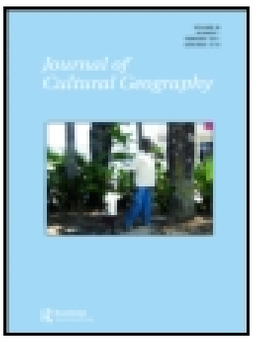

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Creating a Deaf place: the development of the Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Poor Children in the early nineteenth century

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ABSTRACT

By tracing the beginnings of the Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Poor Children, this article describes the first Deaf place in England. It argues that early Deaf places, like the Asylum, function as incubators necessary for the growth of Deaf culture. From its founding through its first move to a purpose-built campus, the central stakeholders – the founders, financiers, headmaster, teachers, and students – not only performed their roles but also succeeded in creating a place for Deaf people to come together and use sign language in large numbers. Even so, the Asylum was a divided place; poor children had a very different experience than their wealthy counterparts. Reconstructing the origins, policies, and evolving practices of the Asylum helps to understand the treatment of Deaf people, the value of Deaf places for this often-marginalized minority group, and the development of institutional landscapes for the Deaf.

KEYWORDS Deaf space; Deaf history; Deaf geography; Deaf culture; Deaf schools; England

Introduction

The founding, success, and spread of a separate education system for deaf people in Britain represents a profound change in the lives of deaf people, and as such, cannot be overemphasized. The sign language(s) that were and are fostered in these schools may be considered the embodied performance of this group's identification without which there is no group, only individuals whose auditory sense does not function. With sign language, Deaf people form social units based on shared values and experiences. This makes schools for the deaf critical for the nurturing of Deaf culture.

Deaf culture may be described as being "one generation thick". Most Deaf people are born to hearing families, so they need to find a pathway to a "Deaf community". This experience is both metaphoric and physical. As understood today, Deaf communities primarily occupy minority spaces overlaid upon the physical and hegemonic cultural landscape, though there are exceptions. Such

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exceptions function as significant landmarks on the Deaf landscape, and include Deaf social clubs, Deaf churches, and schools for the deaf. These spaces where Deaf identities, both individual and group, emerge and flourish serve as the material manifestations and the places of Deaf culture. The first of these to become established were residential schools for the Deaf. These residential schools are especially fascinating places to study, but, more importantly, they are crucial to Deaf education and community formation. The fluid populations of these schools served as incubators, generating alumni with a Deaf identity who then take this into the wider world. Based on the important social networks that they first formed within the schools' walls, this affiliative sense of identity grows.

Schools also serve as locations for the development of sign language. Studying sign linguistics, Baker (2016, p. 1) wrote, "Where there is a Deaf community, a sign language emerges." A persistent and common misconception among people who have not had interaction with deaf people is that sign language is universal. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sign languages are natural, visual–spatial languages that are developed by deaf people where ever and whenever they live in proximity to one another over time. Sign languages are also independent of the spoken or oral–aural languages that surround them. They have their own grammar and lexicon. Sign language was used at the Asylum, the place described in this paper, by its teachers and pupils. In fact, many children arrived already having a sign language. Unfortunately, little has been recorded about that language (or languages)[1] at the time.

This article focuses on the beginnings of the first known Deaf place in England. For more than 220 years, one particular residential school provided opportunities to deaf children who came from families that could not afford private tutelage, and it also served as a training ground for teachers of the Deaf and Deaf teachers. Today, it is called the John Townsend Trust's Royal School for Deaf Children at Margate, but in its early years it was known as The Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Poor Children. And though it ended up in Margate, Kent, the Asylum's first location was in Bermondsey, the south London parish of its founders, Rev. John Townsend and Rev. Henry C. Mason. The institution would move twice over its lifetime, the first in 1809 to a new purpose-built space less than a mile away in Old Kent Road, St George's, Southwark, and later in the nineteenth century to its final location in the fresh air of the coast at Margate, Kent.

A Deaf place

The beginnings of British Deaf education were, unsurprisingly, steeped in class. At the Asylum, the first headmaster's terms of employment had a profound impact on the day-to-day organization and operations of the school.

Children in attendance were not treated alike. The charity students had a very different experience from the privately tutored, wealthy "paylist" students. The charity ran both the school and a vocational manufactory. Most of the charity pupils' time was divided between these. This reflected both the social mores and child labor practices of the period. The separation of the wealthy from the poor students made possible a Deaf place, where deaf people's interactions were made manifest via their embodied visual sign language.

> This means that deaf places, the knowledges that produce them (and the knowledges that are produced within them) have developed over time in ways that make them profoundly different in nature and priority from those of hearing people. (Gulliver 2008, p. 91)

Ordinarily, deaf people share the same physical spaces as the world of their hearing counterparts, but they are often excluded from the sorts of interactions that occur in that hearing environment (Gulliver 2008). At places like the Asylum, unrelated deaf people, both pupils and teachers, were brought together in sufficient numbers for the first time. Together, they created a place that where day-to-day life was conducted in the sign language. Additionally, deaf children had the opportunity to meet others like themselves. Padden (2005, p. 510) saw this type of "recognition by mirror" as holding the possibility of elation for young deaf people, as they were being surrounded for the first time in their lives by real-life versions of the self, in deaf teachers and fellow deaf students. As such,

> … [S]chools became the central loci for the deaf community, places through which almost all deaf children would eventually pass, in which deaf people could guarantee to meet each other, interact visually, and pass language and shared knowledge from generation to generation. The network of deaf places gradually became populated by its own culture, folklore, legends, politics, philosophies and priorities for wellbeing – a deaf world, created by deaf people with little connection to the hearing world around it. (Gulliver 2008, p. 92)

Research regarding the Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Poor Children, especially its early years, presented interesting challenges. Fortunately, the early official records, the Royal School for Deaf Children's Committee Meeting Books still remain. However, at the time the research for this paper was conducted, administrative barriers within the John Townsend Trust meant that gaining access to them was limited to the head office staff's generosity. Secondary sources of the Asylum's early period, including the founder's memoirs, the first headmaster's publications related to teaching, and contemporary print sources were used to construct an imperfect picture of the school and its pupils; imperfect because testimony from the deaf students or deaf teaching staff remains unavailable. Later, secondary sources were also consulted since returning to the school at Margate was problematic, both logistically for the school's head office and financially for the researcher.

