

## **A Brief History of British Sign Language 1.**

Although sign language has been used for thousands of years, throughout history it has been regarded by hearing people as inferior and not recognised as a language. Until as recently as the 1980's the sign language used in deaf communities was wrongly considered to be merely a system of mime and ungrammatical gestures.

As BSL is an unwritten language we have a limited understanding of its history. This is because the few written records or rather descriptions about sign language were recorded by hearing people which is questionable in regard to the language itself. We can find information from other sources such as photographs and drawings and also video footage. Before schools were established deafness existed, therefore, signs would have certainly been used for communication purposes, at least within the family.

One of the earliest written records of a sign language is from the fifth century BC, in Plato's Cratylus, where Socrates says: "If we hadn't a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn't we try to make signs by moving our hands, head, and the rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present?"

There is solid evidence showing that deaf people in Britain were using sign language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but there is evidence which suggests sign language was used sooner than this.

In 1516, Richard Carew recorded an observation in his book 'Survey of Cornwall' of two deaf men: Richard Kempe and Edward Bone having 'hartie laughter' and using 'passionate gestures'. He wrote 'Edward Bone...used mime like gestures to communicate with his Master, and a more sophisticated sign language when he met his friend, Richard Kempe,...'

In February 1576 a signed wedding is recorded in the parish of Leicester.

When Thomas Braidwood opened 'Braidwood's Academy for Deaf and Dumb' in 1760, he used a combined system of lip-reading, signs, finger spelling, writing and pictures. Unfortunately his school was only intended

for children of wealthy parents until his grandson Joseph Watson opened the first public school in Bermondsey in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

It was after the Milan Conference in 1880 that sign language was banned in schools for the Deaf. Deaf children were discouraged and often punished if seen to be signing. Parents of deaf children were advised not to allow their children to use signs or gestures as it was thought this would prevent them from developing lip-reading skills and speech. This resulted in deaf pupils being forced to learn finger spelling and lip reading. As these schools were mostly residential, the fact that sign language survived is due to deaf children who communicating secretly with other pupils and as these schools were all over the country, signs developed and were passed down through generations resulting in regional variations. Despite these regional differences most Deaf BSL users have little difficulty communicating with each other which supports sign language as being a single language.

As I mentioned earlier we are able to look at video footage of BSL history. Archive footage has been found from the 1920's. Scholars studying the footage have confirmed the Deaf signer to be using British Sign Language. This differs from later footage, i.e. after the Milan Conference, where there is lots of finger spelling and English influence.

In 1974 sign language was eventually acknowledged as a language and officially named 'British Sign Language'. Linguistics studying BSL agreed that it has grammar, structure and sign order.

In 2003 it was finally recognised by the British Government as an official language and not merely a form of communication.

Resources:

The Linguistics of British Sign Language.

Bda.org.uk

Bbc.co.uk/voices

## **The History of British Sign Language 2.**

There are many early references made to Sign Language. It is thought the growth of sign language is linked closely to the growth of modern cities.

Early records of sign language being recorded include a wedding ceremony conducted in Leicester in 1576 and reference to the finger alphabet developed by Daniel Defoe which was documented in 1720.

Charles Michel de l'Epee is credited with opening one of the first schools for deaf people. Born to a wealthy political family and having studied law himself, his attention to sign language and deaf education was started when he met deaf sisters who used sign language to communicate. He is credited with opening the world's first school for deaf people in 1755. He looked to structure and formulated the language giving it order.

Thomas Braidwood established the first British school for the Deaf children in 1760. This was based in Edinburgh; however, he later went on to establish the "Braidwood Academy for the Deaf and Dumb" at Grove House in London's Hackney district. Braidwood was originally a writing master who tutored wealthy children. He changed vocation becoming a tutor of the deaf. Braidwood focused on the development of sign language exploring its structure and form and many of his students graduated to high profile careers. These included John Goodricke, the famed astronomer; Francis Mackenzie (Lord Seaforth) who became a Member of Parliament and later the governor of Barbados; John Philip Wood. Joseph Watson joined Braidwood in 1784. Watson went on to become the first head teacher of the London Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb which was established in Bermondsey in November 1792. Watson was the teacher of the first deaf barrister, John William Lowe. This time became known as the golden age of sign.

In 1880 sign language suffered as a result of the Milan Convention on deaf education. This imposed a ban on sign language in the classroom with only Britain and American putting forward arguments in its favour.

The conference found that oral education gave deaf learners:

“Superiority of articulation over signs in restoring the deaf-mute to society and giving him a fuller knowledge of language”

This was considered a forgone conclusion as the conference was organised by those known to oppose sign language and resulted in many teachers of the deaf losing their jobs.

