

FINANCIAL TIMES

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 14 2007

Business Life

Library turns new page for start-ups

The British Library offers a unique free service for budding entrepreneurs – as well as a chance to meet some stars of enterprise, says **Jonathan Moules**

Enterprising Britain

A century and a half ago the British Library was a home from home for Karl Marx as he spent hours in its reading room analysing back issues of *The Economist* and other journals for his critique of capitalism, *Das Kapital*.

Today the new Library plays host to those who come to praise, not bury, the free market.

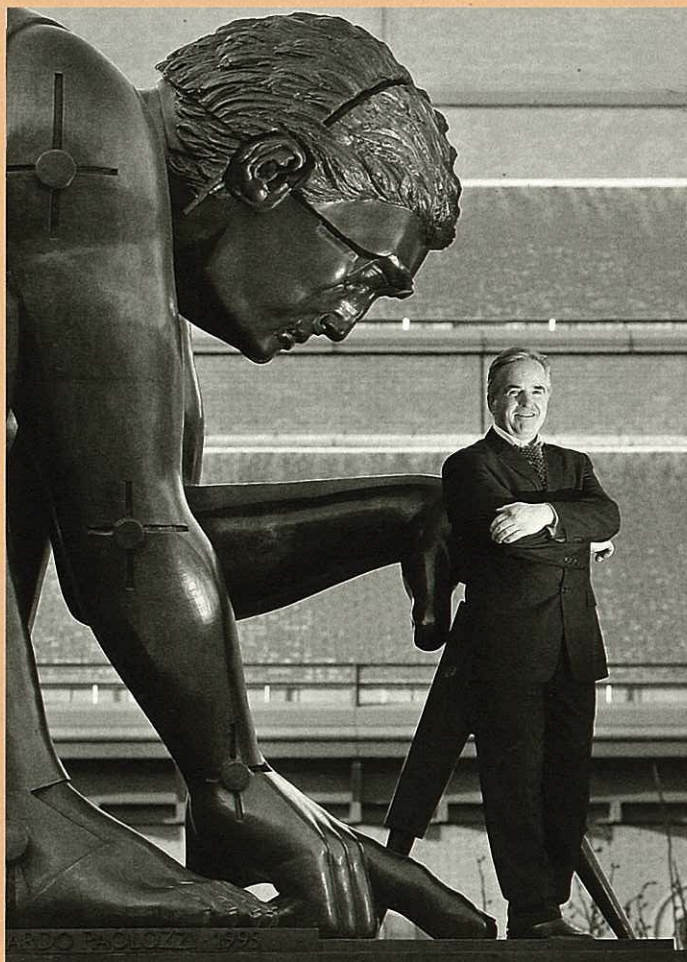
The attraction is the Business and Intellectual Property Centre, a couple of floors of the Library's headquarters, near St Pancras, that have been converted into a boiler room for budding entrepreneurs to research their ideas and learn from those who have made fortunes already.

Doug Richard, former panellist on BBC TV's *Dragons' Den*, and chair of the technology start-up research business Library House, is a big fan of the BIPC. "I send all my start-ups there to do their market assessment work because of the extraordinary range of online services and databases," he says. "The Library is unique in the world in providing free access to these materials."

The free facilities include state-of-the-art meeting rooms, a networking area and wireless internet access. Specialist staff are on hand to help research information.

Since the BIPC opened in April 2005, more than 26,400 people have used its services, equivalent to about 10 per cent of London's small-business population.

Visitors have included the late Dame Anita Roddick, who ran one-on-one advice clinics, and Tim Campbell, winner of *The Apprentice* television series, who used the BIPC's facilities to research his first solo business venture.



Creative choice: the BIPC has appointed Mark Sheahan as its inventor in residence

Ben Stansall

Dee Wright came to the Library when she was researching the idea for her nit and lice removal service, The Hairforce, and credits the BIPC with enabling her to put together her business case. She now employs 10 people, and has big plans to open clinics across the UK and Europe. "A wonderful gentleman at the Library told me to go to the Business and IP Centre," she says. "The resource was invaluable."

A recent study of 230 BIPC visitors, commissioned by the Library, found that 47 per cent were owner-managers of businesses, while the rest were planning to create a company or were at the start-up stage. Of those that had already set up a business, 61 per cent said sales increased after visiting the Library, 56 per cent said profits were up and 46 per cent said productivity had risen. From this small sample alone, 47 new

businesses were registered by people coming to BIPC, creating 115 jobs.

