Britain’s Deaf Heritage

The Late 18th Century
1750-1800

The second half of the eighteenth century saw some remarkable developments in the deaf world. Not only did this period see the birth of deaf education, it was also the era of the first deaf Member of Parliament, the first (and only) deaf painter to be given a royal appointment, the first deaf person to be made a Fellow of the Royal Society. It was also in this period that the world-famous Royal Academy

The First School for the Deaf

In 1760, a wealthy Edinburgh merchant, Alexander Shirreff, approached Thomas Braidwood (1715 - 1806) the owner of a mathematical school and asked him to educate his ten-year old deaf son with a view to his learning to write.

Thus the first school for the deaf in Britain was started.

Braidwood abandoned any further aspirations at teaching only mathematics, and devoted the remainder of his life to the teaching of deaf children. These children were mostly those of wealthy parents.

The school was known as Braidwood's Academy for the Deaf and Dumb, and is mentioned in Sir Walter Scott's novel, The Heart of Midlothian.

In October 1773, Dr. Samuel Johnson visited the school on his way to the Western Isles of Scotland and was moved to write as follows: 'There is one subject of philosophical curiosity in Edinburgh which no other city has to show; a College for the Deaf and Dumb, who are taught to speak, to read and to write, and to practise arithmetic, by a gentleman whose name is Braidwood. It was pleasing to see one of the most desperate of human calamities capable of so much help: whatever enlarges hope will exalt courage. After having seen the deaf taught arithmetic, who would be afraid to cultivate the Hebrides.'

Braidwood never published any account of his teaching methods, but we can gather enough from authentic sources to know that Braidwood used a form of total communication.

Braidwood had a number of pupils who went on to make remarkable achievements after they had left his Academy: Shirreff, John Goodricke, Francis MacKenzie. None of these people had any understandable speech in later life, and had to rely on sign language or writing for communication purposes.

The father of another pupil, Francis Green, however published Vox Oculis Subjecta: A Dissertation on the most curious and important art of imparting speech, and the knowledge of language, to the naturally deaf, and (consequently) dumb; With a particular account of the Academy of Messrs. Braidwood of Edinburgh. The Latin title was the Academy’s motto, and in this account, we learn that Braidwood included a fair amount of oral teaching.

Incidentally, the pupil referred to above, Charles Green, was the first deaf American to receive an education.

In 1783, the Braidwoods moved their school to Hackney, London where it was carried on by Thomas Braidwood’s widow and son after his death in 1806.

The Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb

The first public school for the deaf was established in Grange Road, Bermondsey, London with Dr. Joseph Watson, a nephew of Thomas Braidwood, as Principal following the efforts of a distinguished Congregational minister, Rev. John Townsend. The Rev. Townsend, minister of Bermondsey, had become acquainted with a Mrs. Creasy whose deaf son had been a pupil of the Braidwoods.
Mrs Creasy so interested Mr. Townsend in the subject of the education of the deaf that he resolved to found a charitable institution for the indigent deaf. He succeeded in securing the interest of a wealthy man named Henry Thornton, and obtained subscriptions from a number of other people.

In November 1792, the new school was opened with six children and grew rapidly until it had 70 children in 1809, when the school moved to Old Kent Road.

**Charles Shirreff (1750 - 1831)**

The name of Charles Shirreff (at times spelt variously as Mierrif, Sherriff and Shirreff) has a special niche in British Deaf history.

He was the first deaf pupil of Thomas Braidwood, and his progress was such that Braidwood forsook his previous calling as a mathematical teacher, and devoted the rest of his life to the education of deaf children.

The son of Alexander Shirreff, a wealthy merchant of South Leith, Edinburgh, Charles left Braidwood’s Academy at the age of 18 to go to the Royal Academy Schools in August 1769 from which he graduated with a silver medal in 1772 to make a career as a miniature painter.

He successfully exhibited at the Free Society of Artists and at the Royal Academy, as well as others, and built up a clientele that was mainly theatrical.

He worked from London after graduating from the Royal Academy, and applied to go to India in 1778. In his application to the East India Company, he stated that he had no speech but was able to make himself understood by signs and requested that he be accompanied by his father and his sister Mary to act as interpreters. However, the failure of Fordyce’s Bank ruined his father; his plan to visit India was abandoned and Charles had to stay to support his family.

He lived and worked from Bath from 1791 to 1795 where he was undoubtedly acquainted with no other deaf miniaturists, Sampson Towgood Roche and Richard Crosse, *qq.v.* Certainly, all three shared at various times the same people whom they painted.

