

**The Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind**

**One hundred and fifty years of progress**

**by Patrick Baird**

**'150 Years of Progress'**

**Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind.**

**Text Patrick Baird 1996.**

**Production editing Bryan Holden**

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**Foreword by then President: Rt. Hon. The Baroness Fisher of Rednal, J.P.**

**This book shows the progress of a charity that arose from humble beginnings, from a small house in the centre of Birmingham 150 years ago, the object of which was to educate blind children.**

**Those ideals are now translated into a college undertaking training and education towards employment possibilities; first - class welfare facilities for those with other handicaps, including loss of sight, and excellent residential care for the elderly.**

**The vision of the Victorian pioneers has become a glorious reality taken forward by many others over the years, some, but not all, mentioned in this book. The efforts of the many volunteers offering help and support and raising money have also played their part in the success.**

**I am proud to be the President of The Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind, now so well known in Birmingham and in many parts of the world. Long may it continue to offer service and advice to the problems encountered by persons with visual handicap.**

## **Acknowledgments**

**This '150 Years of Progress' of BRIB is not meant to be a comprehensive history of this magnificent Institution but solely an overall view of what has been achieved in that time.**

**Thanks must be given to Brian Jones who laid the foundation of the booklet by providing much of the required information; David Dixie for inviting me to compile the work; and the late Albert Weedall whose original idea this anniversary booklet was and without whose encouragement it would never have been completed.**

**Patrick Baird, BA., ALA. April 1996**

# 1 A vision that became reality

It is with thanks to Victorian philanthropy and to the vision of one man and two spinster ladies that the Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind continues to be as active today as it ever was. For it was a Birmingham merchant, William Harrold, who had the original dream of establishing such an institution for the blind in Birmingham.

He began a scheme for the erection of a school, but unfortunately did not live to carry it out. Subsequently his only daughter, Miss Elizabeth Bache Harrold and her great friend Miss Mary Elizabeth Badger, decided that a school for the blind should be established.

They rented a small house in Ruston Street, Edgbaston for six shillings a week (30p) and set up school. John Dale at the age of ten years and blinded through smallpox was the first pupil and he was soon joined by seven others who were taught to read through the Lucas system of embossed type.

Within a comparatively short time there was an increasing demand for places at the school which necessitated firstly a move to Ryland Street and then on to larger premises at 113 Broad Street providing accommodation for seventeen pupils, (five of whom were boarders). Subjects taught were music, geography (by means of relief maps), mental arithmetic, history, knitting, straw-plaiting and basket making. Even this building proved to be inadequate and there was an urgent need for 'more enlarged exertions', so in 1848 the school moved to Islington House, Broad Street, where twenty five pupils were accommodated.

Before the move to Islington House an historic meeting of subscribers and friends of the Institution was held at Dee's Royal Hotel in Temple Row on April 24th 1848 for the purpose of establishing the venture as a public charity. Mr. James Taylor occupied the chair and became the first President; Mr. Thomas Goodman, who had helped Miss Harrold and Miss Badger in obtaining pupils for the original school, became Chairman and Honorary Treasurer, holding this latter post until his death in 1874. The first resolution adopted was 'That a public Institution formed in the town to be called The Birmingham Institution for the Blind'. A sub-committee was appointed to draw up a code of laws for the management of the Institution which were substantially in use until 1985.

The meeting also proposed the Objects of the Institution, the following of which are extracts:

1. 'That the designation of this Establishment shall be The General Institution For The Blind.
2. That the object of the Institution shall be the instruction and employment of the blind of both sexes, some as boarders, others as day pupils; the instruction to include the daily reading of the holy scriptures, and all the employment to be of a useful character.
3. That the Institution shall be supported by donations and annual subscriptions; by payment on behalf of the blind, and the profits arising from their industry
4. That the Institution shall be under the sanction of Patrons and Patronesses, and shall be conducted by a committee, consisting of twenty gentlemen, being Governors, and the following Officers, viz. a President, a Chaplain (who shall be a clergyman of the Established Church), a Physician, a Surgeon, a Treasurer, two auditors and an Honorary Secretary; together with all clergymen and dissenting ministers, being Governors.
5. That all annual subscribers of one. guinea and upwards, and all donors of ten guineas and upwards, shall be Governors.
8. That the Committee shall meet once in every month, or oftener if necessary, to transact the ordinary affairs of the Institution, and examine and pass the monthly accounts. At such meetings the members of the Committee then present shall elect a Chairman, and four shall form a Quorum.
11. That the Committee shall be empowered to call General Meetings of the governors for special purposes (when and as often as they shall think necessary) and shall also be required to do so at any time on the request, in writing, of any ten Governors, stating the specific purpose of the said proposed meeting; and ten days notice, at least, of such Special General Meeting, and of the special object intended, shall be given, by public advertisement, in one or more of the Birmingham Newspapers.
13. That there shall be family worship, including the reading of some portion of Holy scripture, morning and evening, daily in the Institution, at which all the boarders shall be required to be present. The prayers and portions of the Holy

Scriptures to be read, shall be appointed by the Chaplain, to whom the general regulation of the religious instruction of the pupils, shall be confided.

14. That on the Lord's Day, the pupils shall attend public worship of the Church of England, twice, under the care of the Superintendent; but if they are Dissenters, they may, on proper application to the Committee be permitted to attend their respective places of worship, provided that they are under the charge of some person appointed by their parents or guardians, with the approbation of the Committee.....'

From the last two laws it can be seen quite strongly that religious instruction played a very important part of the Institution's work as well as the general education of the blind and instructing in some trade.

Upon admission in to the Institution every person had to bring the following items:-

#### FOR MEN AND BOYS

A suit of clothes and hat for Sundays

A suit of clothes or Jacket and Trousers and Hat or Cap to work in

Four shirts

Two Night Shirts

Two Night Caps

Four pairs of Stockings, dark Worsted

Two pairs of Shoes

Four cloth Collars

Four Pocket Handkerchiefs

Two Combs and one Hairbrush, in a small bag

N.B. Waistcoats, Breeches and Trousers, not to be of a washing kind.

## FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

A Cloak

A Gown for Sundays

Two dark coloured dresses

Two flannel Petticoats

Four Shifts

Two Skirts

Six plain Caps

Two close (or cottage) Bonnets

Four pairs of Stockings, dark Worsted

Two pairs of Shoes

Two Shawls

Four pocket Handkerchiefs

Two check Aprons

Two Combs and one Hairbrush in a small bag

## 2 The building of a school

About this time a strong effort was made to collect sufficient funds for the erection of a suitable building in which to educate and train the young blind. This proved to be successful for the second Annual Report states that £1,600 was obtained for this purpose. According to the report the object of the charity was 'to instruct the blind in reading the Holy Scriptures: and at the same time, in some useful trade or calling by which they may be able to provide for their future livelihood'.

In 1849 the Institution leased two acres of land from Lord Calthorpe in Carpenter Road, Edgbaston, on a ninety nine year lease. The corner stone of the new school was laid by Thomas Goodman on 23rd April 1851 and the opening of the completed building, (having cost £7,000), took place on 22nd July 1852 following a service in St. James's Church, Edgbaston. At the service both the organist and choir were chosen from pupils of the Institution. In fact, the centre piece of the building was an organ costing 360 guineas (£378).