The historical sources presented here were all written by hearing people. And no matter how benevolent the writer, the direct experience or viewpoints of those deaf people who were there remain hidden from view. British Deaf periodicals specifically targeting a Deaf readership did not begin until 1843 (Lyson 1965, Appendix 1).[2]

Founding the Asylum

Until 1792, poor British deaf children had no chance for an education. The only school serving the needs of poor children in all of Europe was Abbé de l'Epée's institute in Paris established in 1760. In Britain, prior to the founding of the Asylum, private establishments for well-to-do students operated in both Edinburgh and London. In 1760, Thomas Braidwood opened the first school for the deaf in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was a small private academy where he developed the "Braidwood Combined System", a method for teaching speech to the deaf children of families who could afford the fees. Braidwood's academies were run on a for-profit basis, so the teaching methods he and his family members used were closely guarded secrets. In 1783, Thomas Braidwood's academy[3] moved to Grove House, Mare Street, Hackney (Beaver 1992). The Braidwood family would maintain proprietary interest in Deaf education both in London and Edinburgh during the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Their closely guarded teaching methods were not revealed until after Braidwood's death in 1809, when Joseph Watson (1765–1829), Braidwood's nephew and the Asylum's first teacher and headmaster, published on the subject.

The Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Poor Children's founding Committee was composed of a small group of dedicated members, led by the Rev. John Townsend, a minister at the Jamaica Row Congregation Church in Bermondsey (Beaver 1992). Townsend was approached by a Mrs. Creasy, a parishioner whose deaf son had attended a small academy run by the Braidwood family in Hackney. Mrs. Creasy wondered if something might be done for the indigent deaf children locally. Impressed with young John Creasy's abilities, Townsend sought the assistance of Henry Thornton, a philanthropist, and asked his friend, the Rector in Bermondsey, Henry C. Mason, for help (Hawker 1805; Hodgson 1953). Together, the four moved quickly to form a society with the goal of founding an institution dedicated to serving the poor deaf children in the area. Within six months, this industrious group had raised the necessary money to rent and organize the space for the asylum's first location at Fort Place, Grange Road, Bermondsey, hired a headmaster, Joseph Watson, and had also accepted the Asylum's first six pupils. From its quick start, this innovative institution grew rapidly. It attracted aristocratic patronage and many more applicants than the organizers anticipated.

The first historian of the Asylum, Robert Hawker, compared the Asylum with other charitable institutions, claiming that its goals were "of an infinitely higher nature, than the mere softening, or removing, *temporary* distress" (Hawker 1805, p. 4; emphasis in original). More specifically,

> Her aims are directed to bring forward, into the various departments of active and useful life, a class of beings, hitherto thrown into the back ground [*sic*] of society, and left to wander in a state of solitary dejection; at once useless in themselves, burthensome to their friends, and, not infrequently, mischievous to others. (Hawker 1805, p. 4)

The first location: Fort Place, Grange Road

The Asylum opened in its first location, Fort Place, in November, 1792. Rented for fifty pounds a year, Fort Place was a large house on the south side of the Thames, a short distance from Tower Bridge. Though they were also able to purchase the contents of the house, the Committee spent additional money on refurbishments to suit the needs of a school (Beaver 1992). The founders' successful fundraising publicity campaign also brought in more applications than they anticipated, so the location was expanded over the following months to accommodate the unexpected numbers. According to Beaver (1992) by its second year, 20 children were enrolled. Over time, the facilities struggled to keep up with the number of students admitted to the school. In 1800, Fort Place was enlarged to accommodate more children and the Manufactory, a small factory of four rooms, was built nearby (Royal School for Deaf Children, hereafter RSDC, 25 June 1806; Beaver 1992). In 1802, past capacity once more with forty-three students, additional space was required, so two rooms were rented in a house in Bermondsey Square for the accommodation of sick children (Beaver 1992).

By 1806, the Asylum was caring for some 60 children and every 6 months twice that number applied to the Committee for the half dozen or so available places. The Fort Place facilities had been in a state of almost continual expansion for fourteen years, but the property could be developed no further. By June of that year, the Committee began the necessary groundwork of moving the asylum to a larger facility, but that took time (RSDC, 25 June 1806; Beaver 1992). In 1807, with overcrowding worsening, the Committee gave the headmaster permission to rent additional rooms over the road in which to house some of the boys (RSDC, 9 Feb 1807).