In 1795, he renewed his application to go to India, and left England in the *Lord Hawkesbury* which reached Madras in January 1797. He painted in Madras for some years before moving to Calcutta, where he worked on his *Illustrations of Signs*. In 1807, he announced it was nearly completed and would be available to subscribers as soon as possible. This work has never been traced and is presumed lost *en passage* from India.

He returned from India in 1809, and after painting in London for a number of years, retired to Bath where he died, unmarried, in 1831.

**Other British Artists: 1750 - 1800 Richard Crosse (1742 - 1810)**

The last three decades of the eighteenth century were a golden age in the history of British miniature portrait painting. Some of the best miniature painters flourished at this time, and deaf art produced three such painters - Shirreff,

He was the second son of John Crosse and his wife Mary and was born at Knowle, near Cullompton, Devon on 24th April 1742.

He had a deaf sister, Alice, and it is evident that both of them were fairly well-educated although neither could speak. It is not known who educated them as a large part of the family records perished when the ancestral manor home of the Crosse family was destroyed by fire in the 1870's when a servant set alight some straw in the kennels where the Crosse hounds were kept. One of the manuscripts which survived the fire, however, was a well-written letter by Alice to her brother James complaining about a portrait that Richard Crosse had painted of her husband on wood instead of on canvas!
Bearing in mind some of the family were lawyers, it would appear that the deaf siblings shared the same tutor(s) as the other children at the family home.

When aged 16, Richard Crosse won a premium at the Society of Arts in 1758 and went to study in London at Sibley’s Drawing School and the Duke of Richmond’s Gallery.

Richard Crosse was a prolific painter, painting hundreds of miniatures between 1/2 inches and 6 inches high. He kept a ledger in which he meticulously recorded every painting done and sold. In the space between 13th September 1776 and 30th January 1777, he painted and sold 56 small miniatures for eight guineas each, two of a medium size for ten and twelve guineas, a half-size portrait for fifteen guineas, and two large size portraits for thirty guineas each - a total of 61 works for £572, an excellent income for those days. This ledger can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Many of his paintings and miniatures were unsigned, which resulted in his not getting the credit he deserved in latter years. Those which he did sign were either with his initials R.C. or in four different ways in full in careful handwriting as shown below.

In 1789, he was appointed Court Painter in Enamel to King George III.

He fell in love with his cousin, Miss Sarah Cobley, who refused his offer of marriage and instead married a Mr. Haydon, the father of B.R. Haydon, the painter. This left him embittered and turned him into a recluse in his later years, causing him to retire from painting in 1798 already a wealthy man - and go to live with Miss Cobley's brother, the Prebendary Cobley, at Wells, Somerset for a number of years.

In his Memoirs, B.R.Haydon describes the final meeting between Richard Crosse and his mother.

'My dear Mother felt her approaching end so clearly that she made every arrangement with reference to her death. I went to Exeter to get her apartments ready at the hotel, the day before she left home. She had passed a great part of her life with a brother (the Prebend of Wells), who took care of a Mr. Cross [SIC], a dumb miniature painter. Cross (who in early life had made a fortune by his miniatures) loved my mother, and proposed to her, but she being at that time engaged to my father, refused him, and they had never seen each other since. He retired from society, deeply affected at his disappointment. The day after leaving Exeter, we stopped at Wells, as my mother wished to see my uncle once more.

The meeting was very touching. As I left the room and crossed the hall, I met a tall handsome, old man; his eyes seemed to look me through; muttering hasty unintelligible sounds he opened the door, saw my rushed over to her, as if inspired of a sudden with youthful vigour. Then pressing her to his heart he wept, uttering sounds of joy not human! This was Cross. They had not met for thirty years. We came so suddenly to my uncle's they had never thought of getting him out of the way. It seemed as if the great sympathising Spirit once again brought them together, before their souls took flight.

He was in agony of joy and pain, smoothing her hair and pointing first to her cheek and then to his own, as if to say "how altered!" The moment he darted his eyes upon my sister and me, he looked as if he felt we were her children, but did not notice us much beyond this.

My sister, hanging over my poor mother, wept painfully. She, Cross, my uncle and aunt were all sobbing and much touched; for my part my chest hove up and down, as I struggled with emotions at this singular and affecting meeting. What a combination of human feelings and suffering!

