

Disabled Workers in the Potteries



A learning tool kit for key stages 3-4
Prepared by 104 projects CIC



PHOTOS: STOKES-ON-TRENT CITY ARCHIVES



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Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit has been predominantly designed for use by KS3 and KS4 teachers and those working in a youth work setting but should prove interesting reading to anybody with an interest in attitudes toward disabled people throughout history.

What will I find in the toolkit?

This toolkit provides a brief overview of the key themes explored by the Disabled Workers in the Potteries project, as well as accompanying curriculum-focused activities to complete with your group.



CURRICULUM LINKS

English

Pupils should be taught to:

- Write clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language and style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences
- Use discussion in order to learn; they should be able to elaborate and explain clearly their understanding and ideas
- Develop their competency in the arts of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debate

History

Pupils should be taught to:

- Understand how different types of historical sources are used rigorously to make historical claims and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed, for example photographs of disabled people.

Pupils should be taught about:

- Changes for Britain, Europe and the wider world from 1901 to the present day.
- Pupils should be taught about local history archive study.

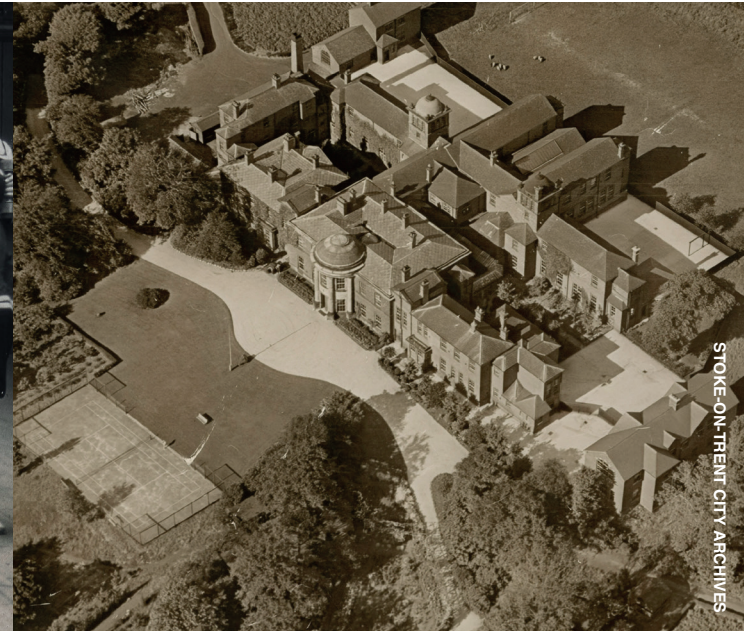
Suggested Dates

- International day of disabled people 3rd December.
- Disability history month 22nd November to 22nd December.

How should I use the toolkit?

In whichever way is most useful to you! The toolkit has been designed as a springboard from which to begin exploration of the history of disability, rather than a stand-alone resource. Feel free to use the suggested activities as they are or to expand upon or alter them.

INTRODUCTON TO THE PROJECT



Pot Dogs is a project delivered by 104 projects CIC about the history of disabled workers in the potteries, funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund. A group of disabled people from community group Project Indi in Stoke on Trent researched, devised and produced a documentary, oral histories and a website which can be found here: www.potdogs.com

They were facilitated by heritage and industry professionals and the project was supported by organisations such as Stoke Archives and Staffordshire Film Archives. On the website you can explore our documentary about the project and oral histories featuring disabled people talking about their experiences working for the Staffordshire Potteries throughout the years. The project is also commemorated with a permanent city centre information panel about the disabled workers in Hanley town centre.



Attitudes towards disabled people have changed greatly throughout the last century, influenced by events such as the First and Second World Wars and the forming of the National Health Service.



The lives of disabled workers is key to understanding the history of disabled people in the UK. The project involved interviewing surviving disabled workers and the group researching archive items such as school registers to understand what life was like for the Potteries' disabled workers.

