



CADBURY
RESEARCH
LIBRARY

Disability History Resource Guide

**Cadbury Research Library:
Special Collections,
University of Birmingham**

Last updated November 2025

Disability History Resource Guide

[Introduction to the Cadbury Research Library guide](#)

This is a guide to help uncover historical records about disability, detailing material held at the [Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham](#).

For the purpose of this guide, a disability is taken to mean any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities or interact with the world around them. These conditions, or impairments, may be cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, or sensory. Impairments causing disability may be present from birth or occur during a person's lifetime.

You can search for further resources via our [archive catalogue](#) and our [book catalogue](#) online.

Our main website gives [visitor information](#) should you wish to consult any of the items we hold. We also have a [Flickr album](#) marking Disability History Month.

If you know of other items held at the Cadbury Research Library you would like to suggest for inclusion in this historical resource guide, please email: special-collections@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Please be aware that historic documents or older books may use terminology or images that we may consider offensive today.

If you are using a paper copy of this guide, you can access the weblinks in this guide via the online version at: www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/rlt/subject

[Other historical disability resource guides](#)

If you are researching disability history, there are other similar resource guides that could help you locate archive and rare book material. Examples of other guides include:

[The National Archives](#)

[University of Leeds: Centre for Disability Studies](#)

[University of York, Borthwick Institute for Archives](#)

[Syracuse University](#)

Archive and rare book material held at the Cadbury Research Library

Hearing loss and d/Deafness

Birmingham Institution for the Relief of Deafness (subsequently incorporated into Birmingham Ear and Throat Infirmary), minutes 1844-1878, ref: [MS130](#)

British Association of Teachers of the Deaf archive, 1885-date, ref: [BATOD](#)

Harriet Martineau, author, 1802-1876, started to lose her hearing at the age of 12, and in later life, used an ear trumpet. She wrote openly in her autobiography and in letters to friends and colleagues about her experiences living with hearing loss. See archive collections refs: [HM](#) and [HMLAdd](#)

Sign language manual, [late C19th]. Ref: [MS924](#)

'Watching' Deaf Children's Views: resource pack of sign-bilingual project. Illustrated brochure published by Yunnan Disabled Person's Federation and Save the Children Fund. Dated 2002. In Chinese language. Ref: [SCF/OP/6/CHN/14](#)

'Elements of speech: an essay of inquiry into natural production of letters'. By William Holder, 1669. Classmark P217 H6

'Instruction of the deaf and dumb, or a theoretical and practical view of the means by which they are taught to speak and understand a language'. By Joseph Watson, 1809. Classmark: HV2440.W38

'An illustrated vocabulary, for the use of the deaf and dumb', Printed for the 'Asylum for the deaf and dumb', 1857. Classmark q HV2443.l44

Physical disability

Sarah Biffin, artist, 1784-1850. Born without hands or arms, at East Quantox-Head, Bridgewater, Somersetshire. Also known as Biffin, Beffin, or by her married name Mrs E. M. Wright:

- 'Appeal and subscription list for the benefit of Sarah Biffin'. Printed appeal, including a personal note by Biffin at Liverpool, with subscription list of those contributing to the fund to purchase an annuity for her. 1849. Ref: [KWH/B/18/56](#).

- Engraving of Sarah Biffin by R. W. Sievier, 1821. Engraving on laid paper, unframed, published by Biffin, 1821. This is a recent acquisition and has not yet been given a classmark. Email Cadbury Research Library for further details.