At that time The British Deaf and Dumb Association (BDDA) was formed (1890) by Francis Maginn to fight the Oral Method and gained a great deal of support from those deaf people wishing to fight to save their language and culture. The word Dumb was later dropped in 1971 to create the British Deaf Association.

The results of the Milan Convention meant that Sign Language was discouraged and in many children were punished for signing at school. Sign Language remained alive in the homes of deaf families and in the Deaf community.

The 1944 Education act supported the education of deaf children but once again favors the oral method of education preventing BSL in the classroom.

*“Part V Blind, Deaf, Defective and Epileptic Children*

The Act required:

parents to ensure that blind and deaf children received suitable education (51);

LEAs to provide or obtain suitable education for blind and deaf children - but not for 'idiots or imbeciles', residents of workhouses or those 'boarded out by guardians' (52); “

11<sup>th</sup> October 1981 saw the first edition of See Hear launched on BBC 2. The programme focuses on Deaf issues and features special editions on subjects such as Deaf education. Clive Mason explained in interview how at first he struggled using a creative lexicon to cover the various subjects featured in the programme and his surprise that many of the signs created for the programme have now been adopted by the Deaf community. The show also acted as a positive role model to those people using BSL rather than the oral tradition.

My own interest in BSL started through the media. I was fascinated by the inline interpreter on "This is you right" a political correspondence programme that ran on ITV from 1972 – 1986.

Visual media provided a unique opportunity for BSL, which due to not having a written form had remained regional and localised in comparison to written or spoken communication. Newspapers and radio had not been accessible to the deaf community. Television and the media changed this.

In October 1993, Gallaudet University held a conference, "Post Milan ASL and English literacy." The conference proceedings included an essay, "Reflections upon Milan with an eye to the future," by Katherine Jankowski.

### Post Milan ASL & English Literacy: Issues, Trends & Research

Another monument in the recognition of BSL was the publication of The British Deaf Association's Dictionary of British Sign Language which was published in 1992.

In 1995 the publication of the Disability Discrimination Act for the first time recognised in law the discrimination in communication services, which included Sign Language Interpreting. Giving deaf people the right to access information, services and employment in their native language.

This act also had a major impact on education and services making information widely accessible to BSL users. The sign language lexicon exploded as subject specific vocabulary was now required on a huge variety of subjects that had previously been off limits to BSL users.

18<sup>th</sup> March 2003 saw British Sign Language finally given recognition as an official language in the UK.

In 2009, UK signed the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which viewed sign language on par with spoken languages.

The arrival of the internet and media compatible phones meant that BSL was now fully accessible and global. Services such as Skype and OOVVOO meant that deaf people could be in touch remotely. Online interpreting made services more efficient and less expensive.

Many universities have created online lexicons for subject specific signs so that a uniformity of delivery is possible within education. The University of Wolverhampton and University of Central Lancashire being two examples of this practice.

DCAL – The British Sign Language Corpus Project 2008-2011

Attempted to record all regional signs and create a corpus to preserve and understand both formal and regional sign language. It did this using video of deaf people talking about their background and how their sign language had developed and changed. Part of this project is to preserve regional signs that are being lost due to young deaf people being influenced by signs agreed by the media.

In June 2013 Minister called for BSL to be classified as a Foreign Language meaning that funding would be available for it to be included in the National Curriculum and therefore be studied at GCSE level in school. In the same way that students at school and college can study French, German etc. This follows the example of Sweden where Sign Language is available as a GCSE.

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### **The History of British Sign Language 3.**

British Sign Language BSL is the language of the Deaf Community in Britain. Sign Language is an important value of deaf culture and is one of its central identifying features. It is highly valued within the deaf community because it is visually accessible. Sign language has its own syntax (grammar and form), semantics (vocabulary and content) and pragmatics (social rules of use). There is a disassociation from speech within deaf culture and speaking is considered inappropriate behaviour.

Sign Language has been traced back to 5000BC, however little is known of its earlier history because there aren't many recordings due to the language being visual and unwritten. There is evidence that sign language was being used in Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The first documentation of sign language being used was recorded in Britain on the register of marriage between Thomas Tillsye and Ursula Russell in 1575. There have also been further accounts recorded in a diary of Pepy's where he had reported Sir George Downing and a deaf servant using signs to tell of events during the 1666 Great Fire Of London (cited in Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999).

The first school for deaf children was opened in 1760 in Edinburgh by Thomas Braidwood using both speech and signing (Kyle and Woll, 1985). Sign language remained in education for fifty years before the 1889 Royal Commission put an end to this. The 1944 Education Act ensured sign language remained away from the classroom and rewarded those deaf schools who delivered an oral system of education. The 1990's era became more relaxed and school started to allow sign language to return to the classroom (The British Deaf Association BDA).