It is a sign of the BIPC's success that the Library was the venue for the launch of this week's national celebration of start-up activity, Enterprise Week.

As the official library of the Patent Office, the British Library holds more than 70m patents, the largest collection in the world. It also has a long history of helping big corporations with research and development activities.

The BIPC operation is modelled on the Science, Industry and Business Library created by the New York Public Library in lower Manhattan. The two institutions have "a very friendly rivalry", says Lynne Brindley, the British Library's chief executive, who was in a group that visited SIBL a few years ago before deciding to bring the concept to London. "In the typical British Library way, we thought 'we can do that differently and better'." The New York Public Library, she notes, does not hold intellectual property databases.

One of the biggest challenges was getting the British public to think of coming to their national library - "quite a formidable institution" - for business advice.

The answer the Library hit on was to turn its building into a new late-night venue for the public, inviting well-known entrepreneurs to come along to offer some pearls of wisdom to their fans. Sir

Stelios Haji-Ioannou, Tim Waterstone and Lord Karan Bilimoria are just some of the business owners to have appeared at the Library's Inspiring Entrepreneurs evenings, answering questions from the floor before mingling with the audience over a glass of wine and canapés.

There are limits to the Library's own entrepreneurial endeavours. Although it has helped many individuals set up in business, the Library will never practise what it preaches and turn a profit from the enterprise. The BIPC burnt through a £1m grant from the London Development Agency, the capital's regeneration agency, during its first year. The LDA has just promised the Library another £2.4m to maintain the service and add new elements.

Ms Brindley says: "I regard this as public investment in the future economy rather than public expenditure that should be squeezed."

The Library does have some understanding of commercial matters, she adds, noting that it generates about £130m in revenue a year from the information it sells to businesses, such as scientific data. "We are the only national library in the world with that income focus," she says. "It is not direct competition with the private sector, but it is entrepreneurial."

The BIPC is likely to continue to rely on the public purse because of the social objectives demanded by the LDA, in particular encouraging different ethnic groups to take the plunge as entrepreneurs.

The proportion of people using the BIPC from minority groups is high, with 40 per cent from Black, Asian and other ethnic minorities and 25 per cent with some sort of disability. Women make up 55 per cent of users.

Isabel Oswell, head of business marketing, denies that the Library is encouraging positive discrimination to the detriment of other people. Most users are white and almost half are male, she notes. "Everybody is welcome, but people who really need the support are women, people from ethnic minorities and the disabled because statistically they are the most likely to fail."

The Library's senior management is clearly excited about

its success, possibly because it has created a cool hang-out for thousands of aspiring entrepreneurs. Someone has even created a BIPC group on Facebook.

"This is one strand of the institution that has moved on," Ms Brindley says. "It is labouring to be totally relevant to the 21st century."

**BIPC: www.bl.uk/bipc/
Tel: 020 7412 7454**

Inventors can turn to one of their own for advice at BIPC

Universities have writers in residence: the British Library's Business and Intellectual Property Centre appointed an inventor in residence.

Mark Sheahan was a blackjack croupier and author of a car repair manual before becoming an inventor. He is on the executive council for the Institute of Patentees & Inventors and the British Association for Inventors. His most successful idea so far is the Squeeze open, an easy-open plastic container created to help people like his arthritic mother, who

struggled with the butterfly catch on a tin of shoe polish.

Licences on the design have been sold in the UK, Japan and the US, and Mr Sheahan is working on a lockable plastic container.

He sees about five people a day when he is on call at the Library and says most questions are about raising funds to develop an idea. "It is the early-stage inventor that you need to help most," he says. "The government doesn't understand that whole area and how to help these people."

Part of Mr Sheahan's mission is to end the image of inventors as

"nutty professors" working from a garden shed. He says the inventors he sees are more business-savvy than a decade ago, but admits that others need to marry their skills with those of an entrepreneur.

An inventor in residence is just one of the advice clinics that the British Library operates. The BIPC has deals with about 20 outside groups to provide specialist advice at the Library, including the Institute of Trade Mark Attorneys, the London Chamber of Commerce and the Dynamic Asian Women's Network.