The Music Department flourished and from the earliest days references are continuously found to the love of music amongst its pupils. The first mention of a pupil receiving a musical appointment was in 1854 when John Ward obtained a post in Staffordshire at a salary of £20 per year; Henry Bywater, just sixteen years old, was invited in 1859 to become organist of St. James's Church, Wolverhampton; in 1860 Susan Taylor was appointed organist at St. Barnabas's Church, Ladywood. Three former pupils obtained the F.R.C.O., several the A.R.C.O., and one Mus. Bac. (Cam). Another former pupil, Samuel Corbett, gave recitals at the Crystal Palace. Suitable scholars were taught to tune pianos and a number of competent tuners were available for outside orders.

With the new school pupil numbers increased to the point where there was a need for more workshop accommodation. A larger basket shop was built, a lending library of Moon's embossed books was established and in 1859 a Master's house built.

From the mid 1850's instruction was given for the first time to adult blind people in their own houses. Joseph Dunn, a former pupil of the Institution, became their first blind tutor. Then there were about eighty members of the Adult Blind Home Teaching branch. By the time the Institution reached its centenary there were nearly one thousand two hundred and fifty.

Pupils were drawn from a large geographical area between 1852 and 1860 - forty came from Birmingham, fourteen from Warwickshire, twenty eight from Staffordshire, thirty nine from other English counties and one from Wales.

Younger children were now beginning to attend the school and there was a need for a play room. Education was becoming a recognised part of childrens' development and a visiting American, Mr. Little, chief officer of the Wisconsin Institution, said he was full of admiration for the Carpenter Road system.

He indicated that the only instances he discovered of blind people conducting shops as employers were graduates of this school. The philosophy of the school was that they would not send pupils out in to the world until they were fully prepared. However, this slowed down the movement of pupils through the school but no doubt had the desired long term effect in them gaining employment.

Although Braille had been invented in 1829 it was not introduced to the school until 1880. The previously used Lucas embossed system had been used for twenty eight years and had been the only practical system of writing but had proved less useful for general purposes. The Braille also brought about a great increase in the number of books for the blind, as well as reducing their cost. Progress at the school was obviously maintained at a high level for when members of the Royal Commission on the Blind visited in 1887 they were well satisfied.

Pupils numbers continued to increase and extensive alterations were required in the early 1890's. Firstly a gymnasium, new kitchens and store were built and the workshops improved. Then the school was enlarged and modernised to comply with the Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act 1893 which made elementary education for blind and deaf children compulsory. Completion of this work by the architect J.A. Chatwin increased the available places for pupils from sixty five to one hundred and sixteen, and it also no doubt contributed to H.M. Inspectors giving an excellent report in 1895.

The close of the year 1893 brought the resignation of Miss Mary Badger, who up until then had worked as the Honorary Lady Superintendent. For nearly fifty years this remarkable woman had lived and worked for the blind. Illness had forced her to relinquish her life-long task.

As a lasting appreciation of her great work the Committee arranged for a beautiful illuminated address, handsomely bound, to be presented to her. Unfortunately, Miss Badger died in the following year at the age of 75. A memorial tablet was placed in the entrance hall of the Institution to her memory and that of Miss Elizabeth Bache Harrold, the two devoted women who founded the venture forty eight years before, the first in Birmingham to succeed in awakening an interest in the cause of the blind and to take active steps for their welfare.

The Institution's place in the forefront of education for blind people was further enhanced when in 1899 a system of Braille shorthand was evolved by a group of five people under Mr. Henry Stainsby, the General Superintendent (who had been appointed when the post of resident Lady Superintendent was dispensed with). He, with the assistance of Mr. Alfred Wayne, designed a Braille shorthand typewriter. It was the first shorthand machine ever invented for the blind on which a speed of one hundred and twenty to one hundred and sixty words per minute could be attained.

Typewriting was becoming a popular form of employment and its potential as an occupation for blind people was immediately seized upon by the Institution. It set up an office with three girls at Carpenter Road, later transferring to the retail shop in Christchurch Passage, New Street. Then in 1901 Miss Edith Wood, a pupil, obtained a post as shorthand typist with the Remington Typewriter Company - the first blind person to secure such a post.

The late 1890's and early 1900's saw the introduction of many new occupations, including machine knitting, the making of coal bags, cylinder covers and boot mending.

The finances of the Institution had been for a number of years a cause of anxiety and in searching to find some fresh source of income two blind young men, former pupils, began to canvas for subscriptions and donations. Fifty years after its founding the Institution appealed for more subscribers to help its cause and to this end produced a fifteen page booklet describing its work, together with a number of photographs of blind children and young people at work and at play. It was obviously aimed at tugging at the heart strings and the purse of the wealthy in the hope of realising an increased subscription list of at least £71,000 per year to maintain its position. A hand-written accompanying letter from the Institution's then President - Lord Calthorpe - also aimed to attract more subscribers. Its text is set out overleaf.

*“The General Institution for the Blind, Edgbaston, Birmingham, 1897.*

*Dear Sir,*

*As President of the General Institution for the Blind in Birmingham I venture to invite your attention to the urgent need for a considerable increase to the Subscription List. The School is certified under the Education Department but it should be stated that at least one third of the Annual expenditure must be met from Annual Subscriptions and other voluntary contributions if the Certificate is to be obtained. Again the School is only part of the work of the Institution. It also provides teaching in handicrafts and professions. There are workshops for the Blind Adults and a Home Visiting and Teaching Branch which also gives relief to necessitous Blind so that fully 500 Blind persons are benefited.*

*The annual expenditure is approximately £5,000 while the total amount of subscription for all purposes is shown in the last report as only £635. In 1867 it was £1,009. The Committee desire in commemoration of Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee to raise a special fund of an additional £1,000 in Annual Subscriptions. I enclose a first list of subscribers to which I trust you will allow your name to be added. The Institution is doing its work excellently and I earnestly commend this appeal to your sympathy and support.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Calthorpe*

The first list of subscribers included such well known local luminaries as Joseph Chamberlain who gave 2 guineas, and Sir John Jaffray (founder of the Birmingham Post) who gave the same.

### 3 School Fundraising

In the meantime, plans were being looked at for the establishment of a separate kindergarten school situated in the country but within easy reach of Edgbaston. At the end of 1898 the Governors held a special meeting under the presidency of the Lord Mayor of Birmingham (Alderman C.G. Beale) at which they decided to establish such a school. A freehold site of about 10 acres was purchased at Harborne. Plans of the building were prepared but an appeal was postponed by the Boer War.

However, by 1905, £15,860 of the £19,000 had been subscribed by friends including £1,500 from Gardner's Trust for the Blind. The school was finally completed in 1904, and by the beginning of the following January term every place was filled. Visitors were astonished at the rapid progress made by small blind children within the first year of its existence.

About the same time it was decided to carry out much needed improvements at Carpenter Road involving an expenditure of £3,000. The scheme included isolated sick wards, new bathrooms, better provision for storing household linen, additional workshops and office accommodation and precautions against loss of life and property by fire.

Before 1910 the school curriculum was broadened by a decision to teach all partially blind children (whose sight was unlikely to deteriorate further), to read and write by sighted methods. Fifty of these scholars were admitted between November 1910 and March 1911, with encouraging results. The teaching was chiefly oral and it was hoped to transfer a number of these children to ordinary schools after they had received instruction for about two years - a very progressive idea.

