

Feeling Our History



**The experience of Blindness and Sight Loss in
Edwardian Edinburgh, the Lothians and the
Scottish Borders**

Iain Hutchison

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and the Scottish Borders

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Published in 2015 by

RNIB Scotland
12-14 Hillside Crescent
Edinburgh
EH7 5EA
Scotland

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Feeling Our History: The experience of blindness and sight loss in Edwardian Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Scottish Borders

A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-9934106-4-2

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Typeset in Scotland by Delta Mac Artwork,
deltamacartwork@btinternet.com

Printed in Scotland by J Mcvicar Printers, 97 Dykehead Street, Queenslie Industrial Estate, Glasgow G33 4AQ, Tel 0141 774 5132

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, 'Feeling Our History' owes much to a dedicated team of volunteers who embraced the research challenges necessitated by the fragmentary nature of 'The Register' of outdoor blind. 'The Register' is capitalised throughout this book because of its importance. Its discovery was the impetus behind the Seeing Our History project. Our team, consisting of Veronica Bell, Kirstin Cunningham, Jill Doran, Lizzy Ellicott, Joan Kerr, Moira McMurchie, Fiona Patterson, Victoria Ross and Elizabeth Wood, juggled their other commitments to research the archival collections of the National Records of Scotland. As a result of their work, several of our volunteers can highlight cases - strangers living a century ago - with whom they became intimately attached as personal stories were revealed and voices reached out from the past. David Bakermault provided support as the administrative volunteer, an essential role in managing more than 1,100 Register entries and their distribution to research volunteers.

Iain Ferguson and the staff at the National Records of Scotland gave valuable support to the team. We were always made to feel welcome at General Register House and the staff freely gave of their advice and knowledge, so vital to the opening of windows of opportunity to discover the past.

Lothian Health Services Archive, which assumed custodianship of the records of the Edinburgh Society for Promoting Reading among the Blind (The Society) in

2012, not only facilitated further research of the Society's records, but assembled a team of volunteers to transcribe The Register. We acknowledge Laura Gould's earlier support in developing the funding bid and the archive's initiative in offering as early as 2012 to create a catalogue of RNIB Scotland's historic records. We would also like to thank Ruth Honeyman, Louise Williams, volunteer transcribers Aiden Hurst and Elizabeth Welsh, and Clair Millar who provided training and supervision.

Sheena Irving responded to an interview about the project on BBC Radio Scotland in 2014. She wondered if her great-great-grandfather had been recorded in The Register. It transpired that William Finlay was indeed listed and his story appears in this volume. Sheena was able to give us access to valuable family papers and provided the atmospheric photograph of William with one of the horses that he loved. And she joined us to tell his story on one of the Insight Radio podcasts that accompany this publication.

Readers will find that although the Society served a quite different function to that provided by Edinburgh's blind asylum and school, the two were not mutually exclusive, not least because people's lives passed through different phases and these often included both institutional and outdoor frameworks. The project has been substantially enriched by the Royal Blind Asylum and School's (Royal Blind) generous access to its valuable archival records. We thank Pamela Gaiter, Richard Hellewell and the Royal Blind staff.

An important outcome of the research consists of

podcasts created by Insight Radio. We would like to thank Wilson Bain for his narration as well as Stuart Barrie and Steven Scott for their help. Particular thanks are due to Yvonne Milne whose broadcasting skills have been crucial. Input to the podcasts was also provided by project volunteers Joan, Kirstin, Lizzy, Moira, Veronica and Victoria, and by Sheena Irving. Special thanks go to Sarah Caltieri who wrote the accompanying lyrics and music. One of the outcomes was her music hall-inspired song, 'Have a Cuppa Tea', which she sang to musical accompaniment by Sally Clay (piano and accordion) and Seonaid Aitken (violin). The recording was produced, mixed and mastered by Duncan Cameron of Riverside Music Complex.

Most importantly, we thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for generously backing this project to enable the story and experiences of sight loss in and around Edinburgh a century ago to be explored and developed.

We must acknowledge the project's debt to the former Chair of RNIB Scotland, Jimmy Cook. Jimmy had a passionate interest in the history of blindness. When his desk at RNIB Scotland headquarters was cleared after his death in 2012, The Register of the Outdoor Blind was revealed and recognised as a historically significant document. It has been the key focus of the Seeing Our History project.

At RNIB Scotland, the project was given both moral and practical support behind the scenes. We wish to thank James Adams for allowing the time and space for project development, Helen Wilkinson and Caitlin Howie for their

input, Robbie Atkinson and Ania Orzol for help with project finances, Hazel McFarlane for sharing her doctoral research and writing a Foreword, Ian Brown for his media and communications skills and Christine Harrison for her great support of our volunteers. The project would not have got off the ground without the fundraising expertise and commitment of Steven Davies.

And last, but certainly not least, we thank RNIB Scotland's senior research officer, Catriona Burness, for nurturing the project from the initial concept to completion. Catriona's skill and diligence has ensured maximum efficiency, but more importantly, she has brought together strangers, enthused and inspired them and, after a few short months, nurtured the team into a fraternity joined together by a shared interest in a very specific, and unexplored, aspect of history in the south-east of Scotland.

The period image of Edinburgh's Princes Street that forms the front cover is courtesy of City of Edinburgh Council-Edinburgh Libraries [www. capitalcollections.org.uk](http://www.capitalcollections.org.uk). The photograph on the back cover shows some of the Seeing Our History research team.

Iain Hutchison
Research Historian

Foreword by John Legg, Director, RNIB Scotland

The Seeing Our History investigation of Edwardian Edinburgh and its neighbouring counties has followed the lives of individuals with sight loss, and their families.

Feeling Our History highlights the tendency of ‘mainstream’ society to stereotype people who they see as different. People often had to fight against what other outsiders perceive that they can and cannot do – or should do.

The case studies highlight the very different experiences of individuals and their wider family and social networks. They also show that these identities and experiences vary considerably over each person’s life journey.

Then and now, the key message is that everybody is the same and everybody is different.

And then and now, blind and partially sighted people sought and seek support, inclusion and independence.

Feeling Our History is an important story that has to be read and heard. Read this book and go to Insight Radio to listen to the radio version.

John Legg

Foreword by Sandra Wilson, Chair, RNIB Scotland

In February 2013, RNIB Scotland, after consulting with blind and partially sighted members, committed itself, as an organisation, to developing a greater understanding of the history of blindness in Scotland, preserving its heritage and making the heritage more accessible.

Over the last decade the passing away of an older generation of RNIB Scotland activists has both led to awareness of the loss of a good deal of direct knowledge of the past and left behind further valuable historical papers.

After the death of Jimmy Cook, former Councillor and veteran campaigner for the rights of the disabled, especially the blind and partially sighted, RNIB Scotland inherited his collection of books and papers on blindness in Scotland including the Register of the Outdoor Blind. He would have been so delighted about the Seeing Our History research. He would join me in warmly welcoming the publication of Feeling Our History and the associated podcast series on Insight Radio.

Sandra Wilson

Foreword by Hazel McFarlane, RNIB Scotland

This book covers various themes, but of particular interest are the lived experiences of blind people. The Blind Asylums and Missions to the Outdoor Blind in their Annual Reports frequently portrayed blind people as a homogenous group, referring to inmates or recipients of support as 'the blind'. Furthermore, blind people, especially females, were depicted as physically and morally vulnerable, child-like; in need of care and protection - presumably to elicit generous donations from the general public.