DISABILITY IN HISTORY

It is difficult to examine history from a disabled perspective because disabled people's voices have often been marginalised by non-disabled people. Historically, many factors have contributed to this problem, such as the low social status of disabled people, lack of education for disabled people, lack of access to means of communication, dismissal of disabled people as worthless or lazy and even fear and mistrust of disabled people. This was the predominant attitude towards disabled people in the pre-world war one years when Josiah Spode established the Mount School for the Blind and Deaf in Stoke on Trent. He and other philanthropists of the Edwardian Era such as Millicent Gower, Duchess of Sutherland were forward-thinking and viewed disabled people as having an important place in society.

As a result of this marginalisation there are few first-hand sources from disabled people. The group from Project Indi said they sometimes found it difficult to engage with the heritage of disabled workers in the Potteries and the history of disabled people in general because they found that most sources referencing disability were authored by non-disabled voices, for example medical professionals.

The concept of this project was for a group of disabled people to research the history of the disabled workers and "Read between the lines" using archive items such as film, school records, medical records, photographs and certificates to create a picture of worker's lives.





THE MOUNT SCHOOL

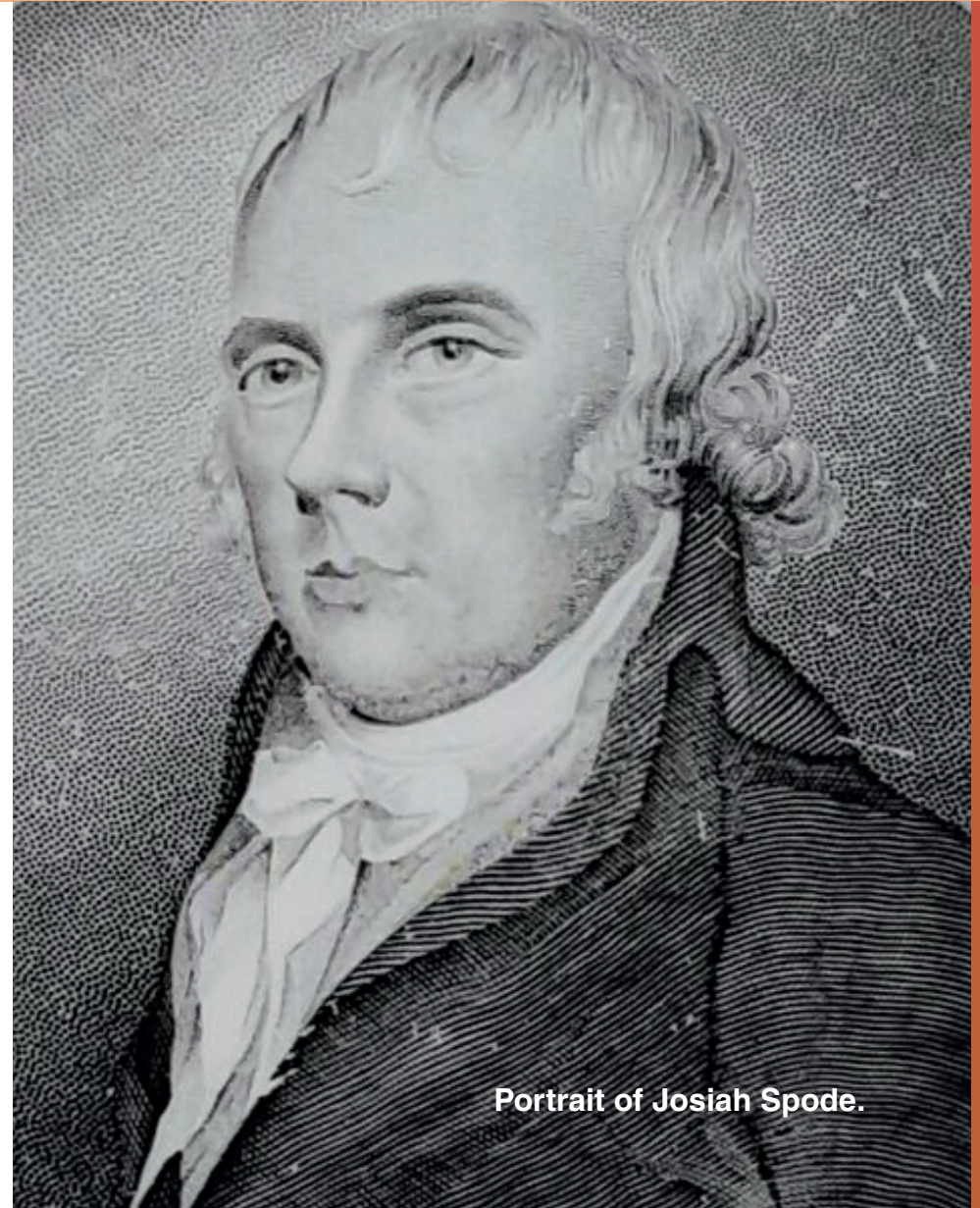
The Mount School for the Blind and Deaf was situated in Penkhull in Stoke-on-Trent. It opened in 1897 and was run by the North Staffordshire Joint School Authority. Its catchment area was wider than just the immediate city, taking pupils from all over Staffordshire and sometimes neighbouring counties. The school was an all-age school, catering for children from the age of 5

