

*Thomas Rhodes
Armitage*



Founder of
The Royal National Institute
for the Blind

Introduction

Blind people in all parts of the world owe a great debt to Louis Braille, but those in Britain hardly owe less to Thomas Rhodes Armitage; for it was through his tireless energies that the embossed type which bears Braille's name was popularised in this country.

Early life

He was born in 1824 in Sussex, the sixth of seven brothers, and a few years later the family moved to Avranches in Normandy, where they remained until he was nine years of age. They then moved to Germany, where the little boy was sent to a school whose headmaster was a well-known German grammarian, and at the end of two years Thomas spoke German at least as fluently as he spoke English. A visit to England followed, and then a return to France, and study at the Sorbonne, Paris.

In 1840 Thomas Armitage became a medical student in London, but after a year's work at King's College his sight began to give him trouble, and he had to have a long rest from reading. After an interval of two years he was again able to go on with his studies, and in

course of time qualified as a surgeon, following this up with the degree of M D (London) and MRCP. After a period of war service in Crimea, he returned to London and worked there for several years, both as a general practitioner and consultant.

His sight begins to fail

But when he seemed to be at the height of his powers his sight once more began to give serious trouble, and in 1860 it became clear to him that if he was to retain what vision he had, he must resign from active medical practice. He was a man of means, so that the loss of his work did not involve poverty, but he had looked upon medicine as his life-work, and his disappointment at having to give it up must have been very great. He was, however, a man of deep religious faith and he soon saw one direction in which his practical experience as a doctor, his private fortune and even his blindness could be employed "I cannot conceive", he wrote, "any occupation so congenial to a blind man of education and leisure as the attempt to advance the education and improve the condition of his fellow sufferers."

Armitage has an idea to help blind people read

Years before this, Dr Armitage had been interested in a blind patient, and in 1865 this man, on recommendation, had been appointed a missionary of the Indigent Blind Visiting Society, founded by the famous philanthropist, Lord Shaftesbury, to visit the blind people of London in their homes.

Accompanied by this missionary, Dr Armitage had himself visited blind people and had seen for himself that what they needed above all was education, and, as a medium of that education, a system of embossed writing which should be uniform throughout the country.

He must have brought into stuffy Committee rooms a fresh breeze of realism and common sense, when he pointed out that the people best fitted to decide what system of reading and writing was most likely to meet the needs of blind people were blind people themselves. So it came about that in 1868, Dr Armitage enlisted the help of three blind men, James Gale, W Fenn (who had been an artist before his loss of sight), and Daniel Conolly BA, and the little group formed themselves into a committee.

RNIB is founded

They took as their axiom the principle that "the relative merits of the various methods of education through the sense of touch should be decided by those, and only those, who have to rely on this sense". Each member of the Executive of the newly-formed Society, which took the name of the British and Foreign Blind Association for promoting the Education of the Blind (known as the Royal National Institute of the Blind) must be a man obliged on account of defective sight to read by touch with knowledge of at least three systems of embossed type, and having no financial interest in any.

Nearly two years elapsed before the little Committee passed judgement. It sounds a long time, but do the readers of braille today always realise how many formidable rivals it had in those days? Today all but braille and Moon type have been forgotten. But in those days there was the plain Roman capital of Fry, the slightly modified form of this type sponsored by Alston of the Glasgow Asylum for the Blind, the other stenographic system invented by Frere, and the several less well-known. During the two years, the Committee worked steadily at its task, studying books written in the various codes, and

getting in touch with as many blind men and women as possible in order to find out their views. "Two or three hours were often devoted to a single witness", wrote Dr Armitage, and only those blind witnesses were examined who, by reason of their knowledge of more than one system, were considered capable of giving an unprejudiced judgement.

It will be remembered that Dr Armitage was a man who had travelled widely in Europe and he had a knowledge of French and German which would deliver him from the insularity which might have made a foreign system such as braille suspect. He was always alive to the possibility that other countries might have a contribution to make to solving his problems, and from the first he established contacts with institutions for blind people in Europe and the United States.

The use of Braille becomes more popular

How long it took braille to be generally adopted in schools for blind people here it is not easy to say. In a list of such schools and institutions published in 1871, details are given of 46 organisations - mainly schools and home teaching societies - and in only one is braille mentioned: twelve years later in a second

edition of the book, 21 are listed as teaching braille.

