



Travelling Library

Liven up the commute to work with a good book from Wimbledon Station's book-swap scheme, suggests Nancy Groves

THE STATION WAITING ROOM. A draughty no man's land of chill-blains and boredom. And for anyone used to the daily Wimbledon to Waterloo commute, only marginally more appealing than freezing your toes off on the platform outside.

Until recently, that is. Those who have suffered a South West Trains delay this winter might have noticed already. Stacked up on the window sills of the waiting room on Platform 5 are books. Lots of them. And blue-tacked to the door, a colourful poster proclaiming: "Don't be bored on a train journey again!"

Some bright spark has turned the space into a book-swap. The concept is simple. Take away a book, any book, to read and once you're done, return it to the pile for another. No stamps, no membership cards, completely free of charge. The first piles arrived last November and the swap is proving such a success it now gets through more than 100 volumes a week – bringing a

whole new meaning to the phrase 'travelling library'.

A little reading around reveals the aforementioned spark behind such an enlightened scheme is 29-year-old Anthony Fairclough, a legal researcher who commutes into London at 7am

every morning. "It seemed such a good idea," he says. "I'd got fed up with the *Metro* – the stories are so light-weight – and the journey goes much quicker reading a book. Getting into something makes the time pass by. And each day,

you look forward to picking up where you left off."

Why the waiting room? "It was the perfect space," says Fairclough. "Waiting rooms in general are quite bare and horrible. You've got the seating and blank walls and nothing else. But the ones at Wimbledon have those lovely thick ledges." And books, as they say, do furnish a room.

Fairclough, to be fair, wasn't the first to come up with the idea, which actually originated one stop down the line in



2005. Terry Killeen, then station manager at Raynes Park, heard that the local library was refurbishing and approached staff about taking over their abandoned stock. Shelves were set up in the waiting-room-cum-cafe on the outgoing platform and the station book-swap was born.

"It really brightened the place up," says Killeen, who saw a staggering 20,000 books pass through the scheme. "The waiting room was tarnished with a bad image but as soon as we set up the book-swap, the misuse stopped immediately. The 'wrong sort' who used to hang around there didn't want to be associated with books – it wasn't cool – so they moved on elsewhere. It worked for everyone and provided a great service."

Now, it's not only books that get swapped at Raynes Park Station but CDs and videos, too, while a second shelf has even appeared on the London-bound platform. "It's very popular," says Marion Preston, who works in the cafe. "At the end of the day, not everyone can afford new books. Some people get off here especially to borrow one." The mother of four often brings in piles her own children have discarded. "They should set up a box in the corner for toys as well," she says.

In a happy twist of fate, Terry Killeen is now station manager back in Wimbledon. So when Fairclough approached him about a book-swap

TRAIN LINES

What we found on our last browse at Wimbledon:

A Long Way Down, Nick Hornby
The Plague, Albert Camus
My Sister's Keeper, Jodi Picoult
The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoevsky

there, he was very receptive. "Terry's been so good," says Fairclough. "He's given us space to store the books and staff regularly go and collect fresh stock from the library. Hopefully, it's not too onerous a task for them!"

As chair of Merton Liberal Democrats, Fairclough is keen on schemes with good community and green credentials. Most book-swap stock

comes through local libraries, but he also picks up batches from Merton's Freecycle network. The current smattering of children's books includes not only *Spot* and *The Rugrats*, but several bilingual titles with joint Hindi, Tamil or Chinese text. As for his own reading matter, Fairclough's last find was a battered 80s anthology, entitled *Sixty Great Tales of the Supernatural*. "I'd probably never have looked at it in a shop," he says. "But it's the same reason why I'm a member of a book group. To make me read things I wouldn't normally read."

One question remains: how often do

books make their way back? "I would like to see people returning them a bit more," concedes Killeen, who chose platform five because of its ratio of regular commuters to people just passing through. Meanwhile Fairclough, who is spotting more and more returns, is considering printing up book-swap stickers and tapping into the world-wide BookCrossing network, which registers and tracks books as they pass from person to person.

"You do want to see them come back," he says. "Hopefully, we can get to a point where it's self-perpetuating. But at this early stage, I'm just encouraging people to leave their own. It's so satisfying dropping off a batch in the morning and coming back in the evening to find they've already gone." ●