Two other important developments also took place at this time. The first was the establishment of a College of Teachers of the Blind, formed to encourage such teachers to make a close study of all matters concerned with their work. The second was the linking together of much of the welfare work for the blind people into unions and agencies - thus the Birmingham Institution came within the Midland Union comprising ten counties. Henry Stainsby, who had been connected with the Institution for more than twenty-eight years, resigned his post as General Superintendent and Secretary in September 1908 to undertake the post of Secretary General to the National Institute for the Blind.

Amongst the many deeds for the blind that Stainsby became involved with, in 1905 he had given evidence to the Royal Commission on the care and control of the feeble minded in which he stated:-

“Unless there is decided evidence that a blind child is defective, it should not be sent to a school for the defective blind until it has been placed in a school for blind children of normal intelligence. After a fair trial has been given to the child, the teachers and other officers of the school should be able, in conjunction with the medical officer, to form a very fairly correct idea as to whether the child has improved since admission, and, if so, whether sufficiently to warrant retention. If not, it should be removed from the home influence, which in the case of blind children, and specially of blind defectives, is often of a prejudicial character, on account either of parental neglect, or ignorance or both. Here, proper food, regular habits and special training would generally have a beneficial effect, while medical treatment would be best administered, and be most likely to succeed. The school should be located on a specially selected site in the open country, and it should provide everything that conduces to a health life. Under such favourable conditions some of the children would certainly develop and then could be transferred to school for ordinary blind children'." "

Mr. Stainsby was succeeded by Mr. W H. Thurman who for many years was Clerk to the Special Schools Committee at the Birmingham Education Department.

In order to perpetuate the name of Henry Stainsby it was determined by members of the Committee and staff to found a Pension Fund for the blind. For this purpose subscriptions amounting to £250 were received and in June 1912, a bazaar was organised by Mrs. C. H. Price and friends which yielded the princely sum of £1000. Following on, another Pension Fund was established for blind women by an anonymous donation of £700 to commemorate the name of Mrs Mary Hadley.

During 1909 King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra conferred their patronage on the Institution when they visited the city. The main building at Carpenter Road became 'The Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind' and the kindergarten at Harborne 'The Queen Alexandra Kindergarten Branch'. By September 1913 a new department for girls had been established through the teaching of cookery, laundry and housewifery with suitable girls being taught massage.

When the Great War of 1914 intervened, the Headmaster and assistant masters enlisted early on so that the school was staffed for the period of the war entirely with mistresses with pupils being taught in mixed classes. With the War over the staff returned and with the passing of the Education Act 1918 making education costs chargeable to the education authorities, the future seemed assured. Donations could therefore now be used to purchase equipment and an organ costing £5,000 was installed with a donation of £1,500 from the Carnegie Trust towards the cost. Moves were now made to form an Old Boys Association and this was established in 1919, although it was a year later before a similar organisation was formed for girls.

Shortly after the war the Ministry of Health suggested that the Institution should undertake the supervision of blind home workers in Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. The Institution's Committee agreed to carry out the task and a Government Grant was received for the work.

The end of this period was illuminated by the passing of the Blind Persons Act 1920, which made it the duty of County Boroughs and County Councils to provide for the welfare of the blind. It also extended the old age pension to blind people at fifty years instead of seventy - doing a great deal to alleviate distress in freeing the blind from the necessity of seeking Poor Law Relief

From this time the Institution's story becomes more and more of co-operation between the Local Authority and voluntary effort. This spirit of co-operation was developed further by the Local Government Act of 1929 which placed responsibility for the welfare of blind on the Local Authority in whose area they resided. Loans formerly paid directly to the Institution by the Board of Health under the Blind Persons Act 1920 were, from March 1930, paid directly to the Local Authorities from whom the Institution received all contributions towards services rendered to the blind.

## 4 Forging ahead

By 1920 it was now possible for blind children to take the Oxford Local Examination and to enter for Craft Examinations conducted by the City and Guilds of London Institute. In curriculum and organisation the schools at Carpenter Road were coming in to line with schools for sighted children.

In the Trading Department, however, things looked rather different. Depressions and extensive unemployment, accentuated by the fact that the Institution existed to find work for the blind and not merely make a profit, were the cause of a deficit of £9,568. In March 1921 stagnation in trade had become so acute that it was necessary to put the blind workers on part-time. Fortunately the payment of Unemployment Insurance Benefit made it possible for this to be done without causing too much distress.

However, happier times lay in the not too distant future. The Midland Musical Festival of 1922 proved a triumph for Birmingham blind pupils. A choir of junior voices trained by Mr. Platt, the blind Music Master, won the Mary Wakefield Silver Shield in open competition against seventy two other choirs. Two years later, in 1924, several miniature articles made to the scale of one inch to one foot by blind workers were submitted at the Wembley Exhibition for the Queen's Doll's House. A hair broom was accepted and a cane chair, a cane linen basket and a wool rug passed in to Queen Mary's private collection.

In spite of the General Strike in 1926 the turnover of the Trading Department amounted to £37,900 and in the same year a new extension to the workshops at Harborne was opened by Neville Chamberlain, the Minister of Health.

Mr. S. W Starling, formerly Assistant Secretary, succeeded Mr. Cowley as General Superintendent and secretary but some years later resigned to take up appointment as Secretary of the Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind, in London. He was succeeded by Mr. H. S. Edkins who had entered the service of the Institution in 1910.

With the co-operation of the Birmingham Public Health Department, premises in Easy Row near the city centre were taken over. They were altered for use as a Social and Handicraft centre including a large concert hall, braille library, canteen, rooms for reading, handicrafts, for committee and office work and also accommodation for an ophthalmic optician.

The year 1938 saw a section of the school completed in which pupils were given a technical education - a section which was to form in later years the basis of Queen Alexandra College. Thoughts were now being given to building a new school on the land at Harborne, as the lease at Carpenter Road would soon expire. The 1939-45 war intervened however, and arrangements were made to move all the children under sixteen to safer locations and the school was commandeered by the army. The Chairman of BRIB at the time, Mr. W. C. Matthews, worked tirelessly on the examination of plans. After the war the school was derequisitioned and all senior boys and girls returned.

During the month in which war was declared the usual work of the Institution's Committees and Sub-Committees were suspended, the direction of its work being placed instead in the hands of an emergency Committee. This consisted of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Hon Secretary, Hon. Treasurer, Chairman of Sub-Committees and eventually representatives of Birmingham, Smethwick and West Bromwich Local Authorities. They reported quarterly to a full meeting of the General Committee.

The Head Mistress of the Kindergarten, Miss E. E. Morley, retired shortly after the war had begun, having completed thirty five years service. The success of the school owed a great deal to the patient and imaginative handling of the children. At the Cowley Home (Erdington) for Blind Women, the majority of residents expressed a strong wish to remain in Birmingham where they were comfortably settled and near friends. So they stayed and the large dining-room in the new wing was adapted as an air raid shelter.