In 1878 Dr Armitage, speaking at a Conference, said it was "used for writing" in 25 institutions, though in some of them the pupils were "allowed" to use it but it was not regarded as part of the regular curriculum. By 1883, 27 schools and institutions were using braille though 35 still used Moon. Almost the earliest publication in braille was "John Giplin", printed in 1870, and some Advent hymns. By 1871, "Anecdotes of Dogs" and two of Longfellow's poems had been added to the catalogue of braille publications, and four years later it included braille instruction books, more poems, hymn tunes, the multiplication table and a number of maps.

Today RNIB has one of the **largest braille printing houses in the world** selling books, periodicals and braille music to blind people at subsidised rates.

Obituary of

**Thomas Rhodes Armitage,
M.D.LOND., M.R.C.S. ENG.**

As appeared in The British Medical Journal
Nov. 1, 1880.

We regret to announce the death of Thomas Rhodes Armitage, of Cambridge Square, Hyde Park, who died at Cashel on October 23rd from sudden failure of the heart, following serious injuries sustained by his horse falling with and rolling over him. The deceased was a younger brother of Mr Edward Armitage, R.A., and was one of the seven sons of the late Mr James Armitage, ironmaster, of Farnley, near Leeds. He was born at Tillgate, in Sussex, in 1824, received most of his early education in Germany, and became a medical student at King's College, where his great abilities attracted the attention and secured the friendship of Dr Todd, whom he frequently assisted in practice, and into whose house in Brook Street he removed at Dr Todd's decease. After leaving King's College he studied for some time at Paris and at Vienna, where he laid the foundation of a lifelong friendship with

Professor Skoda; and on his return to London he commenced practice as a physician in Seymour Street. In a few years after his removal to Brook Street, his sight, which had never been good, failed so greatly that he was compelled to retire from his profession, in which his attainments had given promise of a brilliant future; from this time he devoted himself to the improvement of the condition of the indigent blind, whose miserable and neglected state in the metropolis and throughout the kingdom had long excited his commiseration. He reorganised the Indigent Blind Visiting Society, of 27, Red Lion Square, and laid down the principles which now govern its action in visiting blind people at their own homes, in stopping street begging, in teaching the blind to read from raised characters and to write, in inculcating thrift, and in bringing proper cases to the notice of other societies which taught handicrafts and in various ways assisted the blind to earn their own living. Subsequently, and in connection with the same Society, he founded a pension fund for the relief of those who were past work, and a Samaritan fund for the temporary assistance of the deserving. He was the very life of this Society, and was its most munificent benefactor. Impressed with the

educational needs of the blind among the middle classes, Dr Armitage became one of the originators of the Royal Normal College for the Blind, at Upper Norwood, and has been one of its most staunch supporters, his pecuniary gifts alone having amounted to nearly £40,000. He spared neither time nor trouble in promoting the work of the college; and it was largely by his help that it attained its present position. His leading idea was to render the education of the blind as much as possible like that of sighted persons, to teach the blind to be self-reliant, and to fit them for earning their bread by their own exertions. Music was found to be especially suited to their condition; and many pupils of the Normal College have attained high distinction as instrumentalists, while many others have obtained permanent salaried positions as tuners in large firms. Dr Armitage was the chief introducer and promoter in this country of the Braille method of writing and printing and of maps with raised characters, and most of the improvements in the manufacture of these were originated or fostered by him. He visited most European countries, the United States, and recently Egypt, with a view of ascertaining personally the condition of the blind in each. He was an

active member of the recent Royal Commission on the Education of the Blind and Deaf and Dumb, and he took part in international congresses on the subject both in Paris and Germany. Latterly, in addition to almost complete blindness, he became very deaf; but his infirmities diminished neither his benevolence nor his cheerfulness; and his interest in the good works in which he was engaged continued unabated to the last. His funeral was held at Noan on October 28th.

Henry Wilson, Secretary of Gardner's Trust for the Blind, who knew him intimately, summed up his life and work in the following words: " Those who are interested in the blind look round, but in vain, for another who would or could so ungrudgingly devote to the blind such an amount of time, money, valuable information and eagerly sought advice. His experience was gained in a life of unselfish love-and by personal visits to many hundreds of desolate homes, now made bright by his cheerful, sympathetic and Christian words and by his ready help."

BlindVoice UK

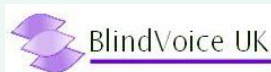
Oral History Project

“Blindness Through the Decades”

The Oral History of Sight Loss in the Tees
Valley
from 1945 to date.

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