'An imperial obligation. Industrial villages for partially disabled soldiers and sailors'. By Thomas H. Mawson, with an introduction by Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, and front piece by Louis Raemaekers. Published 1917. Classmark: BVT HD7256.G7 M39

Diaries of Louisa James of Bredwardine, 1948-1949, detailing her life and that of her family, including references to her son's health needs. It is likely he had cerebral palsy. Ref: [MS1060](#)

'Book of Hours' calendar, dated 1936. Designed by John Buchan, 20th century artist, born without hands. [MS1108](#)

The Cadbury Research Library holds lots of material related to the WW1 hospital, located at the University of Birmingham. These records and printed books detail treatment of physically wounded soldiers. A small selection is listed below:

- Papers of William Billington (1876-1932), Professor of Surgery at the University of Birmingham, 1924-1932 and surgeon at the Queen's Hospital, Birmingham. Includes Billington's work on the repair of jaw injuries. Ref: [US100](#)

- Papers relating to war work of University of Birmingham staff, 1919-1920. Ref: [UB/VP/2/1](#)

- The official history of the Southern General: 'The Birmingham Territorial Units of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 1914-1919'. Ed J.E.H. Sawyer, Birmingham: Alday, 1921. Classmark: D629.G7B57

Related to war injuries, but not connected to the WW1 hospital, located at the University of Birmingham is the book 'Plastic Surgery of the Face. Based on selected cases of war injuries of the face including burns. With original illustrations'. By H.D. Gillies. 1920. Classmark: q RD118.

[Learning Disabilities](#)

Veronica Sherborne Collection: materials compiled and collected by Veronica Sherborne, (1922-1990), teacher of physical education and physiotherapist. The archive contains material relating to her work in the field of special education, to the Sherborne Movement Programme, and to the Sherborne Foundation. She worked initially with children with severe learning difficulties, and subsequently extended her work to include people of all ages. Ref: [MS48](#)

[Visual Disabilities / Blindness](#)

'Cathedrals Through Touch and Hearing' project run by the Department of Education at the University of Birmingham between 1988-1993. It focused on the experience of people with a visual disability visiting cathedrals and finding them difficult to navigate. Ref: [MS886](#)

Papers of John Hull, 1935-2015. Includes Hull's published material, papers and correspondence relating the publication of 'Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness' and readers responses to it, 1990s; papers relating to other research projects and to teaching activities. Ref: [US153](#)

Article about blind students and soldiers' recreation in the YMCA archive. Ref: [YMCA/6/1/8/2](#). Dated 2nd July 1915. Page 594.

'A Historical Sketch of the Origin and Progress of Literature for The Blind: and Practical Hints and Recommendations as to their Education'. By James Gall, 1834. The first page of this book gives raised letters of the alphabet, and the words of 'The Lord's Prayer'. This book was originally at the College of Teachers of the Blind. Classmark: HV1666.G35.

'The Lost senses. Series II, Blindness'. By John Kitto, 1845. Classmark: HV1593.K58

'The Genius of the Blind, a poem in five cantus, composed in total blindness by Edmund H. White'. Second edition, published 1859. Classmark: HV1581.W55

Miss Priscilla Poynton, later known as Mrs Pickering (c.1740-1801), who was known as 'The Blind Poetess of Lichfield'. She published several poetry books: 'Poems on several occasions', by Priscilla Pointon', dated 1770, which includes her poem on p99 'Consolatory reflections that have occasionally occurred on that most lamentable incident, My Loss of Sight'. Classmark: PN4145. Also 'Poems, by Mrs Pickering', 1794. Classmark: PR1217.

'Blind People: Their Works and Ways', By Rev. B.G. Johns, 1867. Classmark: HV1593.J64. The author, Rev. B.G. Johns, M.A. was Chaplain of the Blind School, St George's Fields, Southwark. The book is illustrated with numerous woodcuts.

Fanny Crosby : the sightless songstress, author of 8000 hymns / by John Hawthorn. [1931]. Classmark: Cadbury Research Library r BV330.C76 H

[Deafblindness / Dual-sensory impairment / Multi-sensory impairment](#)

Several entries relating to Helen Keller (1880-1968), an American author, political activist and lecturer. She was the first deafblind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. Refs: [MS203/A/4/3/4](#) and [CMS/ACC1034 F4](#)

We also hold [numerous entries](#) to the Helen Keller Centre for the Visually Impaired.