The student experience: a divided place

Joseph Watson's contract would have a profound impact on the long-term, day-to-day activities of the Asylum. According to the agreement, Watson as "the master" was compensated on a per student basis with the responsibility

for educating the children, finding them proper food and washing, and for procuring all the necessary school supplies: books, pens, paper, ink, and the like. The estimated cost per student at the time was £21 10s (Hodgson 1953). With the allotted money, Watson was expected to meet the all the students' needs, including his own salary. The Committee only covered the cost of lodging the children. Because the charity was initially so modest in size, the Committee agreed that Watson could take on private students too. As the asylum grew, Watson continued to accept these "pay list" or "parlour" pupils (Beaver 1992, p. 43). This effectively divided the deaf children's experiences at the Asylum between the charity students, who lived within the Asylum and the private pupils, who were from "good homes" and were not, of course, permitted to mix with the charity children. The parlor students lived and were taught in Watson's private quarters at a cost to the parents of £3.00 per week per child (Beaver 1992). [4]

The Braidwood combined method was developed for teaching speech. Watson's (1809) treatise on the subject explains the method in detail. He also provides the daily schedule for the articulation classes he taught his parlor pupils:

> In order to raise a voice, or that material of which speech is formed, let the vowels be practised in a natural key, but with firmness and strength, for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, at least, every morning. Then let the powers of the consonants be formed, in their order, singly, and variously combined with the vowels. (Watson 1809, pp. 27–28)

Students were then given a break, after which "an imaginary conversation" took place for anywhere between 20 minutes and an hour. The conversation would occur with servants, "equals in age and rank", sometimes with elders, or "those considered as superior in consequence and rank in society" (Watson 1809, p. 29). If the student and teacher could not think of a good imaginary conversation, the time was spent reading aloud. From this, a lesson would develop. This pattern was repeated two or three times more over the course of the day (Watson 1809). Watson used this method to keep his pupils' interest throughout the day, and for this, his students were considered to have "good teaching" (Hodgson 1953, p. 161). Watson also developed lists to help in teaching vocabulary. These were published in 1858 as a 490-page volume, *An Illustrated Vocabulary for the Use of the Deaf and Dumb.* Divided into two parts, the first section of the book was an alphabetically ordered vocabulary list that included a number of images on each page (see Figure 1). The second part contained illustrations of trades and the tools used by the tradespeople (see Figure 2).

In contrast, the experience of the Asylum's charity children was considerably different than that of the parlor pupils. From the start, applicants had to compete for limited places at the Asylum. They were subjected to a public

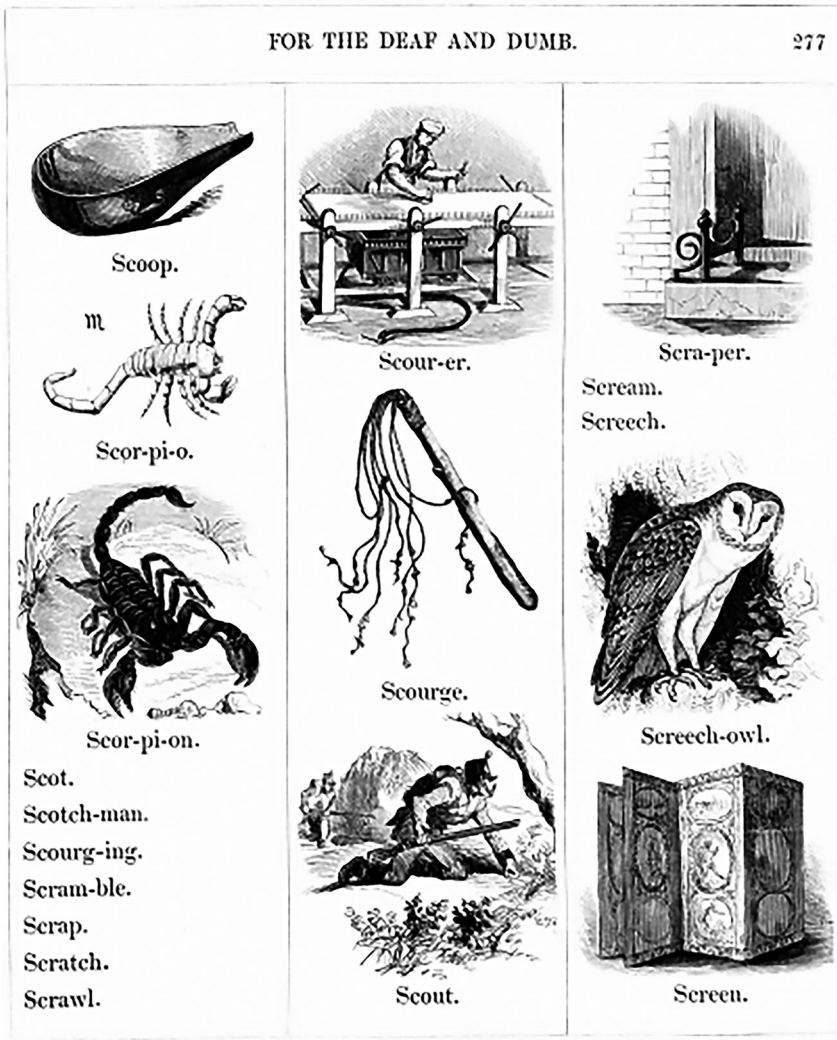

Figure 1. Sample vocabulary page from Watson's teaching aid, *An Illustrated Vocabulary for Use of the deaf and dumb*. Note each word is broken down by syllable to help aid in pronunciation (Source: Watson 1858, p. 277).

election process, by which the Society's donors voted for their candidates of choice. The candidates were described as follows:

> Certainly the children admitted to the first asylums were those most in need. Deaf-and-dumb children who could manage by self-teaching alone through their eyes to make themselves useful and a source of income to their parents did not often find their way into the asylums. The children who were pushed in were the ones useless to their families, the backwards and the troublesome,

