

Start Thinking about Disability History

By Esther Gill, Accentuate Heritage Project Manager

This was originally written for the Heritage Open Days blog and reflects my belief that one of the best ways to ensure that heritage is inclusive, is to ensure that it encompasses the histories and experiences of us all.

For many disabled people, the everyday experiences of their historical peers are rarely reflected in the stories that are told through local museums, heritage sites and events such as Heritage Open Days. In the past, and still today, disabled and deaf people were often educated separately at special schools and sometimes worked and spent their leisure time outside the mainstream. Their stories are not illuminated in our histories and generally remain hidden. I think that Heritage Open Days offers an exciting opportunity to change this, exploring an area of history that is not well known, linking with new audiences, and creating new events.

I have become far more aware of this since taking on the coordination of a disability history project in West Sussex called [Speaking Up for Disability](#). Researching the background to the project and talking with local disabled people, I have come to see that the rich, but sometimes parallel lives that many disabled people have lived in the past, with distinctive patterns, places and cultures, are too often not represented in our local history.

So, as a change to my usual focus on the process of developing access in Heritage Open Days programmes, I thought that I would use this blog to highlight a few interesting projects that I have come across. They interest me and may interest you, but also give food for thought as to how we might integrate more disability history into our Heritage Open Days events.



History in the making: the 2011 campaign against cuts to disability benefits.
Courtesy of Barry Pickthall/PPL

I would love to know what you are already doing, and also what other projects or heritage sites I should be including in a list such as the one below.

The Mandeville Legacy: This project is exploring Stoke Mandeville’s legacy as the birthplace of the Paralympic Movement – obviously very timely in 2012! The website is really worth a look. It has brought together a lot of fascinating photos, including the first wheelchair competitive sports event in 1923. This project made me wonder what potential there is to explore disability sports in our regions.

Reclaiming the Past: This project explored the history of six Mencap societies in East Anglia, and their role in developing community care for people with learning difficulties. The project identified written materials and artefacts that were not publically available, and a huge enthusiasm from within the group to record their history. They created an actual exhibition, but I particularly like the fact that the website recreates this in virtual form so that you can look at the individual cabinets of exhibits.

Re-framing Disability: A significant project exploring the Royal College of Physicians collection of historic portraits of disabled people and the stories behind them. The project brought together 27 disabled people who had their own photographic portraits taken and

reflected on the historical and current experiences of disabled people. There is an interesting film available online. The exhibition is currently on show at the University of Leicester, but will also be touring in 2012.

Our Statures Touch the Skies: A very readable blog by Tom Shakespeare, presenting short biographies of famous disabled people. It may be worth checking whether any of them have lived or worked in your area.



Disability History Month: Following on the path created by [Black History Month](#), the UK now has its own Disability History Month, which ran from 22nd November to 22nd December 2011. There may well be potential for events that ran as part of this month to be replicated for Heritage Open Days, perhaps reaching a different audience.

And coming later in 2012, English Heritage will be publishing its web resources and research into historic buildings that have played a key part in the story of disability. These will include institutions from the medieval period to the 19th century asylums, the impact of inclusive design and buildings that relate to the disability rights movement or key disabled figures.