Unfortunately, difficulty in obtaining supplies of raw materials, particularly from the East, led to periods of unemployment and effort had to be made to find new work. A number of enterprising blind workers found places for themselves in open industry and with the assistance of the Ministry of Labour and local employers of blind people, both men and women were placed in munitions factories. Here they worked side by side with sighted workers with excellent results. By 1943 no fewer than one hundred and fifty seven blind people had found employment in sighted industries, proving that they were capable of much useful work which they had not previously had an opportunity to carry out. The lease on Carpenter Road building was renewed for a short time and in addition 34 Calthorpe Road was acquired.

Fortunately there were no casualties amongst the staff on war service and they returned full of hope for the future. Enthusiasm was also being expressed shortly after the war in the BRIB Centenary celebrations. A holiday for the pupils was arranged, exhibitions and concerts held and a school service was broadcast. Pupils were also enjoying other advantages in the form of food parcels from Australia and New Zealand and free seats at CBSO concerts.

With plans for the new senior school delayed, work had been continued at Carpenter Road. The domestic science room was modernised in 1948 and additional classrooms made available. An Amprosound Talking Film apparatus and Jay Wheel were purchased to the delight of staff and pupils. School activities were continued with the Literary and Debating Society, Guides and Scouts and in September 1950 the formation of a brass band, the instruments being provided by the Birmingham Gazette and Birmingham Post and Mail. The band gave a performance in 1951 at the Central Hall in aid of the deaf-blind and gained a great deal of public acclaim in the press.

This was the year of the Festival of Britain and services were held on the lawn to celebrate this event on May 3rd, June 4th and 11th. Parties of pupils also visited the festival in London. During this year Mr. G. Exley, the Deputy Headmaster, left at the end of the summer term after 16 years and Mr. H. S. Marks and Mr. J. Cannon joined the staff as Assistant Masters. Carpenter Road School had now served as a school for over one hundred years. Disadvantages were becoming apparent with the lack of playing space and the deterioration in the fabric of the building.

## 5 Lickey Grange

Lickey Grange near Bromsgrove, an estate of twenty-six acres and formerly the residence of the late Lord Austin, had been acquired in 1943 and had been used as the junior school since 1945. Notice was eventually given in 1953 to terminate the lease of Carpenter Road and the senior school was transferred to Lickey in 1954.

The purchase of Lickey Grange seems quite reasonable especially as it was bought when war was raging in Europe with the price being £6,500 followed many years later in August 1960 by the purchase of another small plot to complete the site at a cost of £3,000. But chief amongst those who saw the house as ideal for educating young blind people was Mr. Wilfred C. Matthews, Chairman of BRIB since 1925.

By 1944 some temporary buildings had been erected in the grounds of Lickey Grange to house the senior boys originally from Carpenter Road who came there after being removed from Kinlet Hall in September 1944. This arrangement only lasted for a year, however, for when the Carpenter Road building was derequisitioned in 1945, the senior boys returned there leaving Lickey once again to the juniors.

In the very early 1950's new building continued. A house was built for the Head Teacher and an extension built to connect old and new buildings. However, hopes were soon to be dashed by the Ministry of Education's refusal to grant further licences. It was also thought the opening of Exhall Grange at Coventry could affect the numbers of new pupils at Lickey. The Committee therefore considered and postponed the long awaited proposal to build the new senior school. However, within a year or so the Committee decided to terminate the use of Carpenter Road and this time the Ministry of Education agreed to the building of the senior school at Lickey Grange.

Extensions to the junior school had been continued for some time and were finally completed on 16th September 1952. Then during the autumn work began on the senior school classroom block, and was completed for the senior pupils to move from Carpenter Road in 1954. Further plans for hostels, dining hall and kitchen were now confirmed. The final stage for development was yet to come with the building of the assembly hall and library which were to be included in the Ministry of Education's 1959/60 building programme. The cost was estimated at £17,000 together with an indoor swimming pool at £14,000.

Individuals and organisations often donated gifts and money to Lickey Grange and one was Joseph Lucas and Co who often gave gifts of bicycles and scooters. Gardner's Trust was also generous and gave £3,350 to the new building. Plans were also made to rehouse the beautiful Bishops organ from Carpenter Road in the Assembly Hall which was successfully achieved. All was complete and arrangements were made for HM the Queen Mother to open the building on 23rd June 1961 but the anticipated excitement was reduced by the news that she was unable to attend because of an ankle injury. However, the great event took place later in the year and to add to the occasion the Queen Mother arrived by helicopter in the school grounds.

By the mid 1960's causes of blindness were changing. Ophthalmia Neonatorum had almost disappeared but Retrolental Fibroplasia became significant as premature babies of low birthweight survived. An increasing number of pupils had further disabilities in addition to their blindness, a situation which was becoming nationally recognised. This was seen as a watershed in educational provision and was to provide great discussion as to future provision. At this time too, Lickey was facing another turning point with its history. Mr. T. L. Williams, Principal since 1937, retired in 1965 and was awarded the MBE in the birthday honours of that year. His successor was Mr. D. W F. Folley, who had been junior master at Worcester College for the Blind.

Opportunities for blind people in employment were now increasing and the availability of professional jobs like physiotherapy, teaching and the law made greater demands on the educational system, with more emphasis on examinations. Lickey, with Mr. Foley at the helm, met this challenge face to face. Higher professional teaching standards were introduced and care staff replaced the old role of matron/housekeeper.

Pupils were entered for Certificate of Secondary Education and GCE examinations and school prizes were awarded for achievement.

There was, however, still growing concern about the education of visually handicapped children. BRIB, always in the forefront of this debate, set up a pre-school peripatetic teaching service in 1970. This, the first of its kind in the country, appointed Heather Jones to the first post at Lickey to counsel and advise parents and children in the Midlands. Her work load expanded rapidly and increasingly she became more involved with multi-handicapped children. Within two years this was made a National Service by the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

In 1972 a Government Committee of Enquiry into the education of Visually Handicapped Children (the Vernon Report) recognised the special needs of blind pupils. However, by 1977 the first signs of a reduction in the numbers of pupils at Lickey was recorded, a decline which was to continue steadily during the next few years. Schools for the partially sighted began to take blind pupils and some authorities, spurred on by the report of the Warnock Committee on Education of Handicapped Children and Young People, in 1978, began integrating blind children into sighted schools. Legislation based on the Warnock Report recommendations gave further validity to these actions. The Education Act of 1981 recognised the need to assess the special education needs of some children, but emphasised that this did not necessarily mean education in special schools.

In fact it states that so long as it is compatible with their receiving the education they need, they should be educated in ordinary schools. The future for Lickey and schools like it looked bleak, and as though to add insult to injury, there was a disastrous fire in 1979 which destroyed two classrooms and the gym in the Middle School block. There was a determination to rebuild and, despite the fact that many problems had to be overcome, by 1981 the block had been rebuilt.

The main issue now facing the school Governors was the future of this special school with its continually falling rolls. Without doubt it had a future; it employed a concentration of highly motivated staff, experts in their field, who could provide an excellent education for blind pupils. It was a regional resource with Mr. Mayho as additional Principal to serve it. It had difficulties in that it was residential but the number of day pupils was increasing. One answer was thought to be special provision for multi-handicapped pupils.