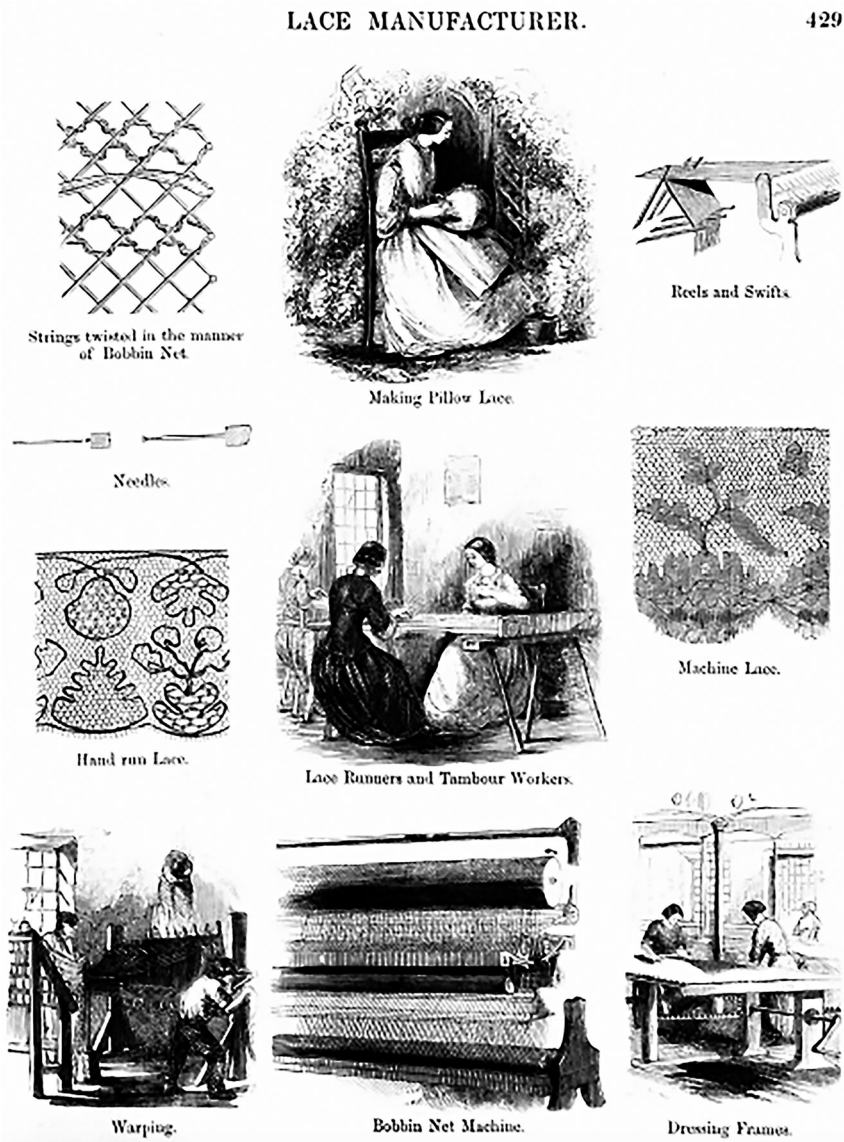

Figure 2. Sample trades page from Watson's teaching aid, *An Illustrated Vocabulary for Use of the deaf and dumb*. Note lacemaking is demonstrated in a number of contexts and the tools needed are also provided (Source: Watson 1858, p. 429).

> just the poor little wretches to provoke barbaric jokes and kicks and blows. The first asylums found themselves the dumping grounds for the most hopeless, most helpless, and revolting little scraps of humanity to be found anywhere. (Hodgson 1953, p. 159)

Only children between the ages of 9 and 14 were permitted to apply. The waiting lists were often so long, that some children passed the upper age limit before a place could be found for them. In these circumstances, the Committee would sometimes waive the maximum age restriction, but this required a supporting vote from the Asylum's sponsors in another publically held election. In addition to indigent children, the Asylum also accepted youngsters whose families couldn't afford a private education, but could contribute towards the cost of keeping their child. The charges for these students were based on the parents' abilities to pay, always one quarter in advance (RSDC, 23 June 1806). A viable candidate had to be "Deaf and Dumb", have already had smallpox or been vaccinated for the disease, and had to be of sufficient intellect. Indeed, the Asylum was proud of its track record in sorting the intellectual abilities of its candidates. Hawker describes this success, reporting that over a 13-year period 106 children had attended the Asylum and of these "only six have been found of totally destitute of intellect, as to be beyond the reach of the exertions of this charity" (Hawker 1805, p. 15).

The Committee made it clear that the children needed to be in good health before they could be admitted. Interestingly, unlike at the Paris school, the charity children were not subjected to medical experimentation. The Committee had a clear sense that this was not a part of the institution's goals. Their assertion was that the children who were candidates for the Asylum would have been previously been diagnosed or treated and that the Asylum's role was "to mitigate their affliction, and, as much as possible, assist their defects" (Beaver 1992, p. 39).

Each accepted candidate required two "Friends", or sponsors, who assumed the responsibility for the child's wardrobe. When considered in the context of the "little scraps" origins, these wardrobes were quite elaborate. Each boy came to the Asylum with six shirts, six stockings, two hats, two pairs of shoes, two suits of clothes, six handkerchiefs, and three night caps. Girls were more elaborately outfitted with six shifts (slips), two pairs of gloves, six pairs of stockings, two flannel petticoats, one cloak, one stiff petticoat, one hat, two white petticoats, two pairs of slippers, four night caps, three dark colored frocks, and two pockets. All the children's kit included two combs and a box with a lock and key (Beaver 1992, pp. 39–40).

From the outset, the Committee had clear ideas for the ordering of the pupil's lives. In one of their early meetings they formulated the school rules, parental access to their children, and the holiday schedule. Unsurprisingly for a Committee formed by clergymen, the school rules focused on the spiritual lives of the children. The rules were: "[t]hat a form of Prayer and portion of Scripture be read every morning and in the evening in the School" and "[t]hat the Children do attend public worship twice on the Lord's Day" (RSDC, Oct 1792). Parents were not permitted to visit the children on Sundays and if parents had any complaints to make about "the

custom and mode of treatment at the school", they needed to make them to the Committee, not the Headmaster. And finally, by today's standards, the holidays were meager. Initially, the children were permitted home for a fortnight at Christmas only (RSDC, Oct 1792). Later, the Committee expanded this to include an additional two weeks at midsummer (RSDC, 13 June 1796).