Disappointment in love, where the character is amiable gives a pathetic interest to woman or man. But how much more than ordinary sympathies must he excite, who, dumb by nature, can only express his feeling by the lightings of his eye; who wondering at the convulsions of his own heart, when the beloved approaches him, can but mutter unintelligible sounds in the struggle to convey his unaccountable emotions? Thus had this man been left for thirty years, brooded over affections wounded as for the mere pleasure of torture. For many months after my mother married, he was frantic and ungovernable at her continued absence, and then sank into sullen sorrow.
His relations and friends endeavoured to explain to him the cause of her going away, but he was never satisfied and
never believed them; now when the recollection of her, young and beautiful, might occasionally have soothed his
imagination, like a melancholy dream, she suddenly burst on his with two children, the offspring of her marriage
with his rival - and so altered, bowed, weakened, as to root out the association of her youthful beauty with the days
of his happy thoughts.

There are great moments of suffering or joy when all thought of human frailties is swept away in the gush of
sympathy.

Such a moment was this. His anger, his frantic indignation, and his sullen silence at her long absence, all passed
away before her worn and sickly face. He saw her before him broken and dying; he felt all his affection return, and
flinging himself forward on the table, he burst into a paroxysm of tears, as if his very heartstrings would crack. By
degrees we calmed him, for nature had been relieved by this agonising grief, and they parted in a few moments for
the last time.'

Mrs. Haydon died the next day.

Richard Crosse himself lived out his final days at Knowle, and died there in May 1810.

Sampson Towgood Roche (1759 - 1847)

Sampson Roche was born deaf in Youghal, Ireland and began to show an aptitude for art, and was sent to Dublin to
study under painters who were practising there, and also in Bath between between 1784 and 1788.

It is not known if he was educated, but he could write his name. His pictures were usually signed simply Roch or
Roche, followed by a date. The letters were always separate and simple.

He married a Miss Roch (probably a cousin) in Cork in June 1788, then returned to live in Bath in 1792 where he and
Charles Shirreff were contemporaries.

He had a flourishing practice painting miniatures, and lived in Bath until 1830, when he retired as a miniaturist and
returned to Ireland where he died at Waterford in 1847.

Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 - 1792)

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A portrait and history painter and the dominant artistic personality in the reign of George III, Reynolds was born
Plympton, Devon on 16th July 1723.

Whereas other deaf painters of the same era such as Crosse, Shirreff and Roche had been born deaf or had become
so in early childhood, Reynolds did not lose his hearing until he was 26 years old as a result of a riding accident in
Rome. Even so, he did not lose his hearing completely; he was able to hear shouted conversation with the aid of an
ear trumpet. was founded in 1760, and a deaf man was its first President.

By then, however, he was already an accomplished painter although his main work and fame was to come after he
had lost his hearing and his ear trumpet had become a familiar sight.

When they judged without skill, he was hard of hearing, When they talked of their Raphaels, Corregios and stuff, He
shifted his trumpet and only took snuff.' Goldsmith c 1730 - 1774

Well before the first ever public exhibition of art was held in 1760, Reynolds had established himself as the leading
portrait painter in London, and when George III established the Royal Academy in 1768, Reynolds was the only
possible candidate for the presidency even though the King found his style and personality unsympathetic. Indeed,
Reynolds was not well-liked by London society of the time. A lot of this may have been due to his deafness which caused him to remain aloof.

In 1769, he was knighted and became Sir Joshua Reynolds. Now he was at his zenith, earning £6000 a year, and in 1773, he become mayor of Plympton, his native place.

In 1789, Reynolds became blind and resigned as the President of the Royal Academy. In the following years up to his death in 1792, he was a lonely man.

He never married.

A Deaf Astronomer

John Goodricke (1764 - 1786)

In November and December 1782, a young man of 18 made a significant discovery in the study of variable stars that laid the foundations of an important branch of stellar astronomy.

His name was John Goodricke, and had been born in Groningen, Netherlands, to an English diplomat and his Dutch wife on 17th September 1764.

In infancy, Goodricke became deaf as a result of a severe illness, and at the age of 8 in 1772 he was sent from the Netherlands to Edinburgh to be educated at Thomas Braidwood's school.

Although school records do not show the state of his progress, it must have been satisfactory because in 1778 he was allowed to enter Warrington Academy. It was at that time a well-known educational institution in Cheshire which made no special provision for handicapped pupils. Goodricke may thus be said to have been one of the first, if not the first, successfully integrated pupils.

John Goodricke became an excellent mathematician during his stay at the Academy. He had for a teacher William Enfield, a mathematician of some renown. Bearing in mind, however, that Braidwood was himself a teacher of mathematics before he devoted his career to the deaf, there is no doubt that Goodricke developed his love of mathematics first through Braidwood, and went to Warrington Academy to further his knowledge of the subject.