The ten blind individuals' stories brought to life in this book convey the diversity of circumstances, occupations and roles adopted by blind men and women in Edwardian Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Borders. Some were married and founded families. For instance, Agnes McArthur gave birth to eight children, two of whom died in infancy. Elizabeth 'Lizzie' Ann Hoseason was also a mother while Georgina McDonald was a child of blind parents, William McDonald and Marion Kirk, who met while inmates of the Edinburgh Blind Asylum. Although Georgina did not marry, her earnings as a mattress-maker enabled her to support her older sister and five children. Similarly, Robert Ponton, a life-long bachelor, exerted a stabilising influence within his extended family.

Those featured were engaged in various occupations such as mattress-making, sack-making, basket weaving and music teaching. Their life courses had highs and lows, tragedies and tribulations. John Richardson, for example, at one time a diligent inmate of the Edinburgh Blind

Asylum, died a pauper, addicted to alcohol.

There appears to have been an active support network and camaraderie among blind people, some sharing accommodation, while ten year-old Sophia boarded with a blind basket-maker and his family following the institutionalisation of her mother, Lizzie Hoseason. This book provides a snapshot of Edwardian life. Importantly, it provides a record of blind people playing an active role in society, employment, family life and communities. It is a first step in recording and celebrating blind people's history.

Hazel McFarlane

Introduction

‘Feeling Our History’ arises from an RNIB Scotland project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It is an historical project that sought to reconstruct the experiences of blind and partially-sighted people living ‘in the community’ in Edinburgh and its neighbouring counties during the first decade of the twentieth century.

It was customary for formal institutions, such as hospitals, asylums, prisons and schools, to maintain well-kept registers detailing their patients, inmates, pupils, etc. Men and women classed as ‘outdoor blind’, who constituted the largest proportion of Scotland’s estimated three to four thousand blind people, were not part of a formal, institutionalised structure. Their lives and experiences were therefore hidden from the incarcerating gaze of guardians, philanthropists, superintendents and matrons.

Blind and partially-sighted people living beyond these formal structures, did however, from 1857, become the focus of missions to the outdoor blind. The missionaries’ aim was to teach reading of raised type in order that blind people may be able to read the Bible. It was around 1903 that a register of blind people living in Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Borders was first drawn up.

Unlike registers maintained by institutions, The Register of the Outdoor Blind was compiled in a haphazard manner. It was poorly maintained, and its entries were often incomplete. As a document that might be used for historical research, it is flawed. But it is nonetheless valuable in that it introduces a group of people who might

otherwise have escaped the historical gaze. On the one hand, its imperfections hinder research, but its deficiencies have also provided tantalising impetus to our research volunteers in their endeavours to 'join up the dots' from vague entries and so bring them to life.

'Feeling Our History' is one of the outcomes of this research. Firstly, themes are explored that seek to place the experiences of blind people, living in and around Edinburgh during the Edwardian period, into a wider context. Then the lives of some of the individuals who frequented these environments, and who attracted the attention of the missionaries to varying degrees, are featured. The people investigated have certainly stimulated our research volunteers, their work restoring flesh and blood to otherwise anonymous names on a dusty register. We hope that readers might also gain a sense of the experiences of blind people – women and men such as Mary Howie, Georgina McDonald, William Finlay and John Richardson who lived through a time epitomised by charitable outreach motivated by middle-class religiosity, half a century before people could call upon the universality of a welfare state.

Part 1 – Feeling Our History

The Missions to the Outdoor Blind

‘The Edinburgh Society for promoting Reading amongst the Blind on Moon’s System’ was founded in November 1857. At the end of the Society’s first year, it proclaimed its success in obtaining ‘Alphabets, chapters of the Bible, and simple books ... in some quantity, and a Teacher ... to visit the Blind in their own houses.’

The Edinburgh Blind Asylum, opened in 1793, was well established by this time. During the decades to 1857, it had developed and expanded its role of providing employment for both inmates and outmates. Another institution, located in Gayfield Square, was a residential school for educating and training blind children. The Edinburgh Society’s niche was in promoting reading of raised type to blind people. Many of the outdoor blind did not have current, or previous, connection with the asylum. But there were also overlaps – so there were blind people who had links with the blind school, the blind asylum and the Edinburgh Society at various stages of their lives.

In 1857, braille raised type was yet to come of age and a variety of styles of tactile print were in use. The Edinburgh Society advocated the Moon System which, in 1858, it proclaimed, had also found favour with the Edinburgh Blind Asylum and the Aberdeen Blind Asylum. A different type style, developed by John Alston of the Glasgow blind asylum, had become popular in the west of Scotland. However, the Edinburgh Society, which claimed that 40 of its outdoor blind already read by the Moon system, also

claimed that some blind people lapsed in their use of the Alston system when they became familiar with Moon.

The Moon System was the creation of William Moon of Brighton and he published his first work in his own distinctive raised type in 1847. This was a modest beginning, but with the setting up of a printing workshop in 1856 he was then able to embark upon making his raised type available to a wide audience. Moon was himself blind, so he was an independent man taking a proactive role in a sphere with which he was familiar through personal experience. When the Edinburgh Society began its work in 1857, Moon type was still in its infancy, but the Society embraced it wholeheartedly to the extent that it was quite critical of the perceived shortcomings of other forms of raised type, notably by Alston, Gall and Lucas. Gall founded the Edinburgh Blind School in 1836 while Alston was honorary treasurer of the Glasgow Asylum for the Blind, founded in 1825.

The Edinburgh Society employed a teacher, John Brown, to teach Moon on a one-to-one basis in the homes of blind people. Lady volunteers were also noted as assisting in this work. No explanation was given as to how these educators themselves honed their skill, and in citing cases in the Society's first annual report, it seems that it was often blind people familiar with Moon who were key to passing on this reading skill to other blind people. Brown was totally committed to the benefits of the Moon system, declaring it in 1861 to be 'the best yet invented'.

The first person whom the Society chose to showcase was a former army serviceman who became blind in later life.

He was taught to read Moon by a blind friend and, when subsequently partially paralysed and confined to bed, spent 'all his time in reading the Bible, which, there is every reason to believe, he knows to be the Word of eternal life.' Nineteenth-century Scotland was a God-fearing society and religion pervaded every aspect of life. The Edinburgh Society was born into this ethos and was driven by its perception that blind people, if they were unable to read, were being denied access to the Bible, religious enlightenment and salvation. John Brown makes this clear in his description of his work for the Society.

Brown experienced resistance to learning to read, notably among older people who refused on account of age, but he built up a core of twelve people who each received a daily lesson. Brown found strength in 'Divine guidance' and by March 1858 he reported that he had visited 'about 100 blind people (not reckoning the 110 connected with the Asylum)'. He found those he called upon to be a mixture of the religiously devout and 'utterly indifferent'. He was certainly a busy man, but his twelve successes, it might be argued, represented a modest proportion of the one hundred whom he had pursued.

By the time of the first annual report, as indicated earlier, there were 40 people in Edinburgh reading Moon. Brown judged that ten read very well, and ten read tolerably well. However, 20 read 'indifferently to the extent that some had not progressed beyond identifying the letters of the alphabet'.

The Edinburgh Society worked closely with the Bible and Tract Societies of Edinburgh which held volumes in Moon.

These included Genesis in two volumes, St John's Gospel, Romans to Corinthians, Gal to Philemon, selections from Pilgrim's Progress, Last Days of Cranmer, Last Days of Polycarp, and Keble's Hymns.