The development of British Sign Language is thought to have come about through the growth of cities and therefore increased deaf population. In the past up until the late 1980's sign language in Britain has been considered as a basic production of 'gesture and pantomime'. In addition hearing parents of deaf children were generally advised not to let their children sign because this would stop their children from developing speech (Sign Community, 2013). However this is not the case as research evidences this such as Jones and Quigly found that 'the early use of sign language does not hamper development of oral language skills' (cited in Marschark p.24). It wasn't until March 2003 that British Sign Language was recognised as an official British language. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century approximately 70,000 people use BSL as their first preferred language and approximately 125,00 people are able to converse using BSL (DCAL, 2013).

A significant historical event which took place was The 1880 Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan where educators from all over the world came together to discuss schools, teaching and methods. The conference was biased and those attending favoured an oral approach to education rather than a the use of sign language. The hearing educators voted to remove sign language from the classroom and replace with solely an oral approach to education . Deaf people were largely excluded in this process and barriers were put in place to prevent training to become Teachers of the Deaf. This took strong opposition from the Deaf community and national organisations were set up all over Europe to defend sign language. In England it was for this reason that The British Deaf Association (BDA) was created. Many quotes were captured at this time to show the opinion of Deaf people for example J.S Long (1890) states 'the people who prevent sign language being used in the

education of the deaf...are denying the deaf their free mental growth through natural expression of their ideas and are in the same class of criminals (McCormick 1976 cited in Gregory 1991, p.23).Strategies used to enforce oralism have included tying children's hands behind their backs, taping them to desks, being beaten or sat on ( Fischer and lane

1993 cited in Ladd p.28). Sign Language for the most part has remained absent from education for 100 years following the Milan Conference.

Socialisation-Deaf communities differ from other linguistic minorities because their language and culture can be transmitted down the generations only by 5-10% with Deaf parents. According to Ladd ( p.43) the other 90% of deaf children born to hearing parents can only gain access to sophisticated language and its traditions by attending Deaf Schools.

Since the 1960's mainstreaming deaf children into hearing schools and promoting oralism has been strongly opposed by deaf communities. Children attending Deaf Schools have always been highly valued as children need to socialise with deaf peers and develop their sign language (p.43).

Sign languages are not universal, the lexicon of BSL is different from other sign languages. Sign languages are independent from spoken languages. In British Sign Language there are lots of variations, this can depend upon the age, sex, ethnic identity, religious identity, the social class and bilingual situations Sutton- Spence & Woll (p.22). The location or region is also a main variation this is known as regional signs. According to Woolfe (2014) some regional signs have been devised through a generation attending a certain school. For example there are many different regional number signs. In the region of Manchester the number signs have been derived from Old Trafford School. Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre (DCAL) have created a corpus project of BSL and they have found that there are regional variations particular in three areas, numbers, colours and countries. DCAL have found that there are in the UK 22 signs for the colour purple. They also discovered that younger people have less regional signs than older people and that signs for countries change faster than signs for colours. Mason, reports that BSL was an unknown term prior to the 1984 conference where linguistics recognised that BSL was a language. Spoken Languages and sign language continue to evolve and new signs are created every day, some influenced by tv and media, some influenced by English language and hearing people and some will continue to develop by Deaf people. There is a social class distinction in

sign languages, according to Sutton- Spence & Woll (p.23) ‘the most noticeable social class distinction in BSL derives from family background’. They continue to highlight that ‘deaf people from deaf families are seen as members of a linguistic elite’. There are more differences in sign languages than spoken languages a reason for this is the breaks in passing the language between generations. Most deaf children 90% are born to hearing parents hence they do not have early access to fluent BSL. Education has greatly impacted upon the signing of deaf people. In schools before 1940 English was taught through lip-reading and fingerspelling, this is the reason why older generations of deaf people are highly fluent with fingerspelling. It has been reported that often young deaf people will say they cannot understand the signing of older deaf people. Lots of young deaf people’s signing has been influenced by English grammar. Post 1940’s hearing aid technology placed expectations upon deaf children to use their residual hearing when learning English. Schools were mostly residential and sign language was not allowed in the classroom, however children did sign in secret and so BSL was mostly learnt in the playground and in school dormitories. Since the 1970’s there has been a gradual return of BSL being allowed in the classroom but not in all schools (p.24-25).

### **British Sign Language Timeline** (DCAL)

**673-735** First defined use of fingers to create an alphabet.

**1253-1257** Princess Katherine Plantagenet born deaf dies at ages of 3.

**1428-1486** Princess Joanna of Scotland reported to have communicated using sign language interpreters

**1450** Publication of the *History of the Syon Monastery at Lisbon and Brentford*. Contains descriptions of signs some, of which are still in use.