Mr. Folley retired in 1985 and despite the many innovative changes he had introduced, he felt that there were two areas which remained unsatisfactory. Firstly, the ophthalmic care of pupils, and secondly, the failure to devise a satisfactory programme of education and leisure, particularly for enforced leisure. This was something shared with every school in the country. Some pupils, he thought, had an abiding interest in physical, aesthetic and practical activities; but most do not carry over an interest in reading, literature and music into adult life.

Following Mr. Foley's retirement, Dr. C. Pugh became Headmaster. His stated policy showed that the school must provide local education authorities with

whatever services they need whether it be advice, resources, teacher education or a specialist provision for a wider range of needs resulting from visual handicap. Within a short time, in addition to the normal Secondary curriculum leading to CSE or GCE there was added psychological and developmental assessment, a preschool nursery and a unit for children whose development is more than usually retarded. Physiotherapy and speech therapy were much in evidence and a soft play room to allow full and free movement without fear and the adaptation of the premises to allow access for wheelchairs all showed a trend towards provision for a very wide range of needs.

## 6 Management

BRIB's first Annual Report in 1847 was a small pamphlet of some sixteen pages recording the pupils progress in reading and Holy Scripture. The Charity had not yet been formally constituted and when it was at Dee's Royal Hotel in 1848 a sub-committee was appointed to draw up a Code of Laws for the management of the Institution.

Control was vested in a General Committee which was responsible for general policy matters concerning the development of the schools. It was this Committee, which in 1896, observed that no matter how good the academic education pupils received they also needed to acquire practical training to earn a living. Before the end of the 1890's they had also established a kindergarten. Over the years the Committee's responsibilities were intended to meet changing demands and in 1919 they met and agreed to submit a scheme to the Board of Health. Workshops also came within their remit and it is interesting to note that in 1920 the element of democracy was achieved when three representatives of workshop employees were appointed to the Committee.

With the outbreak of war in 1939 the Committee was suspended and replaced by an Emergency Committee.

After the War other committees were formed with representative members which in 1947 included Birmingham Education Committee, Birmingham Council, Smethwick Council, West Bromwich Education Committee, West Bromwich Council and the councils of Burton on Trent, Coventry, Warwickshire, Worcester, Worcestershire and Birmingham Trades Council.

Sub-committees were now formed - one for Aftercare matters which had responsibility for Home Teachers, grants and the Cowley Home. Another special sub-committee was formed in 1948 and met monthly as required.

At the AGM in 1950 Mr. W. C. Matthews resigned as Chairman after 25 years. He was succeeded by Mr. A. Peter Wilson, the Vice Chairman. Mr. T. E. Hurst, the Honorary Treasurer was appointed Vice Chairman. At the same meeting the Honorary Secretary, Mr. G. H. Cumming Butler, resigned after serving 50 years. His place was taken by Mr. Malcolm W Beale. The next few years saw a number of other changes. On 31st October 1960, Mr. H. S. Edkins retired as General

Superintendent and Secretary, a post he had held since December 1933. His service at BRIB began in 1920 and he was Assistant Secretary from 1929 to 1933. He died in 1972.

Under Mr. Edkins, an intellectual donnish figure, education at BRIB had progressed with departments working in harmony. Mr. T. R. Huntley, the assistant Secretary, succeeded him as Secretary.

Among the many famous people to be President of BRIB was Sir Fitzroy Hamilton Anstruther Gough-Calthorpe, who held the position for fifty years until 1960. However, his successor, Admiral Sir William Tennant, Lord Lieutenant of Worcester, died in 1963 and in turn was succeeded by Sir Bertram Waring, DC, who retired at the AGM in 1972 and died the following year.

The 1960's was an unfortunate period for BRIB. In 1965 the assistant Secretary, Mr. R. A. Reed, who had worked for the Institution since 1934, became ill and died.

Other changes in the pattern of work at BRIB departments meant an administrative reorganisation in 1964. The General Committee was reconstituted as a Board of Governors with the two educational establishments treated separately each with its own Committee, and Aftercare matters coming before the Adult Welfare Committee.

On 31st December 1970 Mr. T. R. Huntley, General Secretary resigned after twelve years to become the Chief Executive of Preston Institute for the Blind and Mr. D. W. Golding was appointed to succeed him.

In 1971 a firm of management consultants reported (Annan Committee) and one result of the report was the formation of an Officers Committee to bring the work of the separate sections of BRIB closer together.

In 1978 Mr. Hurst relinquished the Chairmanship, a position he had held since 1965, and BRIB again embarked upon a new era. Mr. P. Southall was elected Chairman and Mrs. C. Bourne, Vice-Chairman.

Efforts were being made to improve the financial and administrative services of BRIB so that when David Golding resigned as General Secretary in 1981, his successor Jim Kendrick was someone with a background in industrial

management. The new Honorary Treasurer that year was Mr. G. A. Morris, manager of Lloyds Bank in Colmore Row. BRIB's financial recovery was assured.

With a new President taking over in 1982, The Baroness Fisher of Rednal, and the resignation of Mr. P. Southall as Chairman, BRIB had broken the mould of people holding these positions for many years. The new Chairman was Walter Thornton, OBE, who strangely for an agency serving blind people was the first blind man to hold this position. Sadly, Walter Thornton died in 1988.

During his term of office BRIB began to overhaul its administration and financial systems with the installation of an ICC computer which began to simplify much of the accounting and ledger work. Budgetary control was also improved and the production of minutes and reports speeded up.

Under the term of the next Chairman, Albert Weedall, who was elected to this position in 1988 after being Chairman of the Queen Alexandra College Board of Governors, BRIB went from strength to strength. One of his greatest achievements was to inaugurate the construction of the Queen Mother Gardens, the sheltered housing scheme on the Harborne site, which Her Majesty opened in 1991.

During his time in both of these offices many major changes" occurred. The number of students at the Queen Alexandra College increased from 42 to 150 and perhaps most importantly of all the College campus was ramped allowing wheelchair use. In addition, an all weather football pitch was added, all sorts of new equipment was bought, including personal computers and an Open Learning Centre was established.

He also introduced courses in glass and craft making and he spearheaded the Blind Aid Appeal which funded four major developments - the building of the Queen Mother Gardens sheltered accommodation for frail elderly blind people, the extension of the Elizabeth Gunn Day Centre for people with multiple disabilities, and building of the Low Vision Centre and the opening of a new dining area and classrooms at the Queen Alexandra College.

Unfortunately Albert Weedall died while still in office in August 1994, but his memory will live on when in the 150th anniversary year of BRIB, sheltered accommodation for frail and elderly blind people together with a resource centre is to be built on the Cowley Home site in Erdington and will be known as 'The Albert Weedall Centre'.

The present Chairman, Edward W. Steam, has emphasised that BRIB will continue to enable blind people to reach their fullest potential for independent living whilst also providing for those who need a greater degree of care and support in a sheltered environment.

In order to ensure these philosophies he has already put into place a Five Year Strategic Plan that not only addresses the needs of the people that BRIB serves but also measures its performance against its aims.

Among the many guests to BRIB in the 1990's were its patron, Her Majesty the Queen Mother, who visited in June 1991; Virginia Bottomley, Robin Corbett, Eric Forth, Glenys Kinnock, Ian McCartney and Jeff Rooker in 1993/94 and Sir Harry and Lady Secombe who opened the new administration offices in Wood Lane on the Harborne campus. This enabled the charity to centralise its administration facilities, keeping costs to a minimum and allowing funds to be concentrated on providing facilities and services for blind and visually impaired people.