Through a system of 'colportage', i.e. book distribution, following the appointment of John Fenwick as colporteur, the Edinburgh Society expanded its reach so that by 1864 its catchment area embraced communities from Stirling and St Andrews to North Berwick. In that period an 'Eastern Border Mission to the Blind' had been set up to work in south-east of Scotland with the Earl of Haddington as its president. By 1886 there were ten outdoor missions to the blind - their localities being Aberdeen, Dundee, Dumfries and Galloway, Edinburgh, Fife and Kinross, Forfarshire, Glasgow & the West of Scotland, Northern Counties, Perth, and Stirling, Clackmannan & Linlithgowshire. Of these, the Edinburgh Society was the oldest, preceding Glasgow by two years. The Edinburgh Society had gradually expanded its operational reach to the neighbouring counties. In 1892, in that year it acknowledged this by proclaiming its name as the rather wordy 'Edinburgh Society (including the South-East of Scotland) for Promoting Reading among the Adult Blind at their own homes, by Moon's System'.

In 1899, the Society's title became even more elongated when it embraced change in blind reading trends. It was now 'The Edinburgh Society (including the South-East of Scotland) for Promoting Reading among the Adult Blind at their own homes, by Moon's System (Braille System also taught)'. In 1903, when compilation of The Register of Outdoor Blind is estimated to have commenced, the

Society described its 'sphere of labour' as the counties of Edinburgh [Midlothian], Haddington [East Lothian], Peebles, Selkirk, Roxburgh and Berwick. The Objects of the Society were:

To seek out the Blind in these Counties, to visit them at their own homes, to teach them to read with the finger, and to supply them with books from the Society's Library, 20 St James' Square, free of charge; to aid the poor amongst them as far as our Benevolent Funds permit, and in every way possible to seek the advancement of their spiritual and temporal welfare.

The work of the Edinburgh Society was funded by charitable donation using methods widely adopted by Victorian philanthropic organisations and institutions – setting up subscription schemes which attracted contributions from individuals living in affluent localities. Publication of contributions in annual reports was a well-practised method of acknowledging support while spurring donors to increase contributions if they thought they were being outdone by their neighbours, in print, for all to see. In the financial year ending 7 December 1902, subscriptions and donations totalled £407 19s 10d, with the addition of income from other sources such as bequests, an annual 'tea meeting', bank interest, etc., bringing the balance for the year to a total of £695 16s 8d. Half of this sum, £346 19s 0d was spent on salaries to the outdoor teachers and on commission to collectors, while £59 18s 1d was spent on 'coals, assistance and work for poor Blind' and £13 10s was spent on 'books for Blind'.

In 1903, Charles Ness, Brown's successor, reported that there were 427 people on the Society's blind 'roll'. The Society underwent a further name adjustment in 1908, when it became 'The Edinburgh Society (including the South-East of Scotland) for Promoting Reading among the Adult Blind at their own homes, and for otherwise ameliorating their condition'. By this point, the Society gave Moon and braille parity, although the number of braille books was a modest 350 compared to 2,200 Moon volumes. The Society's title, however, now gave greater prominence to a welfare role, while its stated 'Objects' remained unchanged. However, the new title took on increased importance in 1905 with the creation of a pension fund for poor people on The Register through 'a deed of gift' by Elizabeth Jamieson and her brother, Alexander.

In 1911, the year in which The Register appears to have fallen into disuse, the Society claimed 472 blind people on its roll. It had 2,750 volumes of raised type text, Moon and braille, in its library, and 4,331 volumes had been circulated, although the number of people on the roll availing themselves of the library facilities is not indicated. There were 62 'pensioners' benefitting from the Jamieson Bequest Fund, 34 receiving £10 per annum, and 28 receiving £8. In Edinburgh and Leith there were 43 pensioners, while the remaining 19 lived in East Lothian and the Borders counties.

Edwardian Edinburgh

The Register now shows the wear-and-tear of a century, but 1903 when it was a pristine book awaiting the first entries to be made, Scotland, like the rest of Britain and its Empire, had just emerged from a punishing struggle to hold on to power in South Africa. By the time that The Register had been in regular use for five years, astute observers were already conscious of another war in the making, although not of the horrors of trench warfare, mustard gas, and the four years of stalemate that would be its hallmarks. By this point, the Liberal government had begun to introduce a sequence of modest welfare reforms that marked a deviation from its traditional laissez-faire philosophy.

Edinburgh, the Athens of the North, was nonetheless comfortable in its apparent affluence. The Georgian terraces of the New Town exuded stability and wealth – although as seen in one of our case studies, that of Mary Howie, even some of these areas, George Street, had become more mercantile than it had once been. Such is the ebb and flow of cities, as localities move from fashionable, to utilitarian and back to expensive and desirable once again. While the solidity and style of the New Town had endured for more than a century, as the Edwardian period approached, Edinburgh was going through a period of renewed vigour.

North Bridge, linking the top of Princes Street with the Royal Mile had just been replaced, in 1897, with a handsome new span of three 175-foot arches across Waverley railway station. At one end, the North British

Hotel, costing in excess of £250,000 and offering not only 400 comfortable guest rooms, but also a royal suite on its first floor, had opened. Its flamboyant architect, Hamilton Beattie, was also the architect of the new Jenner's building in Princes Street that had been completed in 'free renaissance' style complete with sculptured female figures. And northbound trains, in 1890, began to cross the Forth Bridge, an architectural marvel in steel that had taken seven years to build and which, it was noted, could 'stand a wind pressure of 65lbs per square foot, or between seven and eight thousand tons of lateral pressure on the cantilevers.' Of course, this was the railway age at its most confident, but Edinburgh as a city, it would seem, also felt comfortable with itself.

While the railway passed under North Bridge in its quest to reach all corners of the kingdom, below South Bridge and George IV Bridge was a very different Edinburgh, one that was the domain of the poor and this, of course, included blind people who were without work or tried to eke out an existence through the likes street peddling, oratory, or busking.

Edwardian travel guide books had varying degrees of comment to make about Edinburgh's Cowgate, an ancient thoroughfare that ran through a towering chasm of high tenements fed by the closes which trickle down to it from the Royal Mile. Although decayed buildings in this 'chasm' give hints of an affluent past, the area's downward spiral was long established and the Cowgate and its locality were a world apart. Writing in 1889, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote that 'to look over the South Bridge and see the Cowgate below, full of crying hawkers, is to view

one rank of society from another in the twinkling of eye’.

Stevenson gave a damning assessment of the Old Town’s inhabitants: ‘Irish washings flutter at the windows, and the pavements are encumbered with loiterers,’ he wrote, his comments on laundry suggesting that he saw this enclave as the domain of the down-trodden immigrant. He conceded that some of the ‘loiterers’ were hard-working men merely pausing to exchange views in weighty matters as they went about their business. But Stevenson reckoned that most were ‘skulking jail-birds; unkempt, bare-foot children; big-mouthed, robust women ... and a dismal sprinkling of mutineers and broken men from higher ranks in society.’ One of the broken men could well have been Lindsay Howie who is described later in this book.

In 1898, an anonymous writer in a guide published for delegates to a British Medical Association gathering in the city that year, referred to the Cowgate as ‘... “dives” and low moulded doorways, and close heads, and projecting poles, bearing the dingy “washing” of the inmates of the degraded thoroughfare ...’. He informed the visitors that the Cowgate was once ‘the chosen abode of “patricians and senators and princes of the land” and when men famous in law, literature, and statecraft resided in its side wynds and closes.’ But now, he wrote, it was strictly for ‘those [visitors] not afraid, in their zeal for information, to explore the “dark profound”’.