**1576** Earliest documented use of sign language in the registry records at St. Martin’s Church, Leicester of a marriage ceremony between Thomas Tilsye and Ursula Russel.

**1595** Eye-witness accounts of the life of Edward Bone, a Deaf manservant, including how he communicated with Deaf friends and hearing people.

**1620-1671** Sir Edward Gostwicke is recorded by the Archdeacon of Bedford and a suitor, Dorothy Osborne, as a user of “*signs and tokens*”.

Sir John Gaudy (1639-1708) and Framlingham Gaudy (1642-1673) are the first Deaf people in the UK reported to have been educated using the manual alphabet and signs.

**1648** Publication of John Bulwer's *Philocophus: Or the Deafe and Dumbe Man's Friende*.

Alexander Popham (1649-1708) is the first Deaf person in the UK recorded to have been taught by oral methods (although he was first taught with fingerspelling).

**1680** Publication of George Dalgarno's *Didascalocophus, Or the Deaf and Dumb Man's Tutor*, containing a 2-handed manual alphabet.

**1698** Publication of *Digiti Lingua*, by an anonymous Deaf author, containing manual alphabet charts that laid the foundation for the British Sign Language two-handed alphabet.

**1720** Publication of Daniel Defoe's *The History of the Life and Adventures of Mr Duncan Campbell, Deaf and Dumb*, containing a manual alphabet chart which closely resembles modern British Sign Language two-handed fingerspelling.

**1760** Opening of Thomas Braidwood's Academy for the Deaf in Edinburgh the first school for the Deaf, which saw the education of many famous Deaf sign language users.

**1783** Publication of Francis Green's *Vox Oculis Subjecta*, about the education of an American Boy at Braidwood's school and the use of his sign language.

**1792** Establishment of the London Asylum for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb Poor at Bermondsey, the first public Deaf school in Britain.

John Creasy (1792-1855) first Deaf teacher of the Deaf in England, employed at the London Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb.

**1809** An author identified only as 'RR' publishes the *Invited Alphabet: Or, an address of A to B*, with illustrations of the manual alphabet, intended for hearing children.

**1822** The First Adult Deaf society is established in Glasgow by the then headmaster of the Glasgow Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.

**1844-1925** Alexandra, Princess of Wales and later the Queen is Britain's best known Deaf Royal. She was taught fingerspelling and regularly attended Deaf services at St. Saviour's Church, London.

**1866** Charles Dicken's *Doctor Marigold's Prescription* is published – a story about a Deaf girl brought up using signing, who marries a Deaf man and has a hearing child.

**1880** The Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, held in Milan, infamously passes several resolutions declaring that sign language was inferior to Oralism, and ought to be banned. This leads to

the widespread suppression of sign language in many Deaf schools throughout the world.

**1890** The British Deaf and Dumb Association is founded in response to the influence of the Milan Congress resolutions.

**1893** The Elementary Education (Deaf and Blind Children) Act is passed. This accepted, in full, the recommendations of the Milan Congress, leading to an era of Oralism in British Deaf schools.

**1895** The *Guide to Chirology* pamphlets are first published by Harry Ash (1863-1934). These ran through until 1920.

**1911** The forerunner of the current Action on Hearing Loss organisation (RNID) is launched.

**1924** The first World Games for the Deaf (now Deaflympics) are held in Paris.

**1944** The National Deaf Children's Society is formed, coinciding with a new Education Act.

**1964** The first public demonstration of a TTY (known in Britain as a Minicom).

**1971** The first documented reference to British Sign Language as the name of the language of Britain's Deaf Community.

**1971** The British Deaf and Dumb Association re-brands itself as the British Deaf Association (BDA).

**1977** The organisation that grew into today's *Signature* is established, as the DHSS Communication Skills Project.

**1977-1979** Research projects into British Sign Language are set up in Moray House (University of Edinburgh), the Centre for Deaf Studies (University of Bristol) and the Sign Language Linguistics Group (University of Newcastle).

**1979** The National Union for the Deaf is formed by a group of radical Deaf people impatient with the lack of progress made by other deaf organisations. One of its key successes is laying the foundations of the BBC See Hear television series.

**1979** The Warnock Report was published, advocating the integration of Deaf and disabled children into mainstream education. This eventually led to the closure of many residential schools for the Deaf.

**1985** The International Congress on the Education of the Deaf, held in Manchester, saw what Deaf historians regard as the 'true birth' of the campaign for the use and the recognition of British Sign Language. Deaf delegates and international Deaf groups abandon the Congress and join to organise an 'Alternative Conference' at Manchester's Deaf Centre.

