

# *Louis Braille*



**'ONE OF THE TRULY GREAT MEN OF ALL TIME'**  
In the village square at Coupvray, birthplace of Louis Braille, stands the monument erected in his memory in 1887, thirty-five years after he had died unknown. On one side of the seven-foot pedestal a bronze relief shows Braille teaching a blind child how to read ; on the other is the Braille alphabet.

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LOUIS BRAILLE, one of the truly great men of all time, died a hundred years ago, unknown to the world. But his simple "touch" alphabet of raised dots for reading and writing by the blind-developed when he was only 16- has since spread his name to every corner of the earth and unlocked the once hopeless doors of darkness for millions of the world's sightless.

"Braille died a complete human being, though blind, "Helen Keller has written." He was great because he had greatly used his loss of sight to liberate his afflicted fellow creatures. He had both lived and died in the glorious light of a victorious spirit and a brilliant, inventive intellect."

This summer, to honour this victorious spirit and inventive intellect, the French Government is transferring the remains of Louis Braille from his humble tomb in the village of Coupvray, 23 miles from the capital, to the Panthéon in Paris, where he will be buried among his country's illustrious dead. In many other nations, too, the 100th anniversary of his death is being observed this year.

The son of a saddler, Braille was born at

Coupry on January 4 1809. At the age of three he lost his sight when a sharp instrument he was playing with in his father's shop accidentally entered his eye. An infection developed in both eyes and he became totally blind. When Louis was 10, he was taken to Paris and was enrolled in the Institute for the Young Blind. It was at this school-the first educational institution for the blind, opened 35 years earlier by Valentin Haüy-that Braille distinguished himself as a brilliant student and then became a teacher of geometry and algebra (his favourite subjects) as well as of music. It was here that he learned of the various raised characters used to help the blind to read, and here he finally evolved his own ingenious system of dots.

Braille was not, however, by any means the first to develop the system of raised characters. The desire of the blind for literacy and the efforts of their sighted friends to open the way for them, had led to innumerable experiments in embossed letters and other schemes for many hundreds of years before Braille's time.

Letters cut out of paper, pins stuck into cushions or cards, geometrical shapes enclosing raised dots, even cleverly knotted strings were

all used in early attempts.

The first records of the actual use of raised type for the blind date from 16th century Spain and Italy. Francisco Lucas of Saragossa, in 1571, devised a set of letters carved on thin tablets of wood. In 1575, Rampazetto of Rome improved this somewhat.

Both methods, however, seem to have been inspired by the earlier teachings and writings of Jerome Cardan, of Italy, who had advocated a system of reading by touch about the year 1550. A century later, a Jesuit priest, Father Francesco Lana recognised a new idea that Braille and his immediate predecessor, Captain Barbier, were to develop later : the potential usefulness of a cipher code based on a number of dots enclosed in rectangles. In his book *Prodrome*, he even proposed a writing stylus and a wooden writing frame with strings to indicate the lines.

Then followed a great number of inventors who proposed various devices, including the use of wooden movable letters, cast metal letters, printing on copper. Of these attempts at

embossed type, undoubtedly the best known is that of Valentin Haüy , who has been called the "Father and Apostle of the Blind."

In 1771, Valentin Haüy saw a group of blind men being hooted and laughed at by a crowd at a Paris fair on the place Louis-le-Grand-today the place Vendôme. Horrified, he determined to devote his life to improving the lot of the sightless.

One day, some time afterwards, he found a blind boy begging in front of the Church of St-Germain-des-Pres in Paris and decided to take him home with him to try and educate him. Haüy taught the boy, whose name was Lesueur, to read with letters carved on wooden tablets similar to the method introduced by Lucas and Rampazetto. It was slow, cumbersome and difficult.

Then by accident (so the story goes), when Haüy was busy writing one afternoon, Lesueur began sorting some papers on his desk. Suddenly the boy came across an invitation card printed in heavily embossed relief letters and found he could recognize some of the letters.



























This gave Haüy the idea that teaching the blind to read by raised letters on printed cardboard (embossed letters) was better than using raised type or tablets directly.

Pierre Henri, an authority on Louis Braille and his predecessors, doubts this story. "I am inclined to wonder," he has written, "whether he did not get the idea from an addendum to the 1783 edition of the *Letter on the Blind*, in which Diderot told how a Paris printer named Prault had produced a book printed in relief for the use of a distinguished blind girl, Mile de Salignac."