Four years later, guide author, John Couston, advised visitors that ‘At the south-east corner of the Grassmarket is the entrance to the Cowgate, not a street to attract the

ordinary visitor further than the short distance down where stands Magdalene Chapel, now used as a Protestant Medical Mission.’ It was a locale to be penetrated only by the adventuresome, to be undertaken boldly and followed by a swift exit. Another author, writing in 1908, explained to visitors that ‘in looking down on the Cowgate an interesting glimpse is obtained of what was once a part of the garden suburbs of Old Edinburgh, which, along with the parallel High Street, really constituted the Town’. His advice to visitors appeared to be that they should be content to see the Cowgate from above and from the safety of the new North Bridge or from George IV Bridge. Indeed, in 1914, John Reid, in his guide book, added that ‘George IV Bridge passes over the Cowgate, of which it commands very quaint and picturesque views,’ but going on to caution that:

Now much of it [the Cowgate] may be described as “poverty, hunger, and dirt” and there does not appear to be any warm glow one can imagine as being present in the rollocking days of old. Rags and corduroys have taken the place of glitter and tinsel, and the uniform of the policeman is seen where the rubicund guard one patrolled.

Like the nameless writer of 1908, John Reid, advised that, ‘It all can all be seen from the parapet railings.’

Joseph Keith published his ‘Edinburgh of Today’ (1908) which he maintained was not ‘a guide-book in the ordinary sense of the term ...’, but was to give the visitor ‘an idea of what manner of city Edinburgh really is ...’. He depicted Princes Street as being a sort of social melting pot where,

‘On Thursday and Sunday night, domestics are to be found in large numbers enjoying Princes Street in company with their “chaps,” and the Gaelic-speaking young persons from the Highlands ... are to be met here on the two nights mentioned’, but also where, he observed, ‘The stranger with the well-lined wallet will find opportunities for reducing his white man’s burden by spending a day or two in the ... shops and warehouses ...’.

In assessing, for his readers’ benefit, ‘what manner of city Edinburgh really is’, Keith does not venture into the Cowgate or the Grassmarket. But he does give a descriptive account of the more salubrious Lawnmarket, the tenemented cobbled promenade that links the High Street with the castle esplanade. He informs that there are:

... premises devoted to business in rags, bottles, ice-cream, cigarettes, cooked foods, cheap shaves, milk and cream, groceries, second-hand trunks, fried fish and chips, and, indeed, all the goods known to civilisation, and there are also a pawn shop and one or two spirit dealers’ establishments to meet the wants of the frouzy residents.

Keith does however invite his reading guests to risk a little adventure:

If we are bent on inspecting “closes” ... let not the stranger hesitate to use these closes as thoroughfares, for, although there is much that is squalid about them, there are often interesting buildings at their further ends, access to which

can be had with small risk to life and property.

On the course of such a promenade, he says that 'We begin to see that what we have taken for comely Scottish lasses, with tartan shawls on head, as per olden pictures, are really ghoulish wrecks of womanhood, whose tartan shawls, as often as not, conceal stolen goods, which are about to be pawned to raise the wherewithal to purchase ardent spirits'. However, the disparaging remarks of Keith and other writers of guide books for the comfortable tourist classes about the impoverished areas of the old city do not attempt to investigate or understand those living on the margins - the frail, the elderly, the unemployed, the disabled and, of course, outdoor blind people whose lives might encompass any of these characteristics.

A city map dating from the late 1890s, shows the northern extent of Edinburgh to be quite distinctly contained by the Water of Leith. There is clear space between Edinburgh and Leith along Leith Walk although streets in the intervening space are appearing. South of The Meadows, Merchison, Morningside and Newington appear to be typified by generous space around their street layouts, localities that Joseph Keith labels 'villadom'. The areas around and parallel to Nicolson Street and Pleasance, a neighbourhood occupied by many blind people because of the proximity of the blind asylum workshops, are more dense. The area in the east through Tollcross to Gorgie also looks more densely developed. Murrayfield and Corstorphine are out in the countryside.

Pages in The Register emphasise the distinctness of Leith

from Edinburgh. Although, according to our 1898 commentator:

... Leith and Edinburgh have so grown together that, topographically speaking, the boundary between them is a merely conventional one. The city, however, has not absorbed its “port,” which retains to its full its separate municipal organisation and its distinct, and on some points divergent, interests and character.

So, Edwardian Edinburgh, and Leith, presented a varied urban landscape. It was one of both opulence and deprivation. And for most of the people on the Society’s Register, their experience was of the latter for much of their lives.

The Register

The Register of the Edinburgh Society for Promoting Reading amongst the Blind is the only document known to have survived which details individual blind and visually impaired people with whom the Society endeavoured to engage. It did this through provision of training in reading raised type, supply of Moon and braille books through its library service and, by the early twentieth century, offering some material support in instances of poverty.

At the Scottish Outdoor Teachers' Union Conference, held in Paisley in June 1906, it was reported that, at a Committee Meeting of the Union in Glasgow four months earlier, it had been proposed that 'a common register or roll book' be maintained by each of the outdoor blind societies 'similar to those used in Glasgow'. This was agreed to. Although this was in 1906, The Register for the Edinburgh Society appears to have been compiled and maintained between approximately 1903 and 1911. It may be that attempts were made to create the Edinburgh register with a certain degree of back-dating of entries. Indeed, there are earlier references to the existence of registers of some description across several of Scotland's expanding number of outdoor blind societies, for example in 1884 when it was recorded that 'there are 2,700 at least on the 21 Roll-Books'. Interestingly, between 1894 and 1906, the minutes of the Union are written in the same neat and distinctive handwriting that appears in the latter pages of the Edinburgh Register and which show this to be the hand of its missionary teacher Charles Ness. He was secretary of the Scottish Outdoor Blind Teachers'

Union throughout this 22-year period.

That the dates of The Register are open to challenge highlights that it is not a perfect document. Indeed, The Register presents many challenges, but it nonetheless opens a window on the lives of some of the people who lived in Edinburgh and neighbouring localities and counties during the Edwardian era. For historians, it presents a valuable resource and a tantalising series of conundrums.

The Register takes the form of a ledger. Instructions, inserted at the front, are given for its completion. In addition to basic information such as name and address, it seeks to record such data as cause of blindness, religious denomination, 'conjugal condition' – for example whether single, married or widowed, and reading ability before sight loss and following sight loss. The Register tries to differentiate between those who are able-bodied, earning a living, and those who are 'disabled' from earning a living or are unemployed. Of course there are a number of people listed who did earn some money, but not enough to live on, and so aid from the likes of the Poor Law authorities and benevolent societies is occasionally recorded. It seeks to tabulate where people originated but, like the census returns, detail of locality was only solicited from those born in Scotland while the country of origin was all that was asked of those from beyond Scotland.

In only a minority of instances have all these questions been addressed in completing The Register. So, as the 'roll' of outdoor blind people in Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland, it has many deficiencies. During the short

life of The Register, it was rewritten, resulting in many duplicated, but not necessarily identical, entries. Identifying duplications is one of the challenges presented to researchers using The Register. Despite these various shortcomings, The Register has enabled the partial reconstruction of the lives of some of the people in it. The insight that these reconstructions provide shows that this flawed record is nonetheless a unique and valuable document. Indeed, the limitations of The Register might also be interpreted in a positive light in that compilation of more comprehensive data might have resulted in its entries being accepted at face value. Deficient data prompted investigations using other archival records. Consequently, the use of several sources resulted in valuable additional information, which could be cross-referenced with The Register, being traced. But this additional information also throws up errors that have occurred in the completion of official documents, such as census returns, birth, marriage and death registrations, and institutional records where, in theory, there should be no errors.