The school curriculum followed a seven-day schedule and divided class time into three sessions across the day. Sundays were dedicated to the study of Scripture, including the Commandments; attending church services twice, in the late morning and afternoon; and participating in religious exercises. The Sunday afternoon session also included an explanation of the Prayer Book via signs. The weekdays also followed a regular routine. Morning sessions included exercises in composition, the conjugation of verbs, and the study of divisions of time. In the forenoon period the class moved on to scripture, history, and geography. They studied vocabulary and colloquial phrases, and practiced writing copies. There were exercises in drawing and dictation by signs. In the afternoon, students tackled arithmetic, including arithmetic tables and practiced mental calculations. Saturday's forenoon session was given over entirely to faith-based study – scripture, catechism, and religious exercises. Students had two "half-holidays" on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons (Beaver 1992, p. 55).

Individual education plans were unknown at the time, yet each student was assessed and placed according to their abilities. In an 1805 description of the Asylum, Hawker writes,

> They are taught to read, write, speak, and understand a language, whereby the can communicate their thoughts, receive information, and derive amusement, from the various sources open to them. They learn arithmetic, as far as necessary to the management of common accompts. (1805, p. 15)

The children's daily routine was mapped out (Beaver 1992, pp. 54–55):

6.30	Rise, wash, dress
7.00	Prayers and schooling
8.00	Breakfast
9.00	Drill and play
10.00	School
13.30	Dinner
14.30	Play
15.00	School
18.00	Supper
18.30	Play (only in Summer)
20.00	Prayers
20.30	Bed

Watson tended to neglect these day-to-day activities of the Asylum in order to focus on his private, paying "parlor" students. The "Braidwood Combined" system that Watson used was labor intensive and required low student–

teacher ratios, so using the Braidwood system for the Asylum's rapidly expanding, charity-sponsored, underprivileged, student population was impractical (Hodgson 1953). To manage the larger Asylum classes, Watson hired assistants to teach the poor children, and he kept tight controls on the staff. Following in his uncle's careful footsteps, Watson's assistants were required to sign three-year contracts of apprenticeship. Importantly for the Braidwood family's ongoing control of British Deaf education, these contracts included non-competition clauses.[5] Watson's first assistant in 1795 was Robert Nichols who was paid a high salary of £30 per year (Hodgson 1953). Watson also hired his own former students as assistants. The first, William Hunter, a pupil from the Asylum's inaugural class of six, was hired in 1804 as a "writing assistant" (Branson and Miller 2002, p. 139). As a further example, in 1808, the House Committee reported hiring another Asylum's pupil. John Hamilton was "retained and bound apprentice as an assistant in the School" (RSDC, 6 June 1808).

As stated earlier, the classes in the Asylum were too large for the use of Braidwood's oral methods. Instead, the charity-sponsored students were taught with the sign language. As Beaver (1992, p. 48) writes, "Most children arrived at the school with some knowledge of signing, and it was easier by far to train new teachers in that method than in oral." Watson had little time for de l'Epée's Methodical Sign system, which was much more complex than natural sign language in that it required not only the sign, but also the signaling of the syntactical structure for each sign (Watson 1809).[6] But Watson acknowledged the usefulness of natural sign language in teaching:

> I have found, by experience, that one deaf person may be employed to teach another with the happiest effect. So much so, that when I happen to be, for the moment, at a loss to make one of slow apprehension understand a lesson, I turn him over to one of his schoolfellows, who has learnt it; and never without advantage to both – for it is really true, – it is true of all indeed – as well as the *deaf*, that
>
> "Teaching we learn, and giving we retain
> The births of intellect ....." (Watson 1809, p. xxxvii)

Watson, therefore, opened the way for the emergence of an entirely manual method of deaf education, not reliant on speech articulation or a synthetic "methodical" signing system. According to Beaver, "Within but a few years, all instruction – and indeed communication – at the school was in signs" (Beaver 1992, pp. 47–49).[7] So through his inaction, his hiring of former pupils to run the school, and his permitting the use of sign language in the classroom, Watson inadvertently created the first truly Deaf space in England, a social landscape for Deaf people where visual language – signing – was the primary mode of communication.

Manufactory

The Manufactory, the vocational branch of the school was created in 1801 (RSDC, 12 Jan 1801) and continued until 1820 (Beaver 1992). It was built near Fort Place and consisted of four rooms dedicated to "tayloring, shoe-making, and staymaking" (RSDC, 25 June 1806). The Committee had a firm belief that providing a form of vocational training for their pupils in the trades was "an appendage absolutely necessary" to the Asylum. To this end, they hired a Mr. Sandwich and his brother to run the tailoring program on an annual contract. Sandwich was also responsible for the overall management of the facility, including hiring decisions. Sandwich's brother, an Asylum alumni (another Deaf teacher), was an assistant in the Manufactory. He was "acquainted with all the professions" (Hawker 1805, pp. 16–17), but by 1806, Sandwich replaced his deaf brother with a man named Lewis, who was hired to run the shoe-making branch of the manufactory while Sandwich continued to oversee the rest of concern (RSDC, 25 June 1806).

