



A LOOK AT THE LAST 100 YEARS

# Disability History



# Disclaimer

## Use of language

Please note: using the language of the time reflects our desire for historical accuracy. We do not agree with the everyday use of labels which are now seen as deeply offensive.



# The Growth of Asylums

The 19th Century is the time when buildings designed for disabled people 'boomed'. The industrial revolution had a dramatic impact on the English landscape. Towns, factories, railways and mills quickly replaced the ancient fields and villages.

# The Growth of Asylums

Following the 1834 Poor Law Act, 350 grim new workhouses were built, one within roughly every 20 miles. Earlier workhouses had housed the destitute disabled of the local parish, and their buildings were of a more humane design.

The new workhouses were designed to root out 'shirkers and scroungers'. They were intended as miserable places to live, with Spartan conditions and harsh work regimes. The able-bodied poor avoided them if they could, so disabled and mentally ill people were moved into them.

# Life as a Disabled Person in Victorian England

Despite the expansion of institutions, people with disabilities still lived in their communities. Special schools and many charitable organisations for disabled people were established.

Though some people begged on the streets, others prospered. The blind Henry Fawcett (1833-1884) became Postmaster General in 1880. Young disabled people formed a self-help group called the Guild of the Brave Poor Things. Their coat of arms was a sword crossed with a crutch.

# Life as a Disabled Person in Victorian England

Fawcett Memorial, Vauxhall Park, Vauxhall, Henry Fawcett (1833-1884) was a blind academic, statesman and postmaster-general who campaigned for public open spaces.

The statue shown here was demolished in the early 1960s.





# Eugenics: 'Improving' the Human Race

In 1930, Julian Huxley, secretary of the London Zoological Society and chairman of the Eugenics Society wrote:

'What are we going to do? Every defective man, woman and child is a burden. Every defective is an extra body for the nation to feed and clothe, but produces little or nothing in return.'



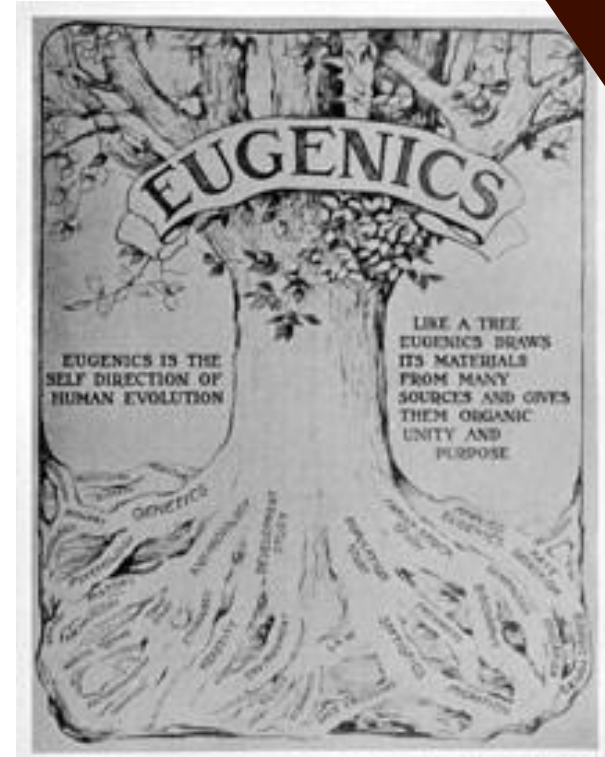
# Eugenics: 'Improving' the Human Race

In the early 20th century, many public figures agreed with the idea of Eugenics. They believed that anyone disabled or 'deficient' was a threat to the 'health of the nation'. The aim of eugenics was to eliminate human physical and mental defects altogether, in order to build a stronger society. People with disabilities would be segregated from everyone else in the name of 'perfecting' the human race.



# Eugenics: 'Improving' the Human Race

Eugenics was a popular theory around the world in the early 20th Century. Scientific papers of the Third International Congress of Eugenics held at American Museum of Natural History, New York, August 21-23, 1932.