up until the age of 16. A nursery school was also later added. In 1949, the school stopped the intake of blind children, who were transferred to Birmingham. It continued to provide education for the deaf until 2000, when the city council decided to close the school and merge the remaining pupils into mainstream education.

BACKGROUND TO DISABLED WORKERS

KEY FACTS

- 1868. North Staffordshire Deaf and Dumb Society is established in 1868 at Hope Street in Hanley by Charles Davies.
- 1891. The Workshops for the Blind were established by a group of local philanthropists in Fenton to provide skills and employment for local visually impaired people.
- 1897. The Mount School for the Blind and Deaf was established in Penkhull, Solihull by Josiah Spode. The aim was to educate blind and deaf children.
- 1898. Millicent Gower, Duchess of Sutherland sets up a guild for disabled workers, which quickly grows into a successful business.
- 1933. It is reported that in North Staffordshire there were 280 deaf and dumb workers of whom 172 were in the Stoke area.
- 1939. Two Deaf footballers from The Mount School are part of the GB football team at the Berlin Olympics, which wins!



Portrait of Josiah Spode.

Portrait of
The Duchess of Sutherland (1904)
by John Singer Sargent.



What can you find out about Stoke's Disabled workers online?

- Where did the Duchess of Sutherland first base her guild workshop?
- Who was Tom Millington?
- What is the North Staffordshire Deaf and Dumb Society called now?
- What is the Mount School now?





Questions

- What ideas did people have about caring for disabled people in the past?
- What is the response to this if you have disabled students in the class?
- How does this contrast with the present?
- How have attitudes changed?
- Why are there so few disabled voices in history?

EXERCISE
What was it like
being disabled
in 1907?





Photographs

- Many photographs were staged for various reasons, usually it was to help persuade an audience of philanthropists to part with donations – discuss with students how these have been staged?
- Why have they been staged?
- Were they staged because of technology or something else?
- Here are a few examples of staged photographs.





LIFE FOR DISABLED WORKERS

Disabled workers in the potteries were seen as being equal to other workers and employers such as the Duchess of Sutherland and Josiah Spode treated them as such. Sadly there was not equal pay and conditions for all and many Deaf workers were paid less than their hearing counterparts.

Joseph Ellis, was the Superintendent of The North Staffordshire Deaf and Dumb Society. His efforts to gain employment for its Deaf members led to a large amount of Deaf people gaining employment in the potteries.

Ellis also created a special church for a Deaf congregation, with a slanting floor, so that it was possible to see the vicar deliver sermons in sign language.

Pupils at the Mount School were referred by medical professionals such as doctors. Often those who referred them believed that their city environment in Stoke was detrimental to their health. At this time, cities were very unhealthy places to live prior to the clean air act of 1956.



It was the belief that clean air was key to improving health. It was also seen as beneficial to get away from the noisy, polluted and diseased environments of inner-city slums. When the first students were brought to The Mount School they were also taught skills and handicrafts in order to equip them with a trade for later in life.

Write a letter home as though you were a student at Mount School:

- Think about the lessons conducted outdoors – how cold it must have been in winter?
- Think about what skills you might learn – perhaps metal work or how to make pottery plates?
- How does it feel being among other deaf people maybe for the first time in your life and learning how to communicate through sign language?
- Think about how different the green fields around the Mount School are compared to the grimy, polluted city of Stoke on Trent and what you see on your journey home.