## 7 Queen Alexandra College

Carpenter Road had for many years placed pupils in Technical Training Departments, and as early as 1938 a section for these pupils had been opened at Harborne. When during the war the kindergarten children were moved to Sion Hill House, Wolverley, technical pupils over sixteen years of age shared the main building at Harborne with the office staff.

In 1958 the Technical Department was designated a Technical College and further extensions were made that year to the building.

The opening ceremony was performed by Edith Pitt, OBE MP, on the 25th June. It was given wide publicity and featured on BBC Midlands News. From now on the college was to be known as the Queen Alexandra Technical College for the Blind. A warden was appointed and the person chosen for the job was Cambray Jones.

Annual Open Days became a feature of College life with parents, friends and other interested visitors being shown around the Departments. The impressive display made a favourable impression on the DES and in 1963 they invited BRIB to develop the College as a Vocational Assessment Centre for Blind Adolescents. Future plans were drawn up for additional buildings. Fortunately additional and separate accommodation was found for girls nearby.

Administrative reorganisation at BRIB meant that in 1964 a separate College Committee was established with a Principal as the executive officer in charge. The person appointed was Mr. J. A. J. Cannon. He took charge of what was now an Assessment and Development Centre and with its counterpart Hethersett in the south, run by RNIB, was to provide pre-vocational assessment and guidance, further education and training for blind people. It was decided that Birmingham would accept pupils whose physical handicaps made them unsuited to the more difficult Hethersett site. Placements in employment would be found for students by the RNIB Placement Officer. There were now in 1964, forty residents and ten day students, and the future seemed assured. However, by 1967 there was a fall in demand for places which caused considerable concern.

In 1973 a number of changes took place in the College Committee. Mrs. V. Wootten became Chairman, Mr. S. O. Myers and Dr. M. Tobin joined the Governors. At the end of the summer term 1979, Mr. Cannon the Principal retired

and was succeeded by Mr. Brian Hewitt, formerly Deputy Principal, Royal National College. He took up his post on 1st November 1979 and began with enthusiasm and energy to apply himself to the revitalisation of the College. There was now an extensive programme of modernisation and renovation of the College buildings and new subjects were added to the curriculum. Bicycle repairs became a new subject and another innovative achievement for BRIB.

Refurbishment continued with improvements to toilets and bathrooms, a new reception area and switchboard being installed. Plans were prepared for a daily living skills centre and a residential hotel for 16-20 places including accommodation for multi-handicapped pupils. To finance this expansion an Appeal with a target of £350,000 was launched with Mr. W. E. Thornton, OBE, as Appeals Director. By the end of the first year £112,000 had been raised. During this time closer co-operation developed between the College and Adult Welfare Department in the use of the latter's Rehabilitation Centre and rehabilitation staff were transferred from the welfare department to the College. Costs were, however, heavy and to add to the difficulties, in 1981 boilers and additional heating had to be installed. However, student numbers were rising and by 1983 there was a waiting list for places.

The curriculum was expanding and with additional courses available for students at the College of Food and Domestic Arts, Warley College of Technology and Halesowen College. At the centre of the building of hostel accommodation was the Principal's house. Fortunately BRIB were able to acquire 21 Elm Tree Road in 1983 and it was used as accommodation for the principal. The other part of the plan providing a daily Living Skills Centre was completed in 1983 and opened by Hugh Rossi, the Minister for the Disabled, and designated Queen Alexandra Education for Living Centre.

Brian Hewitt resigned in 1984 to take up an appointment with the Partially Sighted Society, and was succeeded as Principal by Peter Talbot, formerly Vice-Principal of the Worcester College for the Blind, and a radical overhaul of the internal organisation was completed with the establishment of a new Department of Pre-Vocational Education.

The College moved into the mainstream of Further Education with the introduction of City and Guilds Vocational Preparation courses, and subsequently pioneered the new Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education. This course gave students increased choice in vocational options and a much more thorough preparation for further training. In other curriculum developments, Foundation

courses were established to assist those with special needs and a new Vocational Course in Telephony, Reception and Information Processing was introduced. The latter course has given in addition to Telephony and Reception Skills, the wider range of training needed by modern office employees, including the use of information technology

The Engineering Course was developed to include major components of Computer Studies and the use and operation of Computer Controlled Machine Tools, together with the elements of Computer Aided Design. To meet the demand from mainly mature applicants a major expansion in the Cycle Mechanics Department was achieved with £25,000 from the European Social Fund and substantial sponsorship from Manpower Services Commission (MSC). The course was further developed to include Business Studies to meet the needs of those who wished to become self-employed. An expansion and reactivation of Home Workers Schemes with assistance from MSC helped in this encouraging trend and many College graduates successfully run their own Cycle shops.

Close co-operation with several local Colleges enabled the College to increase vocational choice and to give added opportunities for social and personal development. Substantial help and encouragement from local industry and business enabled work experience programmes to be introduced as an integral part of every students course.

A major re-equipping of the College was undertaken during 1985, including computer equipment, specialist aids, such as Closed Circuit Televisions in classrooms, an Electronic Switchboard with synthesised voice attachments and computerised lathes.

By 1985 the College appeal had reached its target of £350,000 and substantial new building and refurbishment programmes during 1986 enabled Woodville House, a hostel for 14 students, to be opened. This hostel has given much needed specially adapted accommodation for wheelchair bound students. In addition the Engineering, Industrial Training and Cycle Mechanics departments were very successfully re-located in the refurbished Bedding Shop of the former Industrial Training Centre for the Blind at Harborne, giving much needed extra space and facilities for further development.

The accommodation vacated by the Engineering Department has been imaginatively transformed into a Computer Centre, Mathematics rooms and for

the first time a College Library and Study Centre. Other refurbishment have included a new sickbay and supervision accommodation and independent accommodation for older students in a house owned by BRIB on or near the Harborne site. Sufficient on-campus accommodation for younger students remains a problem.

A new development was the introduction of a Leisure Activities Programme funded by MSC under their Community Aids Scheme. This has given students considerably increased opportunities for social, sporting and cultural activities, many in conjunction with other local community groups.

The period from 1985-1986 saw an expansion of student numbers in excess of 50 per cent and considerably increased demand for places on College courses. In part this was due to increased publicity for the College with the production of a new College Prospectus and several successful Open Days for educational and careers advisers.

In-Service staff training development was improved and extended, due in part to a shared appointment with Birmingham University's Department of Special Education.

New technology, changed employment opportunities and students with increasing needs requiring special attention are making fresh technical, professional and financial demands. Queen Alexandra College has risen to this challenge and is progressing with vigour and enthusiasm.

In fact the College is now both nationally and internationally known with its challenge to encourage, to train and to educate people with impaired vision and other disabilities, to do whatever they wish to in life. To the staff and students nothing is impossible. Advice and help to set up individual businesses are given with such intricate details as how to buy, sell and prepare a business plan. The College itself runs a number of businesses run by its own students, including a highly successful bicycle sales and repair shop; manufacture of glass which has included in recent years a bowl presented to H.M. The Queen Mother and a unique set of First Edition champagne flutes commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. Each glass was engraved using a specialist technique with a war poster designed by Abram Games.