# The Return of the Disabled 'Heroes'

When almost two million newly disabled British ex-servicemen came home from the battlefronts of the First World War some attitudes had to change. They were heroes who had sacrificed their bodies for the nation.



# The Return of the Disabled 'Heroes'

These are some of the ways society adapted to their return:

- There were major advances in plastic surgery and prosthetics.
- Ex-servicemen with physical and mental damage were treated with new exercise and fitness approaches.



# The Return of the Disabled 'Heroes'

Employers were urged to take on disabled workers and at the same time sheltered employment workplaces sprang up, including the British Legion poppy factory in south London.

New housing was built for disabled ex-servicemen, ranging from single cottages to entire special villages.

# Colonies for Disabled People

Despite these changes, disabled civilians didn't always benefit. Rural colonies were established for people with learning disabilities. At that time they were known as 'the mentally deficient'. The 'colonies' were self-contained small worlds in which disabled people were isolated from the outside world. They lived in 'villas' that housed up to 60 men, women and children. There were farms, laundries, bakeries, recreation halls, chapels and mortuaries. Segregation by sex, age and ability was strict.



# Children

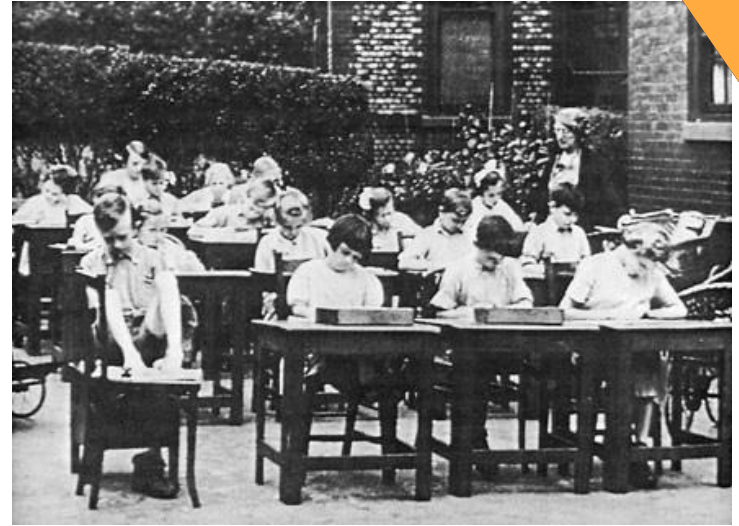
Between 1900 and 1945, up to half a million children had a physical disability or sensory impairment, mainly due to poverty and disease. There were no vaccinations, and many working class families couldn't afford specialist equipment or treatment.

Everyone now had the right to education. Schools for 'crippled', blind and deaf children could be harsh but there were some new approaches. Progressive 'sunshine homes' looked after blind children, and 'open air' schools were believed to improve children's health. Disabled children were trained for low-skilled work, but most people thought they would never find a job.



# The Return to War in 1939

When the Second World War began, many employed people signed up to fight. There was now an urgent shortage of workers and the Ministry of Labour launched a recruitment drive. It was aimed at people who had been considered unfit for work. Life was about to change again for people with disabilities.



# The Return to War in 1939

As the Second World War ended in 1945, many horrors emerged. They included the mass killing of disabled people in Germany.

In reaction to Nazi abuses the pre-war 'eugenicist' theories which had argued for the isolation and sterilisation of people with disabilities became increasingly reviled.

In England, public concern shifted to the 300,000 ex-servicemen and women and civilians who had been left disabled by the war.



# Rehabilitation For All

The 1944 Disability Employment Act promised sheltered employment, reserved occupations and employment quotas for disabled people.

Initiatives to restore the fitness, mobility, daily living skills and morale of disabled servicemen and women spread to the rest of the disabled population. The new National Health Service extended rehabilitation services to workers disabled by industrial accidents.