**1990** Deaf Studies programmes are established at the University of Central Lancashire (Preston) and University of Wolverhampton to

encourage people to obtain degrees in British Sign Language related subjects.

**1995** Bencie Woll becomes the first Professor of Sign Language and Deaf Studies in the UK, at City University London

**1995** The Disability Discrimination Act is passed.

**1999** Rachel Sutton-Spence and Bencie Woll publish Linguistics of British Sign Language, still regarded as the definitive work on British Sign Language Linguistics.

**1999** The first British Sign Language march of the Campaign for the Recognition of BSL takes place in London.

**2003** British Sign Language is officially recognised by the British Government.

**2006** DCAL (the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre) is established in University College London.

**2010** The 21st International Congress on the Education of the Deaf, held in Vancouver, Canada passes a resounding resolution that rejects the motions passed back in Milan in 1880.

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## **Deaf History 4**

Today there are 8.5 million people in Britain with a Hearing Impairment, however not all are aware of the Deaf Culture or rich Deaf history that is attached to being Deaf. Deaf Education plays a key part in Deaf history. In the Action on Hearing Loss Library there is a book written by John Boar, which dates as far back as four hundred years ago, this is the first mention of Deaf education. In the book it mentions that there is a need for a Deaf school to be set up. Before this many people believed that the Deaf could not learn. Thomas Braidwood was the first man to set up a Deaf school. The school was based in Edinburgh and was a fee paying school. This meant that only the rich could pay for the Deaf education of their Deaf child. Braidwood started using the oral approach because he did not know sign, however over time his methods changed. His methods were secret because like all educators he had to protect his finances and “keep it in the family.” He said the proof of his methods were in the quality and achievement of his pupils. This is easily shown by the number of children leaving the school and achieving highly in the wider world. For example Lord Sea Forth became a Member of Parliament. After Thomas died people found out he was actually using a mix of approaches, which was the beginning of the “total communication” method. In the 1500’s there was a split between educators that supported the oral approach and educators that supported the sign approach. Heincke was an army sergeant living in Germany; some would describe him as an oralist. He used touch and taste to develop the oral approach. Vinegar and salt were used to develop mouth patterns. Heincke believed that spoken language was the only way to “clear thought.” He said that speech separated humans from animals. Others strongly disagreed. Abbe de L’Epee was one of these. He argued for sign language but the German method was spreading fast. L’Epee learned the children’s street sign and devised a set of rules which he attached to the French meaning, he then taught these back to the children. Heincke and L’Epee argued over and over again about

which way was best, Heincke believed he was teaching Deaf children to fit into the world of speech whereas L’Epee argued he was teaching Deaf children topics, History, science and maths. In 1880 the second International congress of Education of the Deaf was held in Milan by a group of Deaf educators which strongly supported the oral approach. The three main topics to be discussed were; school buildings, teaching and methods. The conference focused on methods, showing many presentations about the oral approach and why it worked. The organisers showed them a school in Milan and presented children who could, using lip reading, answer questions. No one else was allowed to ask the children questions therefore not disproving that the children and staff could have practiced this before the presentation. As Audiology wasn’t invented then we also don’t know if the children had a mild, severe, profound or moderate hearing loss. The conference passed eight new resolutions; two of these were that; oral education is to be given to all deaf children; and to discourage sign language. 160 educators voted in favour of these and only 4 voted against. There were no deaf people were involved in the commission. The oralist then wrote to all the top newspapers publishing what was seen to be a “breakthrough” in Deaf Education. Many deaf children hated this approach, with educators being brainwashed, children became unhappy at school. At first the lessons included speech, spelling and signing. But as the oral approach became stronger, sign language was dropped and eventually banned in schools. Hearing parents were told not to use sign language, there were poor attitudes towards deaf children and Deaf children left school with few qualifications. In 1890 the British Deaf and Dumb Association (BDDA) was formed by Francis Maguinn, he fought for sign language and to protect deaf people’s rights. In 1971 the “Dumb” was dropped from the name. In 1960 American Sign Language was recognised as a language by its own right and on March 18<sup>th</sup> 2003 BSL was also recognised as a language. In 2009 the UN Convention for the rights of Persons with Disabilities which viewed sign language as on par with spoken languages, actually more commonly used than Welsh and Gaelic. 90% of Deaf children are educated in Mainstream school due to the Warnock report. Some people think this can be a positive approach in terms of education and work opportunities however socially it falls

down. Deaf children are isolated and have fewer Deaf peers. However there is still a huge variation in local authorities and the support given to Deaf children. The NDCS are fighting to encourage the government to change this and develop standards so the education given to Deaf children is the same in all local authorities.

