The History of British Sign Language

British Sign Language is now usually referred to in its abbreviated form of BSL, just as the sign languages of other countries are referred to in a shortened version, for example, ASL - American Sign Language, AUSlan - Australian Sign Language, DGS - Deutsche Gebärdensprache (German Sign Language) and so on.

As recently as 20 years ago, the term BSL was not yet in regular usage, and the sign language of Britain's Deaf Community was regarded as an inferior system of pantomime and gesture that was not a true language.

Parents were advised not to allow their children to use signs or even gesture, as this would spoil their chances of developing speech and lip-reading skills (this is still the case in some areas) in spite of the fact that this system was failing the majority of deaf children as described in this extract from SIGN IN SIGHT 1992:

"A study carried out in 1979 found that most deaf school leavers had not progressed beyond a reading age of 8.75 years. In real terms, this means that they would be unable to read the tabloid newspapers, and those instruction manuals, government or official forms, safety regulations, and so on, would all remain beyond comprehension. In addition, speech quality was found to be largely unintelligible, and skill at lip-reading was found to be no better than inexperienced hearing children, dispelling the myth that deaf people are good lip readers."

Large numbers of adult Deaf people remember vividly and with anger their frustration at not being able to understand what was going on, or to express themselves through sign language.

Even when families decided for themselves to offer their children something more, and to learn sign language, classes were virtually non-existent and there were precious few resources on the subject (the British Deaf Association's Dictionary of British Sign Language was not published until 1992).

Many people are surprised when they discover that sign language was forbidden in deaf education and not used in the teaching of deaf children until about 20 or so years ago, and then not in all deaf
schools. Its use was discouraged even informally, although deaf children could not be deterred from signing with each other in the playground and when teacher was not looking, since visual language is so important to them. The language is developed and passed on out of necessity, and the 10% or so of deaf children of Deaf parents, who develop BSL as a first language, bring their valued native competence into the lives of others.

Deaf adult role models have also been rare in deaf children's lives, to the extent that some deaf children believed that they would no longer be deaf when they grew up, because all the adults they knew were hearing. It was not considered appropriate to employ Deaf people in deaf schools until schools started to adopt policies using sign language, and there are still very few Deaf teachers. Approximately 90% of deaf children are born into hearing families who have usually never encountered deafness or sign language before. Even today, deaf children may not have adult Deaf contact unless this is specifically sought after and arranged - something that is not always encouraged by the medical profession or educationalists that are the first line of contact for families.

**CHANGING ATTITUDES**

Attitudes towards sign language started to change due to research in America in the 1950' and 60's then in Britain during the 1970' and 80's. Sign languages started to be recognized as full, complex visual languages with structure and grammar very different from spoken languages. It is now recognized that sign languages exist throughout the world, wherever groups of deaf people and children come together, and each has its own unique vocabulary and rules, although being visual spatial languages, they have a great deal in common with each other - more in common with each other than with spoken languages. The structures of sign language are necessarily different to those used in spoken language, as explained in this extract from the Introduction to SIGN LANGUAGE COMPANION.

"Spoken languages have evolved over thousands and thousands of years. They are particularly suited to the auditory medium, expressed by mouth and taken in by the ear. Less is know about sign languages than spoken languages and their study is still fairly new, but it is clear that sign languages have also evolved over time to suit the visual medium, expressed by physical movements and taken in by the eye."
Spoken language involves words in sequence, one following another, and lots of them. The grammar affects the order of the words and their combinations, the different beginnings and endings that can be added to them, combined with the way that they are said, to communicate what we mean. Through the ear, the brain processes and decodes this linear information, not all in one go but bit by bit, in small units of meaning - the phrases, clauses and sentences in which it is expressed. If these units are lengthy, meaning may be lost because of the natural limits to this part of our memory and our inability to process a message that is too stretched out. We may find people difficult to understand if they use long and convoluted ideas, jumping from one half-finished concept to the next and generally 'going all round the houses' to explain something, leaving us unsure of their meaning. This does not mean that we fail to understand the words or the phrases or even the concepts being used, but that the overall message or proposition has been lost, leaving us puzzled. Good communicators tend to order and express their thoughts in digestible 'chunks' and are able to adjust these to suit the other person, whatever language they are using.

In sign language, the physical movement of signs is slow compared to the speed of spoken words. Words can be spoken at roughly double the rate at which signs can be produced, yet it is possible to interpret from one language to the other in the same space of time without loss of meaning, nuance or intent. How can this be? How can half the number of signs conveys the same propositions or ideas as those that might be spoken? The answer is really quite ingenious. Sign language relies less on 'words' and more on the inventive use of space and movement - an alternative and creative visuality, devised by the human brain to fulfill our need for language when the usual channels are not available. It involves the three-dimensional use of space, the location of signs within that space, the speed, direction and type of movement, the handshapes that are used, all combined with non-manual information carried by the head, face and body. All these factors can be taken in by the eye at the same time. The order of the message can also be very different, and might involve a completely different starting point, construct of events, and finishing point, not unlike the old story of asking directions and being told, 'If I were going there, I wouldn't start from here.' Things can happen simultaneously in a visual language, concentrating detail relevant to the message into the signs in a very economic way, so that the rate
Of ideas and chunks of meaning remain within the brain's normal limits. Now that really takes some getting your head round!

A simple illustration of these processes would be an instruction such as 'turn right at the traffic lights'. In BSL, traffic lights (one sign) would be signed first, followed by turn right (one sign). This not only reflects the real order of events, a crucial and distinguishing feature of visual language, but uses classifying handshapes to indicate lights and vehicle, which are located in space with appropriate directional movement to suit the context. In this way, information is condensed into just two signs, enabling the expression of an instruction that would require six spoken words. Brilliant. Imagine the possibilities in signed English - turn ...right.....at.....CRUNCH.

The reason why it is so important to understand this type of process is that it explains some of the misconceptions about sign language, and why Deaf BSL users find signed forms of English such a strain. Deaf people say that when signs are used to accompany speech, they can understand each item as it appears, but find difficulty taking in the message content as a whole when all the information is expressed in the linear sequence of spoken language. The patterning that enables meaning to be given in chunks is inappropriate to sign language, and has to be 'worked out' by the receiver. In addition, because sign production is slower than speech, unless many items are simply missed out, then the whole thing is slowed down. This has the effect of lengthening the units of meaning that put the message across, making understanding more difficult.

Signs-supported English may suit some deaf people in some situations, but does not meet all the linguistic needs of those deaf from infancy for whom English is not a first language. Furthermore, it reflects an insistence on 'normalization' (they have to learn English) rather than valuing a unique difference - and making the difference normal."