The Committee debated the best way to schedule the pupils' final year between classroom learning and their training in a trade. Initially, they thought the pupils would be able to spend their year alternating their time between the classroom and the Manufactory, so they could learn a trade while continuing their academics, but they were disappointed in the results of this system. Instead, they decided that the last six months of a pupil's time at the Asylum would be spent in the Manufactory on a full-time basis. It is important to note that not all the charity children became involved in the Manufactory. Sometimes parents could "provide for them other situations equally advantageous and more suitable to their own inclinations" (RDSC CMB, 25 June 1806). If parents had the financial capability, other arrangements for apprenticeships outside of the trades provided by the Manufactory could be made for the pupil.

A place of spectacle

As a charitable organization, the Asylum relied upon donations and subscribers to support it. With their non-statutory status, the Asylum's Committee engaged in vigorous marketing campaigns to achieve financial solvency. The Asylum became the site where, for the first time, deaf people become objects of a regular and ongoing spectacle. Even after the cessation of visits to other institutions in Britain like mental hospitals and asylums ceased, spectators could still visit the Asylum (Borsay 2007). According to Beaver (1992, p. 45), "Visiting governors and parents were encouraged to buy the school's produce at very reasonable rates."

In addition to visiting the Asylum itself, Deaf children were placed on display as "advertising" for the charity regularly and systematically in almost all venues where funding was solicited. These donations were sought from the public on three regular occasions – special sermons, subscriber meetings, and anniversary events – all of which depended on framing the children as objects of sympathy. "Special sermons" were held in churches throughout the country. The early Committee Minute Books carefully recorded when different ministers held special sermons in their parishes. These orchestrated events were sometimes conducted by guest ministers representing the Asylum and they were often accompanied by a pupil brought along to recite the Lord's Prayer. The brave little performance was intended to stir the hearts and wallets of the attendees. Townsend was one of these tireless campaigners for donations and toured the country to preach special sermons.

The second and third types of solicitation events were the subscriber meetings and anniversary events. The biannual subscriber meetings were routinely held in large tavern venues on the north side of the Thames and were covered by the press.[8] By donating a particular sum, the gathered subscribers had the opportunity to engage in the pupil selection process. As stated earlier, previously examined and slated applicants were selected by a popular vote at these events. Absent subscribers could vote via a mail-in proxy ballot. These events marketed the charity, but they also provided a venue for the great and the good to mix with the wealthy in such a way as to reinforce their social cohesion and promote the status quo, all mixed with warm feelings of sympathetic altruism. The February 1795, *Gentleman's Magazine* published this description:

> With what exquisite sensations must the feeling heart expand to know that near 20 poor objects, seemingly devoted to melancholy silence, with every idea buried as it were in the grave of sense, have been rescued from their miserable fate, and have been received, where, through the blessing of the Almighty, they may be rendered useful to themselves, a comfort to their friends, and may be taught whatever may be valuable to them here and hereafter! It is impossible to describe the emotions which filled the breast of a most respectable number of the subscribers at a recent meeting, where five were added to the number already received; and where they heard a child, who was admitted in January 1793: then, as now, entirely deaf, then unable to express a single idea, or to know the use of words, to hear such an object articulately and distinctly repeat the following lines … (M.D. 1795, p. 35)

The earliest of the Committee Minute Books records the popularity of these events and carefully lists the names of the attendees. More than 200 people often attended these meetings in order to cast their vote for as few as 3 children from the ever-growing candidates' list. London-based candidates were encouraged to attend these meetings to stir up pathos among the subscribers, and more distant subscribers could vote by proxy, via a ballot they received

ahead of the meeting. Years later, when the school had expanded and was able to accept more students, this viewing of the applicants remained an important part of the charity's marketing strategy. The spectacle was described by the American School for the Deaf's founder, Thomas H. Gallaudet in his travel diary, dated 10 May 1815:

> Seventy three [*sic*] applied for admission, which could be granted only to sixteen, and for them each subscriber had a right to vote. The stairs which led to the ball-room were lined with the parents & friends of the deaf & Dumb [*sic*]. They presented their children to each one passing … a ticket, giving an account of their circumstances & the peculiar claim, which they had on the charity. These little groups of unfortunate beings, pleading with a silent eloquence for relief, was a touching sight (Gallaudet 1818).

The Asylum was not the only organization to promote its deaf students this way. The school for the deaf in Paris, founded in 1760 by Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Epée, also gave demonstrations of his best pupils' skills. His successor, Abbé Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, even spent time in London with two of his best students. For the Abbé de l'Epée, "[this] public appearance of deaf children in 'broad daylight' was an act of liberation, enabling them to be 'shown off with just as much confidence and pleasure as care had been taken … to keep them out of sight'" (de l'Epée 1776 quoted in Borsay 2007, p. 77) By allowing the children and their sign language to be seen, de l'Epée hoped to reduce the general sentiment that deaf people were objects of shame. This was different for British Deaf children, where the missionary and philanthropic ideologies that fostered the Asylum reinforced the persistent trope of the "unfortunate". This has had lasting repercussions for all deaf people.

A purpose-built place: the second location

By 1806, the asylum was caring for 60-odd children, and every 6 months, double that number applied for the half dozen or so available places. Therefore, it was decided to buy a suitable site and thereon build and equip a new school for 120 children, and, importantly to the Committee, the site was to be large enough for expansion. Though the cornerstone was laid in July 1807, with much fanfare and expense by the Duke of Gloucester, the Kent Road site was not opened and occupied until October 1809.

In the meanwhile, the tight squeeze remained at Fort Place. Without explanation, the Committee took a more "hands on" approach to the oversight of the Asylum. In April 1807, a subcommittee called "House Visitors" received the following new remit:

> The House Visitors shall meet at the Asylum the first Monday in every Month, and oftener, if needful. They shall visit the House & School from time to time, inspecting the conduct of all persons employed for the Charity and the Pupils;

Figure 3. The Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb by John Pass after Thomas Swithin (1814). The Asylum's second location on Kent Road (now Old Kent Road) was the first purpose-built facility for Deaf education in England (Source: The Ear Institute and Action of Hearing Loss Libraries, London, Wellcome Library no. 20163i).