It is worth bearing in mind that registrars of births, marriages and deaths, census enumerators, and hospital and asylum officials, could often only record information as accurately as it was given to them. Such an example is the house-by-house record of everyone living in Scotland at a set date every ten years, the decennial census, which has been conducted since 1841 (with the exception of 1941). The full details of the census are only released following the lapse of one hundred years. Release of the 1911 census data for public consultation coincided neatly

with the end of the period of The Register.

The work undertaken in the National Records of Scotland by the 'Seeing Our History' volunteers has certainly highlighted inconsistency in census reporting of people on The Register. It fell upon the 'head' of households to give enumerators, who collected data by door-to-door visits, the details of each person in the house on the appointed date, including visitors and lodgers. It was not unusual, for example, for the head of the household to make slight errors in ages of people living in his house, or for the enumerator to mis-hear the names of unfamiliar parishes of birth. A particular failing arose in recording the presence of 'blind' or 'deaf and dumb' members in a household, even although this was a requirement of the census from 1851. Census returns for occupants of various institutions present their own challenges because of the frequent anonymity accorded their lives in such places.

There are therefore aberrations apparent when tracing an individual through several census returns. Occasional omission of blindness does not, of course, represent miraculous recovery from blindness. For example, Elizabeth Ann Hoseason is recorded as blind in 1891, but not in 1901. There were also differing interpretations of what constituted blindness – by officials, by family members, and by the 'blind' individual. Although enumerators were only required to record blindness with a mark in the appropriate column of the enumeration book, they often supplemented these entries with the likes of 'totally blind', 'blind from birth', etc.

The shortcomings of the ten-yearly census in accurately recording cases of blindness, as it was obliged to do, was noted by William Auchincloss Arrol in his role as one of the members of the Royal Commission on the Blind. In 1886, he wrote:

I regret that I cannot accept the Statistical Return for the Blind as correct, as in 1881 the Census gives for the counties of Lanark, Ayr, and Renfrew, a total of 1,037, whereas on the roll of the Outdoor Mission to the Blind for Glasgow and the West of Scotland, at the same period there were 1,060, to which falls to be added the inmates of the Blind Asylum at Castle Street [of] 150, making in these counties in all 1,210, [a] difference in excess of [the] census [of] 173.

Arrol concluded that this census under-reporting was nationwide, leading him to speculate that the overall number of blind people in Scotland was around 3,650 rather than the 3,158 tabulated. The total number of people on the registers of the ten outdoor missions was 2,747, while those affiliated to the five blind asylums totalled 533. He also believed that there were approximately 370 people who had affiliations with neither outdoor missions nor blind asylums, 'a few of whom are in a position of independence'. While she was indeed on the Society's records, such a person 'in a position of independence' was Elizabeth Jamieson who was not recorded on the 1901 Census as blind. Elizabeth Jamieson developed cataracts in old age and was 'discovered' by the Society's missionaries on 28 June 1905. And as will shown later in this book, what an

important discovery she was.

The purpose of The Register has to be challenged. Taken at face value, it is a roll of all the outdoor blind across Edinburgh and the counties constituting the south-east of Scotland, rich as well as poor. It therefore implies that this is a record of the people with whom the Edinburgh Society engaged within its efforts to encourage literacy (and religiosity) through advancing reading in raised type, and in some cases giving welfare support.

However, the many entries deficient of detail other than a simple address, or name of a poorhouse or lodging house, suggest that there were many people recorded as being blind with whom the Society did not establish meaningful contact, or contact at all. In particular, this is suggested by vague entries such as 'Wilson boy, 13 Union Place', 'Woman, Gorebridge', and 'Jack, Ramsays Square, Loanhead'. The forename of women on The Register is often omitted so that, for example, Miss Henderson of Kirkliston presents problems – as there were two unmarried sisters who ran the post office, neither of whom was recorded as blind through their long lives. Agnes lived from 1833 to 1905 and Elizabeth from 1834 to 1908 – one of them lost her sight in old age, but we have no means of identifying whether it was Agnes or Elizabeth.

While acting as a detailed record of some blind people, The Register's wider goal of 'name collecting' served to accentuate the extent of blindness as a 'problem' in the Society's efforts to attract sympathetic philanthropic support for its work, even if it was only engaging with a proportion of those people on its roll. This notion of 'name

collecting' is suggested by John Brown in his missionary work for the Society when he recorded, in his diary, visiting localities in Edinburghshire (Midlothian), Linlithgowshire (West Lothian) and Haddingtonshire (East Lothian) in 1865. He detailed his strategy of arriving in a place, asking people if there were any blind people in the area and, if he received a positive response, going to seek them out. For example, of his arrival in Ormiston, he recorded 'calling upon the Established minister [the minister of the Church of Scotland] and the two villages schoolmasters, and at a number of other houses, searching for blind, but found none'. Upon calling on blind people that had been reported to him, he was not always welcomed with open arms, noting that one such man in Kirkliston made clear that he 'was unwilling to learn' – although in this instance Brown insists that his persistence succeeded in making his subject more receptive to his overtures. Brown's successor, Charles Ness, also recorded that 'sometimes in the country we are at first looked upon with suspicion, and several visits are necessary to convince our new friends that we have come all the way from the city to see them and interest ourselves in their welfare.'

The Society's missionaries had a large geographical area to cover and had limited resources at their disposal. The extent to which they succeeded in their specific mission of teaching reading of raised print and pursuing their evangelising agenda with those recorded on The Register has to be considered critically. It is possible, even probable, that they achieved meaningful engagement with only a modest proportion of those listed on the roll.

However, despite shortcomings and biases, The Register

should be seen as a unique window on lives that might otherwise be hidden and undervalued. These lives are diverse and, while having their own individual characteristics, they open a window upon wider blind experience during an era when public welfare support was limited, as was popular understanding of the experiences of people living with sight loss.

Charity and Philanthropy

When the directors of the Edinburgh Society met in December 1909, they reported to subscribers and supporters that 'during the year the Society removed to their new premises in the property gifted to them by the late Mr and Miss Jamieson in 34 and 38 Howe Street, where their Library has been fitted up, and where the Meetings of the Directors are now held from time to time'. The same report also recorded that 18 'blind people with their guides' had spent a fortnight in the holiday home at Kirkliston during the summer; and that 38 pensioners were now on the roll of the Jamieson Fund which gave them £8 per year. The estate of Miss Elizabeth Jamieson, who had been predeceased by her brother, was still being finalised, but the Society was already putting initial instalments to good use and had aspirations to increase pensions to needy blind people and to purchase property to serve as its own holiday home.

The first report of the Society to give a statement of its finances occurred in 1863. Perhaps making amends for not printing such statements in earlier reports, the Society covered a 26-month period from November 1861 to December 1863. This showed subscriptions and donations totalling £386 18s 6d, the bulk of which was spent on paying its missionaries and book distributors (colporteurs). Most of the income arose from subscriptions and donations across the areas of the Society's missionary activity and, while it was able to compile an extensive list of subscribers, donations tended to be relatively small.

In 1865, John Brown, the Society's missionary, wrote about his work. In addition to seeking out blind people, checking on the progress in reading raised type among those already known to him, and engaging them in prayer during his visits, he was also proactive in seeking donations and subscriptions to assist the Society's work. He described his visits to towns and villages such as Ratho, Kirkliston, Broxburn, Tranent, Ormiston and Penicuik, all of which were undertaken on foot. In his journal entry for 20 October 1865, he wrote:

Visited Penicuik and neighbourhood ... and called upon all the principal gentlemen, with the view to enlisting their sympathies in our work. Called at the Lord Justice-Clerk's, Sir George Clerk, Mr John Cowan's and many others.

The accounts of the Society show that he elicited five shillings each from Sir John Clerk and John Cowan.