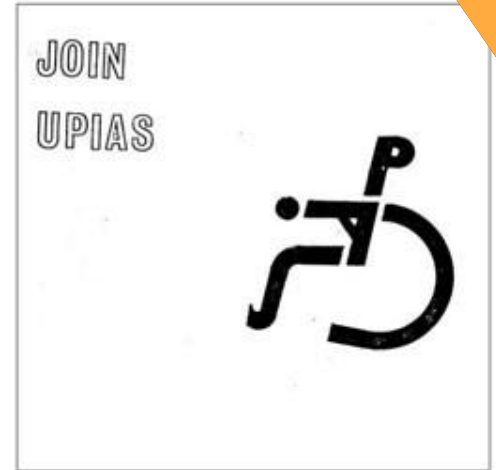
# Direct Action

Disabled people did not remain passive, and many campaigning disability charities formed in the 1940s and 50s. A new social movement was started by a 'silent reproach' march of disabled ex-servicemen in 1951.

In the 1960s and 70s, the civil rights movement in America inspired disabled groups to take direct action against discrimination, poor access and inequality. A 'social' rather than a 'medical' model of disability emerged and eventually, in 1995, the Disability Discrimination Act was passed.

# Inclusion and Access

The new social model was concerned with people's rights as members of society. The question of access was critical. Disabled people needed adaptations made to their environments if they were to be properly included. Separate facilities were built at first, but soon architects and planners took on the idea of 'universal design'. They created buildings and landscapes which every person could use every part of.



*The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation was an early disability rights group. © Disability Archive UK, Centre for Disability Studies, Leeds University*



# The Birth of the Paralympic Games

Great changes took place in sport. The inspirational refugee neurosurgeon, Ludwig Guttman (1899-1980), was in charge of Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury (opens in a new window), Buckinghamshire. Here, patients paralysed in the war began to compete against each other as part of a pioneering rehabilitation method.

In 1948 a wheelchair archery competition was held on the lawns of the hospital. In this humble way, the Paralympic Games was born. The Games are now the second biggest sporting event on earth, and many elite disabled athletes have become sporting icons in their own right.



# The End of the Asylum

The era of the asylum finally came to an end after a series of scandals revealed neglect and abuse. In 1981 the Jay Report promoted a 'care in the community' programme for people with learning disabilities and mental health needs. Tens of thousands of people left the long-term hospitals and returned to mainstream communities.

The Victorian ideal of a safe institutional 'asylum' has been replaced by new visions of equality, inclusion and universal access. Their long-term impact will be seen in time.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

Year 1840-1900

Event Key Legislation

1845 Lunacy Act – this legislation, administered by Commissioners in Lunacy, was dominant for the early years of the Royal Albert. It made no clear distinction between learning disability and mental illness stating that 'Lunatic shall mean insane person or any person being idiot or lunatic or of unsound mind.'

1886 Idiots Act. For the first time legislation dealing with the educational needs of those with learning disability. It made a clear distinction between lunatics on one hand and 'idiots' and 'imbeciles' on the other.

1890 Lunacy Act which like its 1845 predecessor again muddied distinctions between learning disability and mental illness.



# Timeline of Learning Disability History

## National Developments and Policies

1847 The Charity for the Asylum of Idiots – established in London.

1850s and 60s Along with Earlswood Asylum in Surrey, The Charity for the Asylum of Idiots gave impetus and support to the establishment of 4 regional voluntary large scale asylums for 'idiots' in England: the Northern Counties (i.e. The Royal Albert); Eastern Counties Idiot Asylum (Colchester); Western Counties Asylum (Starcross, near Exeter); and Midland Counties Asylum (Staffordshire).

1900-1910

## National Developments and Policies

1902 Mary Dendy's Sandlebridge Colony opened.

1907 Formation of Eugenics Education Society.

1908 Report of Royal Commission on Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

## Publications

1908 Tredgold 1st edition of Mental Deficiency which was the main reference text (with revisions) for the next 50 years. Used in nurse training during that period.

## Labelling

'Mental defective' and 'mental deficiency' most common terms 1900 - c.1950.