[Save the Children Fund Archive and Disability](#)

Save the Children Fund was established in 1919 as a humanitarian non-governmental organisation with the aim of improving every child's life. Over the course of the past 100 years the charity has initiated, and supported, various projects across the world to help children with physical and mental disabilities. These have ranged from projects providing on-site support to raising awareness, advocacy and education work.

Examples of Save the Children Fund's work in the United Kingdom, include hospital play schemes for children in 'mental handicap' hospitals in the 1970s, and

PLAYTRAC, a travelling resource and advice centre on play and children with mental disabilities in the 1980s. In addition to these, are several advocacy projects, such as the Disability Access project, 1990s, which aimed to identify and remove barriers which prevented children with disabilities from gaining access to a full range of day-care provision.

Save the Children Fund's overseas programmes have supported numerous projects working with disabled children, including sign bilingual education for deaf children in China and a Social Inclusion and Disability project in Anhui and Beijing in the 1990s. In Jerusalem, funding was provided to the Princess Basma Centre for Disabled Children and a Centre for a Palestinian Sign Language School, 1980s-1990s. Save the Children Fund also supported a school for deaf refugee children in Nicosia, 1970s, and a School for the Blind in Austria, 1920s. Beyond this Save the Children Fund have worked with children in post-conflict nations where young people have suffered the traumatic effects of conflict, both physically and mentally.

The archive can also provide an insight into the changing views, concepts and language used over the past 100 years, in connection to children and disabilities. You can find out more by searching the online [Save the Children Fund catalogue](#).

[University of Birmingham](#)

There are articles in the student newspaper, Redbrick, on the activities of a Disabled Students' Action Group which formed in 1973 to campaign for better access on campus for all disabled members of the University, and to make it easier for students with disabilities to live in University owned accommodation.

Ref: [UB/GUILD/F/5/4](#) Redbrick 1972-1975

Further exploration of [Redbrick](#) from the 1970s and 1980s is likely to reveal more evidence about the experiences of students with disabilities.

[Church Mission Society Archive \(CMS\)](#)

The Church Mission Society was founded in England in 1799 as a Christian mission organisation with three guiding principles: evangelising the world, social reform in the UK, and abolition of the Slave Trade. To meet the goal of sharing the Gospel with people outside the UK, in the early 1800s the Society began to recruit men and women from the UK, Europe, and in the many different countries in which it built mission stations. Different branches of mission work were established including work in schools, industrial training centres, medical mission, translation and literary work. Evidence of all of this activity is documented in the Society's illustrated magazines and periodicals and over two million records which are now held as the Church Mission Society Archive and related collections.

There are miscellaneous letters, diary entries, minutes, reports, printed literature and photographs referring to work with and by children and adults with disabilities.

Examples include records referring to Jane Chambers Leupolt née Jones who adapted the Moon raised type system for use with her severely sight-impaired school pupils in India; news of a band of young musicians from the 'School for the Blind', Fuzhou, China, who undertook an acclaimed 12-month tour of England in 1922; correspondence relating to CMS missionary, John Gunning Seymer, an Oxford graduate who for five years undertook translational work for the CMS in South India (Seymer was severely sight-impaired from birth); and references to the achievements of Gindi Eff Ibraheem, a severely sight-impaired evangelist whose skills led to his being appointed by the Egyptian Government as an instructor at the Higher Training College for women at Bulac in Cairo ([CMS/ACC1034 Z9](#)).

You can find out more about the [Church Mission Society Archive](#) and related collections in the online archive catalogue.

[Additional things of interest](#)

[‘On being ill’](#), by Woolf, Virginia (1882-1941).

London : Printed and published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at The Hogarth Press, 1930. Classmark: r PR6045.O72 O5-1930

This is Woolf's famous essay arguing for illness and mental health to be treated as a valid literary subject for discussion.

First and limited edition of 250 copies. This edition was typeset by Virginia and handprinted by Virginia's husband Leonard at the Hogarth printing press in Woolf's home; it is hand signed by Virginia. This copy has the original illustrated dust wrapper, which was designed by Virginia's sister, the artist Vanessa Bell.