Typical donations from subscribers were either half a crown or five shillings, and the largest single amount in 1865 was £3 from the 'Misses Anderson, 24 Moray Place, Edinburgh'. There were no large donations and the philanthropic backing for the Society might be described as being on a modest scale. Indeed, historian Gordon Phillips notes that the Society operated 'on a shoestring budget'. This contrasted with the significant charitable income attracted by some other bodies including hospitals and asylums. Every half-crown counted, not least in enabling the Society to pay the missionaries a reasonably comfortable salary as befitted their status. The Society needed to be able to reach out to the comfortable classes

and, in so doing, convince them of the worthiness of their cause and the great need to be addressed. It was against this realisation that The Register was compiled 50 years later as part of a strategy of identifying the full extent of blindness and sight loss in Edinburgh and the Borders counties. Even if contact with those on The Register was variable, it was the perceived 'need' for the Society's unique work that was important in soliciting philanthropic largesse. The competition for such charitable support was fierce, as recounted by observer Joseph Keith in 1908, here writing of feminine charitable endeavour:

Give them a worthy object to work for, and the people of Edinburgh will run successful bazaars and fancy fairs and sales of work with any community under the sun, and, as showing that a genuine spirit of philanthropy is common to all classes, ladies in the most exalted stations are to be found working like female niggers [sic] disposing of bazaar truck, and not only working themselves, but also seeing to it that their maids, who attend and assist them, do not shirk their duties.

The 1869 accounts are indicative of total annual subscriptions that might be received during the mid-Victorian era, £184 10 shillings being collected. Twenty years later, in 1889, subscriptions and donations came to £395 8s 6d, a doubling from 1869 of this main source of income, but total salaries to the 'outdoor teachers' had also increased - from £159 9s 4d in 1869 to £310 10s in 1889.

A typeset printed letter from John Brown to subscribers dated October 1898 recalled for its recipients that in past years he had been in the habit of writing individually to many of the subscribers, no mean task. It was perhaps this personal approach that was key to eliciting subscriptions, modest as they might be, over the previous four decades. He now explained that ‘a severe illness ... has laid me aside from active work for the last seven months’ and so his need to resort to ‘this printed circular’. It is against this background of small scale, personal solicitation that Elizabeth Jamieson was to prove such a revelation for the Society, and for Charles Ness, Brown’s successor as superintendent and missionary during the Edwardian period.

Elizabeth Jamieson is recorded on The Register as becoming known to the Society as a blind person on 28 June 1905. The Register indicates that her sight loss was as a result of cataract, her religious denomination was Protestant, and that she could read raised type. That is the extent to which her details were recorded – and as with many women on The Register, even her forename was omitted. Although The Register was consistently deficient in recording full details of many of the people on it, the scant information on Elizabeth Jamieson is astounding given that she was to become so important to the Society’s work throughout the twentieth century – and that importance commenced immediately in 1905.

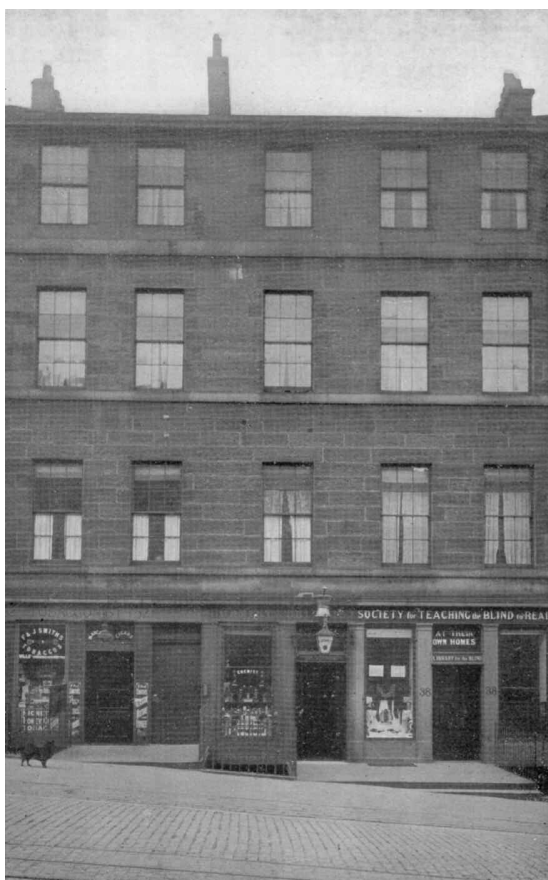
Elizabeth Jamieson was born in Edinburgh in 1825, the third of six children of William and Helen Jamieson. The second last child, Jane, died in infancy, but the remainder, Helen, Janet, Elizabeth, Robert and Alexander, lived into

old age. None of them married. Their father, a builder, appears to have had a flourishing business because, after he died in 1836 at the age of 68, his widow and his daughters Helen, Janet and Elizabeth were all able to live off income from investments for the rest of their lives. The family had rental income from several properties, including apartment houses in an upmarket tenement at 34 Howe Street, and from some other properties including their childhood home at 44 Howe Street where they had all been born. Alexander traded as a wine and tea merchant, and Robert was a wholesaler of coffee, spices and fruit. They lived with their mother, Helen, in a six-room apartment at 34 Howe Street from at least 1861. By 1905, when Elizabeth's sight became impaired with cataracts, only she and her brother, Alexander, remained – along with a young servant, Annie Cockburn. Annie apparently also nursed Alexander and Elizabeth as their health declined over the coming months, Alexander dying in 1907 at the age of 75, and Elizabeth in 1908 a day short of her 83rd birthday.

In 1905, the year in which her sight began to deteriorate, Elizabeth Jamieson, and her brother, Alexander, gifted the Society 'a property belonging to them in Howe Street, Edinburgh'. The 1906 Annual Report explained that:

The free rental of the property is expected to yield from £110 to £120 per annum, and it will be set aside to form pensions ... There will probably be a few pensions of £10, and a few more of £8, amounting altogether from the free rental derived from the property ...

The property was the middle-class tenement, consisting of four houses, street-level shop premises, and basements at 34 Howe Street. This was where Elizabeth and her brother had lived for most their lives - and where they continued to live. The most incredible thing about this substantial gift was that the arrangement meant that, not only had they generously gifted their property, but 'Mr and Miss Jamieson ... are paying rent as the Society's tenants'. It might have been expected that the Society would have insisted on their benefactors having free life rent on their dwelling at number 34. However, it seems that the elderly siblings had little need of such a gesture; they would also have been conscious of their own frailty and decline.



34 Howe Street – the property of Elizabeth and Alexander Jamieson which they bequeathed to the Society. (Courtesy of Lothian Health Services Archive, Edinburgh University Library (LHSAEUL))

Alexander Jamieson died on 8 April 1907. Two days later, being unable to write due to 'defective sight and bodily weakness', Elizabeth instructed revisions to her Will before a Notary Public. As she was the 'sole executor and universal legatory' she recognised that 'the Estate now at my disposal is larger in amount than it was at the time [March 1907] I executed the said Trust Disposition and Settlement.' The hasty updating to her Will was motivated by her newly increased wealth and her awareness of her own failing health. Her revised Will continued to provide annuities of £25 per annum each to four trustees and eleven annuitants. In specified instances, these continued in favour of a wife or sister upon the original annuitants' deaths. One annuitant was Annie Cockburn, Elizabeth's maid and nurse, while an additional annuity of £10 annually was made in favour of a neighbour in 34 Howe Street. The remainder of her substantial assets went to the Society to supplement the already ongoing work of the Jamieson Fund in providing pensions and supporting other purposes that the trustees considered to be appropriate.