It was probably Enfield, whose hobby was astronomy, who set Goodricke on his subsequent career, though this interest may already have been in Goodricke through his grandfather, Sir John Goodricke, who was said to have amused himself with astronomy.

On leaving Warrington Academy, Goodricke returned to his family who had settled in York. At that time, in York, there was already an accomplished astronomer, Edward Pigott (who had just discovered a comet).

Pigott and Goodricke were to form an astronomical alliance that began initially as instructor and pupil, but which later evolved into a close partnership. Pigott had fine instruments and a network of scientific contacts that Goodricke was to make good use of. Isolated in provincial York, Pigott had yearned for companionship in astronomy, and welcomed his new pupil eagerly. Even so, he was to complain in 1783 that 'there is not a soul here to converse with on astronomy' because he and Goodricke communicated almost entirely by pencilled notes. Because of this, only once was there any clash between the two men, and their working relationship remained excellent throughout the brief life that was left to Goodricke.

On 12th November 1782, Goodricke recorded the message that was to make him famous:

'This night I looked at Beta Persei and was much amazed to find its brightness altered - it now appears to be of about the 4th magnitude...'

Goodricke was not the first to notice the variability of Beta Persei (or Algol as it is more commonly known), but he was the first to establish that these light changes were periodic. For these observations, Goodricke was awarded one of the two Copley Medals for 1783.
Goodricke went on to discover the variability of two other naked-eye stars, Beta Lyrae (1785) and Delta Cephei (1786).

For his work, the Royal Society elected him to a fellowship, but Goodricke died at York only two weeks later, supposedly due to a cold from exposure to the night air in astronomical observations. He was only 21 years old.

No stone over his tomb at Hunsingore, near York, commemorates his final resting place, but the University of York has named a lecture hall after him.

Deaf Parliamentarian and Governor of Barbados.

Francis Humberstone MacKenzie, Lord Seaforth (1754 - 1815)

Francis MacKenzie was born a deaf-mute, the second son of Major William MacKenzie, nephew of the 5th Earl of Seaforth.

He was placed with Thomas Braidwood at his Academy in Edinburgh where he learnt to some extent to speak. However, for the major part of his life, Francis MacKenzie used sign language to communicate with his peers. He was a very fluent fingerspeller, and many of his associates such as Lord Melville, Lord Guildford acquired fluent fingerspelling skills.

He was a highly intelligent and articulate man, given to writing numerous letters.

On 22nd April 1782, he married Mary Proby, daughter of the Dean of Lichfield, who bore him 4 sons and 6 daughters.

In 1783, his elder brother Thomas, who had succeeded his second cousin Lord Seaforth in 1781 as chief of the clan MacKenzie died, and Francis succeeded his brother as chief of the clan and inherited the considerable Seaforth estates which were in a neglected state.

Because of his interest in his Scottish estates, MacKenzie stood in 1784 against all expectation for Parliament against Lord Macleod, the sitting member for Ross-shire, and was elected, it is said, with a number of fictitious votes.

He served as M.P. from 1784 to 1790 when he resigned because of his financial problems and gave his interest in the seat to a friend, William Adams.

On the outbreak of war with France, MacKenzie raised the 78th Regiment of Foot, Ross-shire Militia, with himself as Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding. In 1794, he added a second battalion. Although he rose to the rank of Lieutenant-General of the Army by 1808, he never joined his, or any other regiment, on active service.

The impact of events in France on domestic politics drew him out of political retirement, and upon his friend Adams being offered a seat at Banbury, he stood again for Ross-shire, and was handsomely re-elected. On his return to the House, he gave silent support to the government as a result of which the Seaforth peerage was revived, and he was created 6th Lord Seaforth.

He was appointed Governor of Barbados in 1800, and during his governorship up to 1806 he strove to improve the conditions of slaves. He was reported to have been an able and vigorous governor.

On his return to Britain in 1806, Lord Seaforth played no further significant part in national politics, and his later years were blighted by misfortune. His financial embarrassments caused him to sell the 'gift land' of his house, as well as much of his estates. In addition, the only survivor of his four sons died unmarried in 1814, and MacKenzie himself died a few months later a physically and mentally broken man.

These last tragic events fulfilled the words of a seer, Kenneth MacKenzie prior to his execution by the 3rd Lady Seaforth in the 1660s:- 'In the days of a deaf and dumb caberfeidh, the gift land would be sold and the male line of Seaforth will cease.'