Not only this but the world's first 'glassmarked' collection was exhibited in Birmingham featuring city landmarks engraved by QAC Glass. The 'Clearly

Birmingham' exhibition was the first limited edition of lead crystal to carry the glassmark - a special and unique mark granted by the Birmingham Assay Office to promote quality and authenticity.

Queen Alexandra College also has its own engineering work shop, with state of the art technology covering modern computerisation techniques, the intricacies of current office and business administration. It can train people in the work of the retail giant supermarkets and has a new skill craftshop dealing with Craft and Design opened in Birmingham's Gun Quarter.

The College also paves the way for visually impaired people to live independently as part of the ordinary community by teaching cooking and cleaning skills.

In recent years the College has made great strides in improving its educational and training standards, with all students now enrolled on either the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) or a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). These are the key to partially sighted students leaving QAC with qualifications that conform to national standards and the college is leading the field in developing the curricula to meet their needs.

Advances in technology are helping people who are blind and partially sighted to become increasingly independent. To remain at the forefront QAC is continuing to invest in the latest specialist study equipment.

It has been actively marketing a multi-media system it has developed using NOMAD and THERMOFORM software, giving visually impaired people tactile diagrams of maps, charts and other spatial concepts.

A recent (and first) report by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), the funding organisation for QAC's eighty LEA sponsored students who make up 66 per cent of student numbers, cast the college in an extremely favourable light. It commended its high quality teaching, learning and student achievements, its range of specialist support services, its GNVQ work and its graduated support in accommodation which promotes learning for independence.

Thus the Queen Alexandra College can look forward to the millennium in the hope that the dream envisaged by two spinster ladies one hundred and fifty years ago will continue to encourage, train and educate the visually impaired enabling them to live their lives to their fullest possible extent.

## 8 Vision Services

Today much of the care and help given to the blind and partially sighted is provided by Vision Services whose beginnings lie in the period shortly after the First World War when an Aftercare Sub-Committee was formed. This was responsible for the Women's Hostel and dealt with the needy blind, and included amongst its works the giving of grants, the supervision of home workers and the appointment and control of home teachers.

Negotiations took place with the Birmingham Guardians of the Poor so that blind people in receipt of out relief could be relieved through the Institution, the cost being defrayed by the Guardians.

Eventually No. 1 Carpenter Road, a house presented by Mrs Walker, was opened as a hostel for blind women workers who found exceptional difficulty in obtaining suitable lodgings. Thus provided accommodation for seventeen workers who were boarded and lodged at a reasonable cost. As soon as it opened the whole of it was occupied.

### COWLEY HOME

By 1929 The Aftercare Sub-Committee had opened the Cowley Home for blind women at 23, Gravelly Hill North, Erdington, which provided a happy and comfortable retirement for thirty blind women. It had been named after R. G. Cowley, General Superintendent and Secretary of BRIB for nine years. A Sick Ward was added two years later and a further extension in 1937.

In 1950 the Home celebrated its 21st anniversary. A party was held for the then 23 residents and plans were unveiled to provide more ground floor accommodation. These plans, approved by the Ministry of Health, were to include sitting-room, bedroom accommodation in small units, built-in wardrobes and hand basins. This single storey extension was completed just before Christmas 1952 and was officially opened on 13th May 1953 by the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, Alderman and Mrs. T. Bowen, - an apt choice as the City Council had contributed towards the extension.

As well as providing improved physical conditions for the residents, efforts were being made for their recreational needs and during 1951 a handicraft class was established at the Home for the residents and all the blind people of Erdington. Like most establishments of its kind Cowley Home required constant attention and expenditure. The heating system was connected to oil in 1961, a lift was installed in 1964 through a generous donation by trustees of the late Mr. Cropp and improvements to the accommodation and a programme of redecoration continued during 1966.

When in November 1969 Miss J. Hughes retired as matron on health grounds, she was succeeded by Mrs. E. Donovan with Mrs. Collins as assistant matron. Mrs. Donovan later retired in October 1975 and Mrs. Quigley took over as Matron.

This was also the time when due to escalating oil prices the boilers were converted to gas. Cowley Home has always retained a reputation for being a warm building and the new heating system proved equal to its predecessor in keeping the elderly ladies warm.

Social activities continued with the Inner-Wheel and Mr. Chakravarti of the Birmingham Talking Newspapers providing entertainment with parties and outings also being arranged. Mrs. Quigley retired in December 1983 and Joyce Wells (later Mrs. Large) was appointed as Officer in Charge. In the following year Dr. Starrett retired as Medical Officer and was succeeded by Dr. Desmond Murphy.

Under Mrs. Wells the physical and emotional well being of the residents improved greatly and the number of people in each room reduced to one or two. Plans were also submitted for new frail elderly accommodation to be built on the Harborne site.

To facilitate plans for sheltered housing during the 150th anniversary, the building was demolished a short time ago and its then current residents moved to a hotel next door which it is hoped BRIB will take over permanently, with the site being redeveloped and known as the Albert Weedall Centre.

## OAKWOOD

In 1968 a bungalow at 40 Woodville Road was acquired as lodgings for three blind people with particular difficulties. This accommodation was adequate for the purpose but soon the need for more accommodation for multi-handicapped people became evident. Increasingly parents of people attending the Elizabeth Gunn Centre saw the need for residential accommodation to meet the future demands of their children. So in 1971 consideration was given to the situation.

Plans were drawn up and submitted to the Housing Corporation by the newly formed BRIB Housing Society. Work began in November 1978 with the Bournville Housing Trust architects designing and supervising the work. On February 26th 1979 the then Lord Mayor of Birmingham laid the foundation stone using a trowel used for the same purpose at Carpenter Road in 1851. The 16 place hostel designed to wheelchair standards was opened in 1980. Mrs. Janet Allen, at that time Assistant Welfare Supervisor, was appointed officer in charge.

This pleasant building was tastefully decorated and finished thanks to the generosity of the Birmingham Hospital Saturday Fund, British Leyland Social Club and the parents/staff fund. Oakwood was handed over to the Trustees in April 1980 and the residents moved in the following July, with the official opening being carried out by the Baroness Fisher of Rednal.

This accommodation acquired the reputation of being a happy non-institutionalised environment and soon the demand for places required the drawing up of a waiting list. As the officer in charge did not live on the premises, the flat provided for that purpose was used as a training flat to assist residents to a more independent way of life.

Financially the first couple of years were difficult and hostel deficit grant was claimed from the Housing Corporation. However, with more adequate payments made for each resident by the Department of Health and Social Security the situation was soon remedied.

The local community began to take a great deal of interest in Oakwood and residents have over the years gained an active social life attending local churches and clubs.

During the 1980's a house in Oak Close nearby, one used by the officer in Charge, had been taken over to house three residents. Although unstaffed it was supervised by Oakwood staff on a regular basis but allowed tenants, who were taught to deal with all household accounts, to move towards an independent way of life.

Later on a 13 place extension was added. On the first floor 7 flatlets offer greater independence for residents and 6 rooms on the ground floor give additional accommodation for the more severely handicapped. Built through the Housing Corporation it enables Oakwood to provide a range of accommodation, giving residents the choice of independent living best suited to their needs.