In 1909, the Society's financial report showed income of £788 19s 10d accruing to its 'ordinary funds'; and, in separate and distinct financial accounts, £541 18s 7d in a 'Jamieson Fund'. The income to that account included £153 12s 10d from rents on property in Howe Street, and £268 15s 9d from 'interest received on sums invested'. By the following year, the Jamieson Fund, with £946, had overtaken the 'ordinary funds' which rested on a balance of £716. The bequest from the Jamiesons was obviously a crucial boon to the Society's work at this time, especially in

the broadening of the Society's remit to include substantial welfare as well as instruction in reading raised type - that year the fund had paid out £609 in pensions to needy people on The Register, generally the frail and elderly who lacked family support.

One pensioner, described in 1911, did not conform to the 'elderly' profile, but her circumstances had moved the committee administering the fund to grant her a pension for a provisional period:

M.D., who died during the year, belonged to Berwick-on-Tweed, and was first seen by us in the Infirmary. She was an orphan, and dependent on parish relief. Being comparatively young, her pension was only granted for five years. Had she lived, her case would have been reconsidered next year. She gave evidence of being a true Christian, and was deeply grateful for the help given her.

Gratitude and religiosity were obviously qualities that the Society regarded highly. The Register shows M.D. to be Mary Drummond (1881-1911) who lost her sight through an attack of influenza. When she became known to the Society in January 1907, her address in Berwick-on-Tweed was 71 West End where she had lived alone since at least 1901. The missionaries recorded that she had been a dressmaker and that she could read raised type. Different sources indicate that her sight loss occurred when she was twenty-two or twenty-four. Either way, she had lost her sight relatively recently when she was placed on The Register so her level of proficiency can only be speculated.

The other venture made possible by the Jamieson bequest, the Society's new holiday home, opened on 17 May 1912. In its first year it enabled 'between 40 and 50 people to receive a fortnight's holiday, ... a time of rest and recreation.' The new cottage, in Kirkliston, was named the Jamieson Holiday Home.

The Jamieson Fund continued in operation throughout the twentieth century before it was finally exhausted. Elizabeth and Alexander Jamieson were interred with their parents, three sisters and brother in St Cuthbert's burial ground, in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle.



Jamieson Cottage – the Society's holiday retreat in Kirkliston. (LHSAEUL)

Poverty

The Glasgow Mission to the Blind, founded two years after the Edinburgh Society, complained at the extent of its task and of what it saw as mistaken public perceptions of what support was available for blind people in the city. The Glasgow Blind Asylum provided education for young people and employment, both for inmates and outworkers, in activities such as rope-making, mattress-making and furniture manufacture. The Asylum was run according to a business model and won tenders for its output, for example in rope work for the Admiralty. In effect, the asylum was catering for the 'able-bodied' blind, while the Glasgow Mission was serving the much more numerous 'disabled' blind – those who were disabled from working or being productive.

The Edinburgh Society's role was to teach ability to read raised type to outdoor blind people. However, by the Edwardian period, when *The Register*, which is the inspiration behind this book, was compiled by the teacher-missionaries, the society had also begun to take on a role of welfare support, this being aided by the likes of the Jamieson legacy. The first port of call for destitute blind people who lacked family networks from which to successfully seek help was to appeal to the Inspector of Poor for their parish. Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1845, poor relief could be granted to people without family members to care for them, if they were 'disabled' from working, i.e. they were not categorised as able-bodied. The Inspector of Poor for the parish would investigate the circumstances of the claimant and, if

assistance was to be granted, the preferred course was to grant 'out relief'. This might consist of help with clothing or bedding, provision of basic food items, perhaps some coal to heat the home, or help with rent. The aim was to keep claimants in their own homes in the hope that their situation was temporary, perhaps through the winter months, but with the wish that their circumstances might later improve and they could support themselves once more. This was the cheap, and preferred, option of parochial boards and the parish councils that succeeded them. There were several cases recorded on The Register of blind people in Edinburgh and its neighbouring counties receiving an allowance under the Poor Law – and also from other charitable organisations from whom they might be able to claim - while annual reports indicate that the Society itself also gave blind people items of clothing, and supplies of coal purchased from the Cheap Coal Society.

There were cases where paupers were so destitute that they were judged unable to survive in their own homes. This might be because of the frailty that often accompanied old age, or through physical, sensory or mental impairment. Under such circumstances, they might be sent to a poorhouse. A significant number of people recorded in The Register were residents of a poorhouse.

The Register contains dedicated pages for specific poorhouses in, or close to, the city. But poorhouses also appear alongside the entries for outdoor blind people listed under localities in the rural hinterland of the Lothian and Border counties. Craigleith (formerly City), Craiglockhart (formerly St Cuthbert's) and Leith were the urban poorhouses and these had a considerable number

of blind inmates. In the surrounding areas of towns, villages and farms, blind people were recorded in Berwick, Dalkeith, East Linton, Galashiels, Haddington, Hawick, Inveresk, Jedburgh, Kelso, Linlithgow and Peebles poorhouses. These were 'combination' poorhouses that served several parishes that combined their resources to establish a shared facility.

The sparseness of information in The Register about the residents of poorhouses suggests that the Society, while it may have had contact with the poorhouse superintendents overseeing them, had little engagement with the majority of blind inmates. In his introduction to the 1899 annual report of the Society, Charles Ness, in succeeding John Brown as the 'senior' missionary, recalled his second day at work when he joined the Society two decades earlier. On 3 July 1878, he wrote in his journal, 'Met in Mr Brown's house for prayer, and then went out to Craiglockhart Poorhouse and held a meeting on one of the greens, four of our blind and thirty other inmates being present; Mr Brown read the Word and addressed them, and I engaged in prayer.'

When The Register was compiled, Ness's distinctive handwriting reveals his role in recording outdoor blind people, including the poorhouse inmates. Four men and five women were listed as inmates of Craiglockhart Poorhouse. The varied information recorded about these nine inmates suggests that only two of them, 48-year-old Robert McDowell and 59-year-old John Carlottier, both of whom had lost their sight very recently through accident, gave Charles Ness the time of day, but there is no indication that either of them had taken advantage of the

Society's offer to provide tuition in reading raised type. This begs the question as to how many of those poorhouse inmates in the 1900s, albeit that many of them would have been frail and elderly, were attracted to visitations by the Society missionaries to urge them to learn to read raised type so that they might read 'the Word'. However, the absence of any data in The Register on either ability to read raised type or in the process of learning, or indeed the absence of any information at all except for names, suggests that engagement with blind poorhouse inmates was not proving a great success in the Edwardian period.

The Register also has pages recording blind people who it identified as belonging to a 'Migratory Class'. These were effectively people of no fixed abode, many of whom were living in lodging houses. Lodging houses were cheap and basic places of resort for the homeless, and for itinerant workers, where they could sleep for the night. They were often places of last resort for people retaining the last vestiges of independence yet on the margins of society. For most of those without work, it was better than being confined to a poorhouse, although some may have endeavoured to pursue the poorhouse option only to be rejected, particularly if the Inspector of Poor had adjudicated that they were able-bodied. The difference between being able-bodied and being disabled could be highly subjective, but it is conceivable that a sturdy man, who had periphery vision but was not 'totally blind' (as the 1911 census criteria stipulated as representing genuine blindness), would have been refused poor relief – either outdoor relief or by admission to a poorhouse.