1910-1920

## Key Legislation

1913 Mental Deficiency Act. Use of terms 'idiot', 'imbecile', 'feeble-minded' and 'moral imbecile'. In particular this influential Act made it possible to institutionalise women with illegitimate children who were receiving poor relief.

1914 Elementary Education Act

## Publications

1910 Mary Dendy – The Problem of the Feeble-Minded



# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1920-1930

## Key Legislation

1927 Mental Deficiency (Amendment) Act: replaced the term 'moral defective' with 'moral imbecile'; crucially allowed for mental deficiency resulting from illness or accident - previously it had to have been there from birth.

## National Developments and Policies

1920s-1940s major local authority colony (hospital) building.

1929 Wood report published.

Central Association of Mental Welfare (CAMW) major voluntary organisation active in field of 'mental deficiency'.

1930-1940

National Developments and Policies

Campaign for Voluntary Sterilisation.

Eugenics Movement at its height.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1931 South Ockendon colony admitted its first 'mental defectives'.

1931 the average number of patients in the 98 'County, County Borough and City Asylums' was 1,221 (Jones, 1972, p. 357).

1934 Brock Report recommends sterilisation.

## Publications

1934: Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's Crisis of the Population.

1937 Cyril Burt's The Backward Child published.

Created by for the Erasmus+ project The Change Starts With Us

1938 Lionel Penrose's Colchester Report (a clinical and genetic study of 1280 cases on Mental Defect).

1940-1950

## Key Legislation

1940 First Camphill Community founded in Aberdeen.

1944 Education Act.

1944 Disabled Persons' Employment Act.



Erasmus+



# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1948 National Health Service began.

National Developments and Policies

Eugenics discredited after World War II, but eugenicist agenda still in evidence in local and national policies.

1946 National Association of Parents of Backward Children founded (later Mencap);  
Local Mencap Societies established.

CAMW voluntary organisation still active.

1948 NHS took over hospital services.

1948 Mental Welfare Officers appointed to work outside hospitals.

Beveridge establishes framework for Welfare State.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

Development of Occupation Centres.

Mental Health Subcommittees replaced  
Mental Deficiency Committees.

Labelling

'Ineducable' label, introduced by 1944  
Education Act, used with regard to people  
with learning disabilities.

1950-1960

Key Legislation

1959 Mental Health Act (England and Wales;  
1960 Scotland) repealed the Mental Deficiency  
Acts: espoused 'community care' but little  
funding; and said that patients should only be  
admitted on a voluntary basis unless seen as a  
danger to themselves or others (subsequently  
know as being 'sectioned').

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

## National Developments and Policies

1951 National Council for Civil Liberty's 50,000 Outside the Law highlighted affront to civil liberties represented by detention of 'mental defectives'.

1953 Nearly half the National Health Service's hospital beds were for 'mental illness or mental defect'. Concerns about the level of spending were likely to be a factor in shifting government thinking towards Community Care policies.

1954-7 Royal Commission on the Law Relating to Mental Illness and Mental Deficiency (under Lord Percy); National Association of Parents of Backward Children gave evidence to Royal Commission.

1955 Botton Village Camphill Community founded.

1955 Guild of Teachers of Backward Children founded.

1958 NAPBC's 'Brookland's Experiment'.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

'Little Stephen' logo adopted by NAPBC – representing pathos instead of fear.

## Labelling

'Subnormal' 'and 'severely subnormal' terms used in 1959 Act.

'Backward' came into vogue as a descriptive term.

## Publications

1956 Tizard and O'Connor's *The Social Problem of Mental Deficiency*.

1960-1970

National Developments and Policies

1961 Enoch Powell, Minister of Health, says mental hospitals to close in 15 years.

1962 Ministry of Health Report: *A Hospital Plan for England and Wales* – a 10-year report that included the development of hostels.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

Hospital scandals – Ely, Farleigh, South Ockendon, Normansfield

## Publications

1961 Erving Goffman's Asylums critiques institutions.

1964 Tizard's Community Services for the Mentally Handicapped argues for small residential units.

1967 Stanley Segal's No child is ineducable paved the way for education for all.

1969 earliest publications on normalisation by Bank-Mikkelsen & Bengt Nirje (Sweden); Pauline Morris's Put Away put case against hospitals.