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## **Deaf history and the history of British Sign Language (BSL) 5**

From my findings through the use of the internet and speaking with deaf people I have found the below information. It was a shock to me when I was asking my deaf friends and staff about their BSL history. Many of them were unable to comment as they explained to me that they were not brought up in the deaf world, due to having hearing parents and that they were taught at non deaf schools until a later age. Some of them stated that they actually learnt British Sign Language (BSL) at a later age. I then questioned myself? Do I know my history of the hearing world? and to answer honestly I don't, I think we just take for granted our upbringing, background influences and our education.

I managed to find lots of different types of information regarding Deaf History and BSL development. From as early as the 1000BC, The Talmud denied deaf property rights. The Torah protected the deaf from being cursed by others, but would not allow them to fully participate in the rituals of the temple.

As I continued researching initially I found that BSL, sign language was not recognised as a language on its own for many years. I found evidence stating that deaf culture is not associated with any native land, as it is a global culture. Other sources then stated it is not a global

culture, as each individual language has their own development and background.

In the USA: I read the story of Laurent Clerc, a deaf educator came from France to the USA in 1816 to help found the first permanent school for deaf children in the country.

My research then took me to a time line of deaf history which I found some interesting information to me, that in the 15 century a nun named Tresa de Cartagena, had become deafened later on in her life, confronting her disability and becoming now as one of the earliest feminist writers.

I then focused my research on the actual development of BSL? in which in the 1500's a man named Geronimo Cardano was the first physician to recognize the ability of the deaf and tries to teach his son using a set of symbols. also in the 1500's Pedro Ponce de Leon was credited as the first teacher of the deaf history as he developed a form of sign language, which people believed teaches speech to deaf people from birth. Pedro Ponce did successfully teach deaf students in Spain to speak, read and write. Following this Juan Pablo Bonet in 1620's published the first book of manual alphabetic signs for the deaf, however wasn't published until around 1885 in England. After this many authors became more acknowledged such as George Dagarro 1640's and Thomas Willis in the 1664's, leading to me finding that the first deaf school was in the 1760's Abbe Charles-Michel de L'Epée of Paris founded the first free school of deaf. In this school sign language was used as the method of communication, this model led to deaf schools establishing all over the European countries for the next hundred years.

After this a well known event was dated on Sept 06th - 11th 1880 Milan, Italy, where the first political movement in deaf history was called the second international congress on education of the deaf. This is where HEARING educators voted to embrace oral education and remove sign language from the classrooms. Their methods of teaching deaf children to speak and lip read with limited use or no use of Sign language. Their rationale behind this was to make it easier for deaf children to integrate into hearing communities. This to me attempts to limit deaf people's

culture and identity so not very nice and respectful from my point of view. Since the passing in 1880's schools in European countries and the USA switched to using speech therapy without sign language as a method of education for the deaf.

I then gathered more information from the time line such as when the first electrical hearing aid was invented 1892, and when the first phone for the deaf was invented also by Robert Weitrecht, he himself was deaf. Leading me to find that it was only in the year 2003 that The British Government recognised BSL as a language of its own.

As I tried to pay attention to the development of Linguistics I noted that I could only find relevantly new research surrounding this from around the 1920's +. From the information read it described sign linguistics as a scientific study of natural sign language.

Research I read The origins of modern sign linguistics states that natural sign language was initiated by Bernard TM Tevot (1920-2006) and American William c. Stokoe (1919-2000). These researched American sign language (ASL) in which particular interest was to the minimal contrastive units that occurred in sign language. From what I managed to understand of these findings I believe, Stokoe focused on the Lexicon of ASL leading to the elaboration of grammar in sign linguistics. Stokoe's key lexical features for describing a sign are: location of the sign, Handshape, actions, and non-manual features.

Then my research took me to Mary Brennan and colleagues at Moray House School of Education, in Edinburgh. This was establishing that sign language is a language associated with spoken languages for example ASL/BSL.

Evidence from this focused on three social institutions in which sign language is acquired and maintained, The family, The community and the School. All important when researching and learning the linguistics of BSL. My research then led me to things that I have been learning on my BSL level 3 course such as:

Phonology- sign units

Morphology - Formation of the signs

Syntax - Rules combining signs into sentences

semantic - The study meaning.

Sign language is not a universal language, every country has its own sign language.

## **The History of British Sign Language (BSL) 6**

It is estimated that 100,000 people use British Sign Language as their preferred or 1<sup>st</sup> language. This document aims to outline the history of British Sign Language, when it first came into use and how it has developed over the centuries.

There are many myths about what BSL is. There are beliefs in the hearing world that British Sign Language is:- English mimed, that there is one universal language, that sign language was invented by hearing people to help Deaf people.