> and all matters relating to the internal management shall be referred to them to report upon. They shall also examine Tradesman's Bills, Petty Expenses, and School accounts, certifying the same by their signatures. (RSDC, 12 April 1807)

Moving quickly, the House Visitors sought ways to remediate the overcrowding at the Asylum by renting additional space and repurposing the pre-existing spaces. An example of this can be found in an 1807 House Visitors report to the Committee:

> It is recommended to the Committee, that the front Room in the House opposite to the Asylum be taken for the use of the Children employed in making Shoes; That the present Shoemaking Room be added to the adjoining sitting Room and repaired accordingly; that the Committee Room be converted into a sleeping room for the Females. (RSDC, 18 May 1807)

Unlike Fort Place, the new Kent Road facility (Figure 3) was purpose-built for the Asylum, initially constructed to house and school 120 children.[9] The Committee took a long-term lease (999 years) on the property which was situated on the north side of the Kent Road, in St George's, Southwark, at a yearly rent of £200 (RSDC, 9 Jan 1809). Today, this location is part of London's sprawl, but when it was let, "the asylum yet stood in fields with country lanes leading to the villages further to the east" (Hodgson 1953, p. 162). This new site was selected because it was large enough for further expansion,

should that be necessary. Meanwhile, the parts of the property not yet needed by the Asylum were let with 70-year building leases at a £50 per annum profit for the school.

The new facilities were considered state of the art in their time and a model for other institutions. When developing the design, the Committee visited other asylum institutions to determine what was needed for their new facility. They were careful to explain to subscribers that in the interest of frugality, there would be little ornamentation in the new facility. In their meeting minutes they mention that the school and dining rooms were "particularly plain" and the dormitories were simply lime-washed. They also planned the use of the space carefully and included dormitory space under the roof "making two excellent and useful rooms" out of a large space generally devoted to nothing but lumber storage (RSDC, 9 Jan 1809). The only classroom was L-shaped, the larger part, 90×30 feet, was used to teach the boys; and the smaller, 49×24 feet, for the girls (Beaver 1992). In addition to the large school building, the grounds included outbuildings which housed the domestic offices, wash-house, and laundry. It was also decided that with the increased number of pupils, the Asylum needed to add an infirmary. Other parts of the infrastructure – drainage, wells and an external wall around the property – were included but expensive. Not all the creature comforts of the day were provided though. The Committee eschewed some of the modern conveniences. "Until 1821 the only water supply was the well in the asylum grounds, and the only lighting candles" (Hodgson 1953, p. 162).

With the opening of the Old Kent Road facility, a number of additional children were admitted to the Asylum. And though only designed for 120 children, at the time of the move 182 were attending, making even this new and expanded facility overcrowded. Before its eventual final move to Margate in 1860, the place was packed with over 200 children (Beaver 1992).

Life after the Asylum

It was the Committee's intentions that after their initial training in the Manufactory, the Asylum's students would be placed into apprenticeships as it would prevent those students "from falling into vice and [i]dleness whose friends or [p]arents cannot properly provide for them" (RSDC, 12 Jan 1801). This commitment included financially investing in these placements. In the 1806 Rules of the Society, the Committee was empowered to spend up to 10 pounds towards apprenticeships with eligible masters or mistresses for former students who did not have parents or guardians to assist them (RSDC, 23 June 1806). If no suitable apprenticeships were found, they decided to allow former pupils to stay on at the Manufactory for four or five years. This was cause for some discussion amongst the Committee. They wondered if the Manufactory should be a separate entity from the

Asylum. In the end, it was kept under the Asylum's control (RSDC, 25 June 1806).

From the start, the Committee anticipated that the Manufactory would not be a profitable concern. They requested that subscribers continue to contribute to defray the cost and to ask their friends to assist (RSDC, 12 Jan 1801). After 1803, "subscribers were encouraged to patronize the children's efforts by buying their shoes and wearing apparel from the school workrooms" (Hodgson 1953, p. 161). According to Beaver (1992) since its beginning, the Manufactory program had run at a loss, including the costs of material spoilage.

Some of the Asylum's alumni enjoyed relatively successful lives. Writing in 1805, Hawker crows about the success stories, including those who marry and have families, those who work industriously at a variety of trades, and those who remain as assistants to Watson (Hawker 1805). Those involved with the Asylum's operations were proud of their accomplishments. Watson wrote:

> … [I]t would be sinning against the most noble trait of human benevolence and charity, to be silent, when the condition of so many, otherwise hopeless and helpless, fellow beings, has been materially ameliorated: – might I not say, that they have been changed into a sort of new beings, and elevated in the scale of existence! (Watson 1809, pp. xxviii–xix)

However, not all those who left the Asylum in its early years enjoyed successful lives. This was reflected in the Committee's concerns regarding beggars who claimed to have attended the school. The Committee even sent a notice out with the Circular Letter, a regular letter sent to all members of the Society. It said,

> The Committee request that the Friends of this Institution will not give any Money or encouragement to persons begging under pretence of having been educated in the Asylum for Deaf And Dumb, one Boy having lately been detected begging under those pretences, who has been instructed and provided with a good Master and a Trade, but who has repeatedly enticed into idleness and vagrancy by his dissolute and immoral Parents. (RSDC, 11 May 1807)

Perhaps out of concern for the reputation of the institution and its pupils, the Committee was attempting to expose the fraudulent use of the Asylum's name. Clearly, they are demonstrating a paternalistic and pejorative attitude towards impoverished parents. Unscrupulous parents will exploit their children's deficiencies and are therefore not to be trusted.