1970-1980

## Key Legislation

1970 Education (Handicapped Children) Act made education universal.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1970 Local Authority Social Services Act: new Social Services Departments to assume responsibility for Local Authority health and welfare services.

1970 Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act.

National Developments and Policies

Late 1960s to early 1980s major hostel building era.

1971 White Paper Better Services for the Mentally Handicapped advocated care in the community.

1974 NHS reorganisation.

1975 National Development Group founded to advise on policy and practice.

Publications

1971 Maureen Oswin's The Empty Hours showed the deprived lives led by children in long stay hospitals.





# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1972 Wolf Wolfensberger's *The Principle of Normalisation in Human Services* published in Toronto.

1980-1990

## Key Legislation

1981 Education Act laid down that children should be educated in mainstream schools or classes wherever possible.

1988 Disabled Persons (services Consultations and Representation) Act.

National Developments and Policies

1980s-1990s Group Home era.

1981 Three residents of Calderstones Hospital (for people with learning difficulties) successfully campaign for the right to vote in General Elections.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1982 Three residents of Gogarburn Hospital Edinburgh also successfully campaign for the right to vote in General Elections.

1984 The first People First group founded in England.

1986 The first closure of a large long-stay institution for people with learning difficulties – Starcross, Exeter.

1989 Caring for People White Paper set out principles for shift to community care in NHS and Community Care Act.

1989 Sandlebridge Colony closed.

## Publications

1980 Kings Fund An Ordinary Life advocated 'an ordinary life' i.e. normalisation.



# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1986 Open University's Mental Handicap:  
Patterns for Living course published.

## Labelling

c.1980 'People with Mental Handicap' became  
the preferred term.

1985 'People with learning difficulties' adopted  
by self advocacy groups.

1990-2000

## Key Legislation

1990 National Health Service and Community  
Care Act.

1995 Disability Discrimination Act.

## National Developments and Policies

Ideal model became the mixed economy of  
care: state, voluntary organisations, private  
sector and family.

# Timeline of Learning Disability History

1994 South Ockendon, St. Lawrence's  
Hospitals closed.

1994 First 'England People First' Conference.

1996 Open University's Equal People  
published.

1996 Mencap's 50th anniversary.

Labelling

c1990 Department of Health official term:  
'people with learning disabilities'.

> 2000

Key Legislation

2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability  
Act (SENDA): removed two of three caveats  
for mainstream education; made educational  
discrimination unlawful.

2005 Mental Capacity Act: People with  
learning disabilities have the right to make  
their own decisions if they have the capacity  
to do so.



# Timeline of Learning Disability History

## National Developments and Policies

2001 White Paper Valuing People. Revised Code of Practice (DfES); emphasis on consultation with parents. Principles of rights, independence, choice and inclusion.

2007 UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities: UK a signatory to this Convention which commits states to uphold human rights for disabled people.

2007 Putting People First: Department of Health's commitment to making individual budgets a choice for anyone receiving social care.

2007 Mencap publishes Death by Indifference report exposing the fatal consequences of inequalities in NHS healthcare for people with learning difficulties.



# Timeline of Learning Disability History

2008 Department of Health's report Healthcare for All: The Independent Inquiry into Access to Healthcare for People with Learning Disabilities. Emphasises need for urgent change to improve grossly inadequate NHS healthcare.

2009 Valuing People Now: Re-iterated Valuing People's principles and urging more rapid implementation.

2011 Winterbourne View Hospital scandal: BBC Panorama programme in May revealed widespread abuse by staff of people with learning disabilities.

2012 Mencap's Death by Indifference: 74 Deaths and counting highlights continuing critical inequalities in NHS health care for people with learning difficulties.





# Sources

- *Historic England*
- *The Open University*

UK Government - Disability facts and figures

**[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/disability-facts-and-figures](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/disability-facts-and-figures)**

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