In truth there are many different sign languages across the world. Sign language has its own complex grammar and structure and most importantly British Sign language has been created by the Deaf community and has continued to evolve over time.

### **Social Context:-**

BSL is a minority language used by a community who historically had low status. The transmission patterns of BSL are non standard, for example many Deaf children are born to hearing parents. In a traditional transition situation a child learns its language from the parents, in the case of a Deaf child they are unable to learn from the hearing parent, meaning transmission has been from child to child. There is also regional variation in the vocabulary. The Deaf community is one that is bi-lingual since the language of the majority is English, despite access to translated materials being small and patchy.

Across the centuries there have been active attempts to suppress the use of sign language and this is shown in the history of teaching deaf children. It was thought the use of sign language would hinder children's chances of developing speech and lipreading skills. The world's 1<sup>st</sup> Deaf school was set up in Scotland (Edinburgh) by Thomas Braidwood, in 1760 it was relocated to Hackney. His teaching method was the first to be flexible, one that suited each individual for example, he would sign to 1 student, but maybe fingerspell to another and be oral to another, therefore meeting the specific needs of each student.

### **BSL Beginnings:-**

Home Sign is believed to be the origin of Sign Language. Home signs are described as the use of gestural communication systems developed between the Deaf child and the hearing parents. These signs are not passed on through generations and are not shared by one large group. However these signs are largely regarded as the starting point for new signs being developed when deaf people meet up together. Sign Languages are natural human languages with their own vocabulary and grammar.

The earliest account of sign language being used was back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by a Deaf princess in Scotland who communicated with her sister using signs. In 1576 Thomas Tilsye was married in Leicester and the register noted that he uses signs to recite his vows as opposed to the spoken word.

### **Through the centuries:-**

Sir John and Framingham Gaudy are the first Deaf people in the UK reported to have been educated using the manual alphabet and signs. In 1648 John Bulwer published the 'Deafe and Dumb Mans Friende'. Alexander Popham is the first Deaf person recorded to have been taught by oral methods (although he was first taught with fingerspelling). In 1680 George Dalgarno published the 'Deaf and Dumb Mans' tutor which contained a 2 handed manual alphabet. In 1720 Daniel Defoe published the History of the Life and Adventures of Mr Duncan Campbell Deaf and Dumb, this contains a manual alphabet chart which closely resembles modern BSL two handed fingerspelling.

In 1839 Hippiusley Tuckfield provided descriptions of BSL grammar:-

*'Father our, heaven in, name thy hallowed. Kingdom thy come, - will thy done – earth on – heaven in – same. Bread give us daily – trespasses our forgive us – they trespass against us, forgive – same. Temptation lead not – but evil deliver from. Kingdom – power – glory thine forever'.*

In 1860 the Dictionary of Deaf and Dumb Signs was published.

Phamphlets were 1<sup>st</sup> published by Harry Ash from 1895 running through to 1920.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century other sources in descriptive forms emerge such as drawings, descriptions of signs, fingerspelling charts, photographs, film and video.

Leslie Edwards was instrumental in providing the Deaf community with information during this period, he realised that they did not have access to information and came up with the idea to replicate BBC News and local news in Sign Language. This would then be sent to Deaf clubs and enabled Deaf people to find out what was happening in their own area and places like London, Manchester and internationally. Films and sporting events would also be available on loan to Deaf Clubs from the BDA.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century BSL dictionaries were available, teaching materials, and Christmas carols were now available in sign language.

### **Characheristics of BSL:-**

The characheristics of BSL are that it exploits both the visual and movement of the body (mouth, body and 2 hands) as opposed to spoken languages that exploits the spoken word (mouth, ears, tone and pitch).

Edward Tylor (1874) noted, there was no point inventing signed English as it cannot be translated from the classroom to the playground. The natural order of Sign Language is Object/Subject/Action for example road, pipe I find.

New signs are introduced by compounding – compounds enable a new sign to be formed using 2 signs combined into 1, for example 'Think and True' meaning 'Believe' or 'Say and Wipe' meaning 'Forgive'. BSL

borrowed from other Sign Languages and spoken languages (loan translations and loan of fingerspelling) for example the sign for America is borrowed from American Sign Language (ASL) as is New York. Signs borrowed from spoken languages and loan translations include Greenland (green – land) or Iceland (ice - land). The inclusion of mouthing at the same time alleviates confusion, for example Finland/Metal on the hand are very similar, but if mouthing is introduced it immediately becomes much clearer. Signs can be borrowed from fingerspelling using a combination of letters such as Manchester (MCR).

Signs are also created through new technology for example years ago there were no signs for items such as fax, mobile. As new technologies emerge old signs die out for example the sign for film (winding of a film reel).

