curiosity. People like to investigate their family history with the hope of finding 'skeletons in the closet' and ties to famous or otherwise, infamous ancestors. Topics of personal interest such as crime or the history behind current affairs in the media is also very popular. As an online resource, home library members enjoy access to the TDA and many of the libraries facilities and services 24/7.

Outcome

By introducing online membership registration and developing our digital library to include highly acclaimed resources such as The Times Digital Archive, we've not only widened the scope of our services and resources to a mass audience, but as a direct result have seen an increase in our memberships and more traffic to our website. This has inadvertently helped to promote other facets of our library including upcoming events and initiatives.

Lancashire County Council's groups of libraries have seen many changes over the years. Investment into our digital portfolio, in particular The Times Digital Archive has added further value to our library and has served its purpose well – to promote inclusion and provide a more comprehensive and information rich resource that is meeting the needs of the Lancashire community. Our digital library is set to further expand with new additions including *The Sunday Times Digital Archive 1822 – 2006* – a highly anticipated resource that will further enhance the variety and access to information in the 21st Century.