DEAF WORKERS REMEMBERED

Local Historian Mervyn Edwards writes:



“Local charity dDeaflinks has its origins in the North Staffordshire Deaf and Dumb Society, an antiquated name, which could now be regarded as offensive. Many older people from local Deaf organisation dDeaflinks can remember attending The Mount School, which catered for Deaf, as well as blind people.

North Staffordshire Deaf and Dumb Society was established in 1868 at Hope Street in Hanley by Charles Davies and was originally funded by philanthropy from the surrounding businessmen of the potteries. Due to industrialisation and the noise of heavy industry, many people had acquired deafness and the local industries felt a responsibility to take care of Deaf people and provide help for them.

What had been referred to as “a dirty, ill-lighted schoolroom in the old Hope Schools at Hanley” was renovated when the society opened its new Church and Institute for the Adult Deaf of the district in a large, rented room that had formerly belonged to the Victoria Pottery in Victoria Square, Shelton.

The premises was divided into two parts. One section was intended for religious/ spiritual activities and the other for social/ educational activities such as lectures and recreation.

The society also aimed to help deaf people into employment, hence much is made in old press reports of the society’s “industrial record.” By 1917, some of the society’s people had remained in the same job for 20-30 years, so it already had a track record. The committee’s aim was to enable the deaf to become and remain good, working, spiritually-strong citizens and to that end they were provided with an organiser, who acted as a guide, counsellor and friend.

Mrs. Wedgwood said that they could not give the dumb power to speak, but they could give them power to understand what was being said. There were at the time, 30,000 deaf people in the UK, with 300 in North Staffordshire.



The church section of the headquarters was used like any other church, with Sunday services and harvest festivals being held there. Local preachers gave sermons, which were interpreted in the deaf and dumb language – often by a gentleman called Joseph Ellis, usually described as the Superintendent and Missioner of the institute.

What were the prospects for deaf young people who had just left school in the early 1930s? One society official explained perfectly well, in holding that the totally deaf, once their schooldays were over, received nothing from public funds. Many had other disabilities but did their best in these adverse circumstances to be self-supporting.

This is where Ellis came in. He was a pivotal figure in the development of the society. Ellis worked full-time as Missioner and Welfare Worker and it was his job to find work for the deaf and then to promote their good behaviour – and the fairness of their bosses – once they

were in employment. In 1933 it was reported that in North Staffordshire there were about 280 deaf and dumb workers of whom 172 were in the Stoke area. Of these, only 12 were out of work, which underlines the society's progress.

It took a lot of effort on Ellis's part. He was regularly present at the church but received numerous calls for help, also making sick calls and other visits – as did his wife. He made hundreds of approaches to companies on behalf of the deaf people and for similar reasons, visited the local labour exchanges. He was astonishingly successful in securing work for a huge percentage of deaf people, though some were forced to accept an inferior wage on account of their deafness, despite their ability to do the jobs.

With the premises in Victoria Square becoming increasingly inadequate, it was decided to look around for a new site and in 1935, Stoke Council agreed to sell a site in Wellesley St, Shelton at a nominal cost.



By 1936, the prospects for deaf children were at least a little better. There were both provided and non-provided schools for the deaf, funded by Government grants. Local Education Authorities were required to find instruction for children between the ages of 7-16. That said, after leaving school, these children were still out on a limb, having to find employment despite being handicapped or having to be kept by their parents or else apply to the Poor Law – hence Ellis’s efforts on their behalf.

The society had only previously rented premises but its new home of their own – the Church and Institute for the Deaf in Wellesley Street, Shelton - opened in November, 1936.

With a base that properly served its purposes, the society went from strength to strength, as is revealed by newspaper reports of its annual meetings. The dDeaflinks website tells us that the centre was the chief source of support for members, helping them with housing and legal matters, etc.

Ellis and his wife continued to pull out all the stops to ensure that deaf people found employment. Many were able to communicate with their bosses by lip-reading, and it is interesting to note that in 1938, the society remarked that the so-called “oral method” led to far better communication between the deaf and normal people than signing and hand-spelling had achieved. It also improved deaf people mentally.