### **The Future:-**

Throughout the centuries the use of home signs, fingerspelling, illustrations, pamphlets, photograph and film have all contributed to the evolution and development of British Sign Language. BSL is a live language and will continue to change and evolve as the younger generation experience new technologies and new ways of living and demand more access to information from the Government in order to improve their quality of life.

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### References:-

GP Patient Survey 2009/2010

DCAL – Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre, University College London

BDA – British Deaf Association

BBC – See Hear, website and episode broadcast 29.01.14

## The History of British Sign Language and Linguistic Development.

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British Sign Language (BSL) only became officially recognised as a language in the UK in March 2013: **"The Government recognises that British Sign Language (BSL) is a language in its own right, regularly used by a significant number of people ... with its own vocabulary, grammar and syntax."** - Andrew Smith, Minister for disabled people, 2003.

However, records exist of signed languages being used as early as 1570, and the earliest ever recorded use of signed language is from 5BC. The fact that BSL only became an officially recognised language in the UK is evident of how BSL has been viewed in the UK through history and the struggles BSL users have faced in support of their language.

Schools have been a huge influence in the development of BSL. Before deaf children started to attend schools, deaf people could be very isolated in their communities and possibly never meet another deaf person in their lifetime and never use a signed language. Once deaf children started to attend schools it created a community for deaf children. They would use signed languages together to communicate. Some of these children may have come from deaf families and already have an established knowledge of sign language, whereas many (as much as 90%) of the children would have come from hearing families and schools would be their first contact with signed language and would learn from their peers.

In 1760 Thomas Braidwood opened 'Braidwood's Academy for the Deaf and Dumb' which was the first recognised school for the Deaf in Britain. In this school students were taught with 'the combined system' of communication, which included fingerspelling, signed English, lip reading and manualism and created the first codification of what would become British Sign Language. However, Braidwood's students were from well off families and there was no access to education for deaf children from poor families until ex-Braidwood's tutor Joseph Watson opened 'The London Asylum for Deaf and Dumb' in 1792.

Braidwood and Watson's schools become so well known for their success in using sign language in teaching deaf students that protestant minister Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet travelled to Europe to research teaching the deaf but was sent away by both schools. He then went on to Paris where the 'Institut Royal des Sourds-Muets' (Royal French Institute) taught him their methods. This is why American Sign Language and French Sign Language are so similar now; they come from the same foundation.

1887 – 1889 A Royal Commission on the Blind and Deaf & Dumb sought to standardise the education of all Deaf and Blind students. It put an end to Braidwood's combined method of teaching in favour of an oralist method of teaching where students were taught to mimic mouth patterns and breathing patterns to learn speech. BSL was banned from schools and most deaf tutors in the schools lost their jobs to hearing tutors. However, students continued to sign together in secret in their dorms. They learned to adapt their signing to avoid detection from teachers. They also created their own signs. These isolated communities would

develop their own variation of BSL during their time together. Very similar to how we still have varying regional dialects of BSL today.

Age and generation gaps also show similar variations in their use of BSL. This is believed to be due to the lack of continuity between generations and again due to the fact that 90% of deaf children come from hearing parents and are not introduced to BSL from a young age. They learn their language from peers in school as mentioned above. The few students who come from deaf families would be considered a higher class of BSL user and have more authority in the use of BSL in the schools, but even they might adjust their use of BSL when in the community of the school. Each generation that comes out of the schools would become an isolated group of BSL user with their own dialect, with very little flow between generations. We find that older generations tend to use more fingerspelling and less mouth patterns, while younger generations use a lot less fingerspelling and are more gestural. This may also be evident of the development of BSL as the language grows and becomes more standardised and less like the 'combined method' we discussed earlier.

Standardisation of BSL is growing also due to the presence of records of BSL due to the documentation and study of the language. Previously was no written form of BSL, or easy way to communicate it long distance. There were few records of early use of BSL, and the records there are very vague including descriptions from hearing people of what they saw. These records are unreliable as a hearing person who does not understand the language may misinterpret or mis-remember the signs they say and record the conversation falsely. They also lack

details on how the signs were made and fit together (Morphology and Syntax).

Around the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Deaf printers began to make magazines including illustrations of signs and gestures. This is the beginning of broadening the accessibility of BSL although many authorities still saw it as a combination of gestures and mime and did not recognise it as a language itself. The study of BSL linguistics is fairly new, as it is only recently that it has been accepted that BSL does have its own structure and set of rules. It is these rules, such as syntax, phonetics and semantics which make BSL a language in its own right. Due to things like the internet, public press and video, as well as ease of travel, BSL users have more access to other regional uses of BSL and standardisation of the language is more evident.