In any event, whatever really inspired Haüy, it was with this new method that he decided to try to teach other blind children. In 1784, he opened the world's first school for blind children- the Institute for Young Blind, which Louis Braille was to enter 35 years afterwards - and by the end of its first year it put the first embossed books at the finger tips of the blind. His Institute is still in existence today in Paris.

Haüy's system, however, remained difficult to read by touch, and practically impossible to

# Braille Alphabet

								
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
								
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
								
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

# Braille Numbers

				
1	2	3	4	5
				
6	7	8	9	0

write. Changes and improvements were constantly being made in different countries in an effort to meet these difficulties.

None of these embossed type methods survives today except Moon type. Invented by a blind Englishman, Dr. William Moon, this way still fills the special needs of older people whose touch is not good enough to read Braille's raised dots.

The revolutionary idea of representing letters by raised dots did not come from Louis Braille, however, but from Charles Barbier de la Serre, a French Army officer in the Signal Corps. Barbier devised a system of "night writing" for soldiers to communicate with one another in the field after dark.

He then thought of applying it to the blind and presented his system to the Institute for the Young Blind in Paris. Barbier's night writing had 12 dots arranged in various positions and could be punched on to paper. The Institute tried it out and adopted it as a supplementary teaching method.

But Barbier's system was complicated. It occupied too much space and was cumbersome

for fingers ; also it had to be deciphered, since it was a code and not an alphabet.

Braille, a master in the Institute at the time, became interested in the idea. As a teacher, he saw its drawbacks for spelling and punctuation. But the system could at least be written since Barbier had also devised the metal frame for punching the dots on paper. He set to work to try to simplify it and make it more easily usable by the fingers of a blind man.

He reduced the 12-dot squares to six. The six dots could be felt by the finger tip at one go. Dropping the idea of ciphers, Braille decided to work out various combinations of the dots to form the alphabet. He arranged the six dots in three pairs, one above the other, as in a domino.

"It has been said," Pierre Henri wrote, "that the reason why Louis Braille's system has proved superior to all other forms of writing for the blind is that it bore the stamp of genius. To put it more simply, it results from a combination of skill with patient and methodical labour. Only a blind man could have arranged dots in groups

which exactly correspond to the requirements of the sense of touch. Reduce the number of dots, and the available signs become obviously insufficient ; add to their number, and the sign can no longer be covered by the finger tip, nor so easily read.”

"Braille did not rest content with giving an alphabet to the blind. From the outset, by allotting double or triple values to each sign, he presented a system of musical notation, a set of elementary mathematical symbols, and a system of shorthand so that the blind could satisfy not only their desire for culture, but also their professional needs."

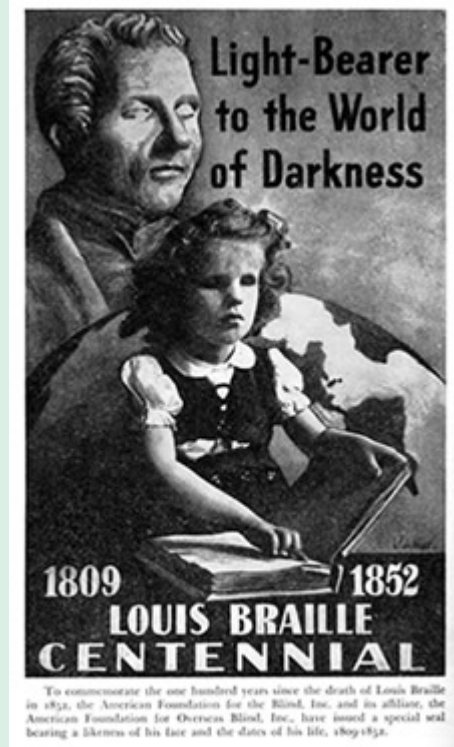
Braille died on January 16, 1852 with no idea that his system would be universally adopted by blind people in every part of the world. Even in his own school he had great difficulty in getting his method recognized and used. Only after his death was it officially adopted in French schools for the blind.

Today, without the Braille system, the world's 7, 000, 000 sightless would be deprived of the most powerful key to human freedom and scholarship ever devised for the blind.

**In this house  
on January 4,  
1809  
was born  
LOUIS BRAILLE  
The inventor of  
the system of  
writing in raised  
dots for use  
by the blind.  
He opened the  
doors of  
knowledge to all  
those  
who cannot see.**

Plaque on the wall of  
Louis Braille's  
home which is now a  
museum

An Artwork  
illustrating the life  
and significance of  
Louis Braille.



Louis Braille's  
Boyhood Home

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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This leaflet is available in Braille, Large Print  
and Audio CD.



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