Conclusion

The Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Poor Children fits the definition of a Deaf place as described by Gulliver (2008). By Watson's neglect and inaction, by hiring his former pupils to run the Asylum, and by permitting the use of

sign language in the Asylum's classroom, he inadvertently created the first truly Deaf place in England, a new social and institutional landscape for Deaf people. It was a place created by Deaf people sharing and interacting in the visual world of sign language, where older Deaf role models taught young children for the first time and where sign language was the predominant mode of communication. At the same time, the Asylum played a critical role in the formulation of Deaf identities for its pupils and Deaf teachers, some of whom went on to create or help create other British Deaf places, including Matthew Burns' schools in Edinburgh (1832) and Bristol (1841), thereby expanding Deaf social networks across the country (Branson and Miller 2002). The candidate election process made it abundantly clear that the numbers of deaf people in the country far surpassed what anyone had estimated. As applications for placement at the Asylum continued well beyond its teaching and physical plant capabilities, other schools for the deaf started. According to Jackson (1990, p. 38), between 1800 and 1850, fifteen schools for the deaf were begun in "the Golden Age of Philanthropy".

> Asylum followed asylum – a peculiar way of rescuing deaf children. Those who gained admittance were fortunate. If by our standards their lot was a hard one, what they suffered inside was nothing to what they would have had to endure outside from a still brutalized populace. And if much that was done in those early days shocks us, we have to remember that what had gone before was worse. (Hodgson 1953, p. 159)

Starting with Thomas Braidwood's academies, where a very few affluent deaf people began receiving an education, the idea of deaf people as being educable spread. In England, ministers functioned as the earliest missioners of deaf people. An interwoven set of humanitarian networks between the clergy and philanthropists worked together to financially support the Asylum. These networks of hearing people would come together on specific occasions to raise funds, and it is here that deaf children were put on display regularly and systematically in the various venues. The parallels with colonial philanthropic efforts of the same period are immediately evident, and, like those, they too were reported regularly in the popular press. They held up their "poor unfortunates" as objects worthy of pity and charity and sought assistance from within the central charitable institution – the church. The Asylum became the place where, for the first time, deaf people became objects of a regular and ongoing spectacle as well as philanthropic concern via the extension of the domestic missionary project, a practice that continued long after it was stopped in other places. The missionary and philanthropic ideologies that fostered the Asylum reinforced the persistent trope of the "unfortunate". This has had lasting repercussions for all deaf people.

What is clear that deaf people, especially poor deaf people, if they had ever been, were not seen as agents of their destiny, per se, but became one of the

focal objects of societal pity. In the process of making this charitable organization a successful concern, all the stakeholders, including the board of governors, the headmaster, the sponsors, and, importantly, the deaf children themselves by their cooperative participation, all paternalistically promoted and solidified the external, ascribed deaf image of the "unfortunate". Simultaneously, they provided an incubator from which a new Deaf community would emerge for the first time.

In December of 2015, the John Townsend Trust's Royal School for Deaf Children at Margate, formerly the Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Poor Children, went into administration – a form of bankruptcy. A week later, in the shadow of an additional staff scandal, it closed. At the time of this writing, its assets are being liquefied. Lessons from the Asylum's beginnings and development resonate at the time of its dismantling. The loss of this venerable institution emphasizes the continuing vulnerable position of Deaf people, especially children, into the twenty-first century. This institution is not the first of its kind to close, nor will it be the last, but as a place of origin for the Deaf community, it demonstrates the ongoing and often losing battle for acceptance being waged from society's margins. Its loss highlights that places where direct Deaf interactions specifically occur are fading from the physical landscape, leaving less opportunity for the children of this "one generation thick" culture to have contact with each other, develop a Deaf identity, and thrive.

Notes

1. According to Jordan and Battison (1976, p. 59), "A standard story, repeated by travelers and natives alike, holds that if you travel 50 miles in Britain you will encounter a different sign language that cannot be understood in the region you have just left".
2. The first, *The Edinburgh messenger*, which ran from 1843 to 1845, was renamed *A voice for the dumb* and had a second run from 1847 to 1852. The first English paper was not published until after the end of this study's timeframe. *The magazine for the deaf and dumb* (London) was produced from 1855 to 1857.
3. Note that Braidwood labeled his establishments "academies". The term, "asylum", in the context of deaf education was first applied in the case of the school for "poor children", the object of this study (Branson and Miller 2002, p. 104).
4. Teaching deaf children and running the Asylum was a very profitable business for Watson. When he died, his estate held the enormous fortune of £100,000. In 2015's terms, estate would be valued at over £7.9 million. See: https://www.measuringworth.com/ [Accessed 16 January 2017].
5. This same contract was offered to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, the founder of the first successful school for the deaf in the United States. Gallaudet refused, claiming time and budgetary constraints placed on him by the school's benefactors (for more on Gallaudet and the founding of the first school for the deaf in the United States, see Edwards 2012).

6. For a brief explanation of de l'Epée's Methodical Sign system, see Edwards 2012, pp. 36–37).
7. It should be noted that Beaver writes about this like it's a bad thing. He goes on to say, "This situation was to survive to some degree or other until Richard Elliott became headmaster of the Asylum in 1878 and firmly established the combined system of teaching" (Beaver 1992, p. 49).
8. The locations of these large meetings were taverns and pubs with large assembly rooms. The most popular locations in this period were the Paul's Head Tavern in Cateaton Street (now Gresham St.) near the Guildhall and the City of London Tavern in Bishopsgate.
9. Today, the Old Kent Road is part of the A2/A201. Remnants of the Asylum are still visible in the surrounding side streets, Mason St. and Townsend St.

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