The centre’s spiritual work progressed as well as the social side, with 40 deaf people attending a holiday camp in the Isle of Man. The centre had also installed a radio gramophone - and some members had learned to dance!

Ellis was from Huddersfield, Yorkshire. He’d already done work with the deaf and dumb in Dewsbury from around 1928 before coming here in 1932, making a huge contribution and ultimately served the society for 45 years, according to dDeaflinks.

He became Chairman of the National Deaf Welfare Board as well as the National Institute for the Deaf Industrial and Social Welfare Committee. He was awarded the MBE in 1958. The Institute in Shelton was renamed the Ellis Memorial Centre for the Deaf in 1976.

Within living memory, the efforts of local figures like Jack Ashley and actress Rachel Shenton have helped us to understand the challenges that deaf people face – but the wisdom of all those people who since the 1830s have highlighted deaf issues in North Staffordshire can, I think, best be summed up by the words of the Ellis Centre's Principal Ken Scarratt, who spoke to The Sentinel in 1979. He offered:

“Only the deaf themselves can tell of the severity of their handicap, its invisibility, its effect on relationships and its awesome capacity for creating misunderstandings.

Deafness affects so many important aspects of a person's life that his whole ethos can be changed. It's not a killer disease, but it can destroy. A deaf person finds almost insurmountable obstacles not only in communicating with his fellow men, but in acquiring an education and getting a job to fit his abilities.”

This article first appeared in The Sentinel newspaper on April 13th 2024.





TERMINOLOGY

Tips on dealing with potential discrimination in the classroom

Terms now regarded as derogatory, for example cripple and spastic were in common usage throughout the 20th century.

The model used is one of inclusion and celebration, however, for some people the concept of disability can at times generate negative reactions. Attitudes towards difference can vary greatly from trying to understand and being inquisitive (sometimes perceived as intrusive) to prejudice and discrimination.

Ignorance leads to some common misconceptions and discriminatory behaviour including:

- Being patronised (the “does he take sugar” syndrome)
- Confusion and cynicism about what is disability?
- Outing; not respecting trust, privacy, or confidentiality of those with non-visible disabilities
- Harassment, bullying, verbal and physical abuse.



TRAINING

Training is essential to equip staff with the necessary skills to successfully challenge discrimination and prejudice. This is a great opportunity to develop your students/ learners ability to express themselves in a respectful way and elicit the difference between:

- An insult and an opinion.
- What they are saying and the impact it has on others.
- The difference between religion and religious interpretation.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Words and disability

Define 20 different nouns defining disability

**Perhaps suggest some nouns to get teachers going?*

Lesson content

- Pre-teach some of the vocabulary you think your students might find difficult
- Divide the class in to small groups (3 or 4)
- Cut up words and definitions from appendix 1 into cards
- Make 2 piles one for words and one for their definitions
- Get students to match the words with their corresponding definition

You could start the activity by getting students to order the words in to alphabetical order and think about their meaning.

The words could be put up on the wall and the students go around placing the Definition cards next to their corresponding words. This could be turned into a competition between groups

Early completers can check what the other groups have done and you can ask each group to present their cards to the other groups.

Duration

30 to 45 minutes

Resources

Cut up cards, pens.





FIND OUT MORE AND BE A RESEARCHER



What can you find out about The Potteries' disabled workers or the history of disabled people in the UK?

Here are some online resources you may want to research yourself:

The Stoke Archives Staffordshire Past Track Website contains films, books and items related to the Mount School, dDeaflinks and The Workshops for the Blind: <https://www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/search.aspx?SearchType=3>

To get you started in your research, try searching for:

- Deaf
- Mount school
- Millicent Gower
- Disability
- Blind

Also try searching Staffordshire Film Archives: <https://www.filmarchive.org.uk/>
The archive contains films on subjects such as:

- A film on the Duchess of Sutherland's Cripples Guild
- Living Again – a film made in 1958 on reasonable adjustments for Stoke's disabled community.
- Compilations of workers and processes in the potteries' factories.

Other resources include the Minten Archive <https://www.themintonarchive.org.uk/>
and the personal website of local historian Mervyn Edwards: <http://www.merver.co.uk/>

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