

# History

The North Wales Society for the Blind was established in 1882; suffice to say much has changed during our 130+ years history!

The Society has a vast archive of newspaper articles which help illustrate the change in attitudes, technology, opportunity and services.

The work of cataloguing the history of the North Wales Society is a long and extremely rewarding process - we are looking for a volunteer with an interest in History to continue this important work, if you would be interested in working with us on this project please contact Steven on 01248 353604.

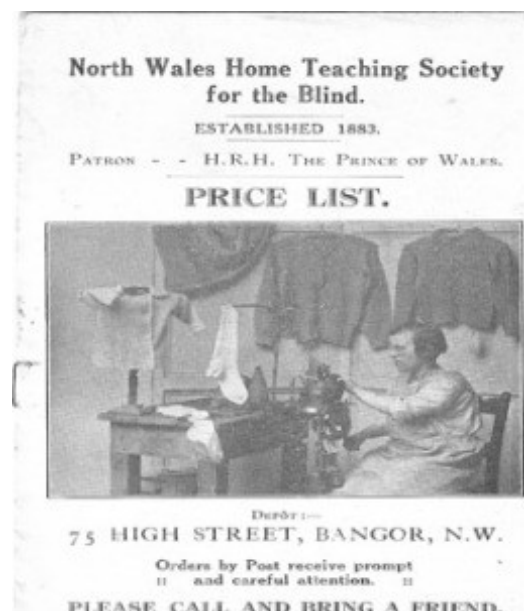
The Society's story begins on the 5th of January 1882 where a small group of volunteers lead by the presidency of the Bishop of Bangor came together in hope of "teaching the blind to read so that the monotony of their lives owing to blindness might be as much as possible relieved"

At this time there were 35 blind people in Caernarfon, 45 in Anglesey and Bangor.

During the meeting they resolved that a branch of the Home Teaching Society for the Blind be established in North Wales, and a 19 strong board of volunteers were set to task to formulate the Society.

They appointed the first paid employee, Mrs Catherine Ellis, who was paid the princely sum of £60 per year, Mrs Ellis was the first home teacher to work in the community. In the same year the Society transcribed the Psalms to Braille at an astonishing cost of £73 (more than a year's salary).

By 1895 a library of Braille books had been established with and 450 books had



North Wales Home Teaching Society for the Blind catalogue

been loaned during the year by 173 registered members.

## The First World War - post War work

The report of the annual general meeting held at Caernarfon on the 17th December 1914 opens with the words “we meet today under the shadow of a great war, and in time of much anxiety for all who are responsible for the safe conduct of any philanthropic society, for the necessities of the great national cause must naturally obscure those of lesser causes”.



Blind First World War veteran making brooms

Yet despite hardship the Society’s work grew, and by 1917 several men blinded in the war had been assisted to learn trades.

By 1920 the Society had recruited five home teachers and procured its first building at 75 High Street, Bangor.

In 1920 the Blind Persons Act was passed, and as a result blind people over 50 years of age were awarded a small annual pension.

In 1923 His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales consented to become the Patron of the Society, an honour bestowed upon the society until his ascension to the throne in 1936.

On Christmas day 1929 the then MP Winston Churchill made a wireless appeal for the Wireless for the Blind Fund. A list of would be recipients was completed by the Society in anticipation. As a result 500 new sets were added to the few that already existed. To this day the Society still administers the scheme on behalf of the Fund.

At the 50th Annual General Meeting the name of the charity was officially

changed to the North Wales Society For The Blind to reflect the changing demands on the work of the Society.

The first bus passes were issued by Crosville Motor services which granted 60 passes that allowed blind people to travel a radius of only 12 miles for a nominal fee. At this time there were 900 Blind people in North Wales.

## The second World War

Following the outbreak of the second world war in 1939 the Society's work grew to accommodate the care of those service personnel who had been blinded during the war, in 1944 there were 89 blind evacuees from the larger cities living in north Wales, each were supported by the Society.

In 1939 the Headquarters of the North Wales Society for the Blind was 204 High Street in Bangor. The following picture shows a very different shop front to what we are used to today! The society at this time focused on teaching skills such as cane work.



A newspaper cutting from July 1939 NWSB's shop front at 224 High Street, Bangor entitled "Problems of the Blind in Wales" illustrates the stark differences in the attitudes and culture of the time. The article describes the "home teacher for the blind" as the only way of "dealing with the blind" it describes part of their role as providing "food, coal and clothing" in urgent cases of hardship. The article speaks of the "unemployable blind" and notes that there were 1157 on the "Blind Persons register" at the time.

The North Wales Chronicle speaks of 25 blind evacuees who arrived in Bangor from Liverpool in the September of 1939, they were housed in Plas Menai Hostel in Bangor, and the article mentions the Society helping to provide Braille magazines and games.

At the time the Society was producing baskets, cane chairs, cribs, mats

brushes and all manner of other handicraft work - the proceeds of which were used to provide grants and services under the most difficult of times.

## The post-war years

By the early 1950s the focus had moved to providing social groups and gatherings of enablement and learning new we begin to hear about blind preachers, poets, harpists, musicians and builders. We begin to see signs of gardening classes, and a slow demise in the more traditional work as competition from larger retail stores begun to affect.

In 1962 we begin to see the emergence of the talking book service, with 53 members in North Wales receiving audio books. In 1963, the North Wales Society for the Blind was the first organisation to record Welsh talking books. A studio dedicated to recording books Welsh language books was created in Bangor.

A recipient of the first book described it as the greatest development for the blind since Louis Braille devised his system of writing. The first books to be recorded were “William Jones” and “O law I Law” by T Rowland Hughes, and Cysgod y Cryman by Islwyn Ffowc Ellis.

The popularity of the books are still relevant today. The work of the studio continues to produce Welsh talking books, newspapers and magazines, albeit on CD and MP3 as opposed to cassettes.

In 1969 the society moved to its current location in 325 High Street. In 1972 the society released its 100th issue of their weekly talking newspaper which was distributed to over 200 blind and partially sighted people.



1953 – children from the Sunshine Home visit Buckingham Palace on Geranium Day to HRH Princess Margaret, President of the homes

By 1974 we once again begin to see cultural changes, with the Cymro reporting on the story of Gareth Williams who was awarded a Law degree. Mr Williams completed his studies using Braille and audio cassette recordings of his lectures.

In 1975 we read the story of Brymor Williams, then a young man of 17, who upon his return from residential school decided to undertake a four mile sponsored swim across the length of Bala Lake. Although he swims very little nowadays, Brymor is still very much connected with the Society (he is the studio manager).

In 1977 we see the first push button phone with numbers arranged in rows as opposed to a dial. This landmark was heralded as a significant improvement.

In 1978 the first ever guide dog owner Mr Thomas ap Rees of Bangor sadly passed away, Mr ap Rees was a first world war veteran who was blinded during the War, He received the first ever guide dog in October 1931.



The first four guide dog owners