## ELIZABETH GUNN CENTRE

On 10th April 1968, Colonel Sir Michael P Anse<sup>11</sup> opened a new single storey building in the grounds of BRIB to be known as The Elizabeth Gunn Centre. This was made possible by a substantial bequest under the will of Mrs. E. A. Gunn, after whom the centre was named. It was intended to house expanding services for the local blind adult population and was designed with the needs of the blind with additional handicaps in mind having ramps and double doors facilitating wheelchairs. At the time of its inauguration the centre was divided into three separate specific components. The Wireless Department, the Welfare Room and the Occupation Centre.

### Wireless Department (late Radio Services)

By 1968 the Institution was maintaining, without charge, something like 1,400 mains and battery wireless sets issued to blind people living in Birmingham, Oldbury, Smethwick and West Bromwich. The sets had been provided either by the Institution or by the British Wireless for the Blind fund. When the service first began in 1926, in the early days of wireless transmission, Mr. J. E. Livesey was appointed Radio Engineer and he was still working in this capacity when the centre opened, together with an assistant engineer, Mr. S. Margetts, who had been taken on in 1948. Mr. Livesey completed 50 years service with BRIB and retired in December 1970. Tragically Mr. Margetts died in January 1973, aged 58. Subsequently radios were repaired by the Government Training Centre at Handsworth and also by arrangements with outside contractors.

By 1980's the service moved to the new Resource Centre and was managed by Ralph Jones, who was also in charge of the Voluntary Visiting Service - thus

bringing together two community services. Volunteers play an active part in visits and the distribution of batteries and so on.

## Occupation Centre

The aim of this was to provide occupation for those for whom it would otherwise not be available - those blind with additional handicaps which would prevent them from obtaining the standard required for admission to a workshop for the blind.

The first Occupation Centre at BRIB dates from 1952 when it was established in a shed in the grounds at Harborne. It was used by two members who were occupied on wire-drawn brushes and seagrass seats.

During the early years of the 1960's there was a demand to extend the provision of Occupation Centres for the multi-handicapped blind to other areas of Birmingham and the West Midlands but nothing was accomplished. Thus by 1965 the centre at Harborne was full with 18 people and another 15 receiving occupation work in their own homes. Thus the bequest from Elizabeth Gunn went a long way in encouraging more people to find a place in the Occupation Centre. Welfare Room

The main purpose of this was to provide limited rehabilitation for those newly blinded adults who were unable to leave home to attend a residential rehabilitation centre or for those waiting for a place in one. Training given was designed to meet the specific requirements of each individual with braille, typing and to a lesser extent domestic training being the subjects covered. The Elizabeth Gunn Centre proved to be a great success. Blind people with mental and physical handicaps now had somewhere to go. In 1970 a centre members club was formed and called the Swann Club after Mr. C. Swann, the Employment Officer who had died in 1961. Parent/Staff meetings were established and met quarterly, forging a link between all the people concerned. At the same time Mr. Romney became parents representative and was invited to attend meetings of the Adult Welfare Committee.

The service was developing rapidly but so also was the demand for places. Because of rising costs, plans to build another centre in the north of Birmingham were postponed. Attention was then given to maximising the use of the existing centre so that in 1979 a room was converted to give additional space. Then in September 1980 two additional staff were appointed to meet the need of the

more severely handicapped people for basic social education, including numeracy and literacy. This was done by converting the large workroom into four smaller rooms having two development groups of more severely handicapped people, a teaching kitchen and office.

By the beginning of the 1990's it was realised that the Elizabeth Gunn Centre needed to be upgraded as a purpose built Day Centre for visually impaired adults with multiple disabilities and there was also an awareness among the Committee of the need for a Low Vision Centre for the West Midlands.

## LOW VISION CENTRE

A group of experts headed by Professor Fielder of the Birmingham Eye Hospital worked on the requirements for such a centre, the first of its kind in Britain.

The service began in January 1993 and in its first year over 1,000 people made use of it, many of them children. Because of this it was decided to make children a target group - one which has not always been well catered for - and this service now provides a data base of information for blind children.

In its second year nearly 2,000 people of all ages used the service and Low Vision continues to play a vital role on offering assessment and training for people with low vision, and in supplying a corresponding range of aids, advice and information.

## Mobile Information Service

The year 1993 saw Vision Services launching MAVIS, its new Mobile Advice Vehicle and Information Service which allows the department to reach out in to the Community to liaise with people who are unaware of the wide range of services BRIB can offer. In 1995 the mini bus was off the road due to a cutback in service.

In early 1996 the mobile service was relaunched, incorporating information in five Asian languages. The vehicle was renamed C.I.S. - Community Information Service, and is being used extensively across the city.

## Advice and Assessment

Vision Services also provides an Advice and Assessment Team which helps to rehabilitate blind and partially sighted people and to maximise their

independence. Qualified rehabilitation workers and the voluntary visiting service are part of this team, providing valuable expertise and care in the community.

## Resource Centre

There is also a Resource Centre which include showrooms, Information Services (Infoline), Hospital Information service, the production of information on tape, in Braille and Large Print. The Showroom is the most obvious and tangible element of Vision Services. In the shop is a wide variety of specialised, or just useful, items on display and for sale including watches and clocks, measures and scales, reading and writing devices, support and guide canes, electrical gadgets and games, medicine dispensers and personal alarms.

## Ethnic Minority Unit

One of Vision Services recent challenges is the formation of an Asian Sub-Committee to work with visually impaired people from that community and with the help of a visually impaired social worker from India. A recent project was undertaken into their required needs - a project under the control of Vision Services but based at the Cowley Centre in Erdington.

By 1993 under the direction of Surinda Shroff and with the support of the Asian Sub-Committee and staff at Cowley, the Asian project had achieved the following:-

- \* A transcription service which produces material in large print, translates English into five Asian languages (Bengali, Gujerati, Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi) and puts material onto audio tape

- \* 'Talking Eyes' - a one hour talking newspaper, produced monthly, and an audio tape service in five Asian languages in partnership with the Birmingham Library Service

- \*A satellite resource centre at Sparkbrook, together with another in Saltley working closely with the Health Service

In March 1996 the Asian Project became a part of the mainstream BRIB Services with the establishment of an Ethnic Minorities unit managed by Surinda Shroff.

## **Chairman**

### **Mr Edward W Steam**

Reading this history of Brib has shown me not only how Brib has developed over the last 150 years, but how it has changed to meet new demands and situations. The pace of change has quickened dramatically in recent years with new technology and attitudes to the provision of services in education, social services and leisure.

If Brib is to continue to have a role in the next century it also has to be able to change rapidly to meet the new situations which will develop, and its structures must be capable of adapting quickly.

I am very pleased that the Board of Governors has recently agreed in principle to a more flexible and less bureaucratic structure which will enable Queen Alexandra College and Vision Services to develop independently with their own resources and fields of operation whilst retaining mutual co-operation and 'family' links.

There is a long way to go before blind and partially sighted people have full access to all the things that sighted people take for granted. I am deeply concerned that their abilities are not given the recognition they deserve. We intend to continue to pioneer and improve services which will enable them to improve their quality of life and enable them to lead their lives to the maximum potential.

**The Birmingham Royal Institution for the Blind**  
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