Of Edinburgh's lodging houses on the Old Town, there were four to which blind men appear to have gravitated. The most 'popular' was the Castle Lodging House, located at 75 Grassmarket. Some stayed at Loftus Lodging House. One man, Angus McMasters, stayed at the Jubilee Lodging House, and another, 54-year-old Peter Carrigan, blind from an accident 14 years earlier, stayed at the Metropolitan Lodging House. These particular lodging houses were male-only establishments and they absorbed a considerable volume of humanity. For example, in 1901, Loftus Lodging House at 65 Grassmarket had 72 lodgers, and Jubilee Lodging House at 1 King's Stables Road had 177. Castle Lodging House had 362 male lodgers and by the 1911 census this had increased to 396. There was also a House of Refuge and The Register records three women and one man staying there.

The Castle Lodging House building at 75 Grassmarket still stands and is B-listed with Historic Scotland. It is an imposing four-storey building with an appearance that belies its original purpose. It was erected in 1875 as a lodging house for the poor who were accommodated in small rooms with external balconies and each floor was provided with one toilet. It was subject to significant alteration in 1889 when a mock baronial door frame was added with the Christison coat of arms, the Latin motif 'vitam dirigat', meaning 'He directs life', and the initials 'A.C.' for Sir Alexander Christison (1828-1918). Christison had been surgeon-general in the Indian Medical Service. The internal alterations undertaken at this time entailed removal of the small rooms, strengthening of the floors, and provision of sleeping accommodation in dormitories.

Its outlook to the north takes the unimpaired eye to Edinburgh Castle on its rock escarpment high above the Grassmarket.

The Register also lists a significant number of people who were lodgers or boarders in family dwellings, mostly in Edinburgh's old town or close to the blind asylum and its workshops. There are instances where heads of families received blind, and also sighted, lodgers and who were themselves blind. A 1911 example is 38-year-old James Clingan, a 'totally blind' basket-maker working at the blind asylum. In his three-room tenement house at 17 Dalrymple Place in the Dumbiedykes area of Edinburgh were his five



Castle Lodging House - and a street entertainer gathering a crowd in 1918. (City of Edinburgh Council - Edinburgh Libraries www.capitalcollections.org.uk)

children and his sister-in-law, all sighted, and two boarders. One of his boarders was 12-year-old Sophie Hoseason, who was the daughter of Lizzie Hoseason, a blind woman who is one of our case studies in this book. The other boarder was 46-year-old Henry Cust, a ‘totally blind’ mat-maker, also employed by the blind asylum. In the late 1950s, these tenements were described as dangerous, disease-ridden and rat-infested and were condemned as part of a wide-scale demolition in the locality.

Boarders and lodgers undoubtedly chose to live as paying ‘guests’ of households because of limited income and earning capability – ‘boarding’ remained a common practice in the early twentieth century in Scottish cities



The view from Castle Lodging House – the Grassmarket and Edinburgh Castle. (City of Edinburgh Council - Edinburgh Libraries www.capitalcollections.org.uk)

among the able-bodied too. Taking a lodger or two enabled families to supplement their earned income from wages, and the practice helped lodgers to eke out their earnings by keeping their accommodation costs to a minimum. But among Edinburgh's blind, evidence suggests that boarding provided practical support in living with sight-loss, as well as economic benefits for lodgers and their hosts. The significant number of people on The Register who boarded with families, some of whom had their own experience of sight loss, suggests that networks of mutual support in living with blindness were at play in negotiating living arrangements.

The extent of poverty, or financial duress, present in such arrangements would have been variable, many of these boarders having some degree of income either as blind asylum outworkers or from other sources of employment or modest free enterprise. In other words, they would have been expected to pay their way. However, it is apparent that poverty at various levels was a characteristic that prevailed among many of the people in whom the Society professed an interest.

Employment – the able-bodied and disabled blind

In 1906, Charles Ness reported:

The difficult problem of finding work for the able-bodied blind falls under the scope of the Blind Asylums. ... most of our people are beyond the age limit for obtaining an entrance into these institutions. They desire, however, to help themselves. The quest is – What can they do? For our women, knitting is the chief employment, and during the past year we have provided work of this kind to a larger extent than hitherto. Quite a number of our men try hawking, with varied success, tea being found most remunerative.

J Frew Bryden, superintendent of the Mission to the Outdoor Blind of Glasgow and the west of Scotland, addressed a conference ‘pertaining to matters of the Blind’ held in Edinburgh in June 1905. He followed up his presentation with a paper to which he appended a survey, dated 1 January 1905, of statistics relating to ‘outdoor blind’ for the areas covered by the various Missions across Scotland. For Edinburgh and south-east Scotland, there were 453 people registered, 208 males and 245 females - including four under 16 years of age who were in education.

The 449 adults were split into three groups – employed (79), not employed (346), and ‘on the street’ (24). The 79 ‘employed’ were split into vague categories of ‘wage earners’ (14), ‘traders on own account’ (40), ‘music teachers, organists and tuners’ (10), and ‘otherwise

employed' (15). The 346 'not employed' consisted of 122 infirm and a further 62 in poorhouses – many of these would have been elderly, disabled, or both. 108 were categorised as housekeepers, all of whom were female except seven. This might be taken as inferring that most were housewives or staying at home to care for children or dependent relatives. 54 of the 346 'not employed' were classed as 'able-bodied unemployed'.

Out of our total of 449, 24 are left unaccounted for and these are placed in a distinct third group headed 'on the street' and consisting of 'beggars, readers, [and] musicians'. The outdoor blind missions obviously considered these street people as a group apart and they were looked down upon with some disdain. They were in significant contrast to the ten (six men and four women) who were singled out within the employed group as 'music teachers, organists and tuners', all of whom were held in high regard for their skills. An organist who played in church was quite different from a musician who performed in the street. It is also interesting that while street performers (reading raised type or busking) were decried, that Ness spoke about hawkers with a degree of pride.

Such figures are instructive to an extent in that they give a rough profile of who the outdoor blind were. But the statistics only reveal as much as the Missions wished to reveal. And they appear to project outdoor blind people in a highly selective manner. The deficiencies of The Register have already been remarked upon and although it had been designed to record each person's occupation both before, and after, loss of sight, this has only been completed in respect of only a small proportion of people.

Those recorded do nonetheless give a flavour of the life-changing effect that sight-loss might cause, not least in economic independence.

Examples are Peter Carrigan who had been a miner, a well-paid job if he was a hewer at the coalface, and was now a hawker, while Thomas Murray who had been a labourer, was now a street reader which, while singled out as an 'on the street' occupation by Bryden, suggests he had developed a skill in place of work which relied on strength. Two men had earned comfortable incomes as shoemakers, 26 to 30 shillings a week, but were now unemployed. However, while these shoemakers were now quite elderly, Murray and Carrigan were not yet encroaching upon middle age.



The Society's encouragement of various skills is exhibited at Jamieson Cottage. (LHSAEUL)

Andrew Duff might have been claimed by Ness as one of his moderate success stories. When he lost both his sight and use of one arm at the age of 20 he was earning 12 shillings weekly as a clerk. While his earnings three years later had dropped, they were still a respectable nine shillings weekly from selling tea – and he had also learned to read raised type. Patrick Reynolds had earned 16 shillings weekly as a labourer, but after his sight loss he had an ‘uncertain’ income as a musician. However, like Duff, he was held in some esteem as, in 1904, he had entertained those assembled for the Society’s annual meeting by singing. He also earned £4 annually by undertaking work for the blind asylum.

Among the women were Miss Williamson, formerly a stationer’s clerk, now a knitter, and Miss Lynch of Musselburgh who ran a small shop whereas formerly she had been a seamstress. Miss Hutch of Dunbar had been blind from infancy and, in her 50s by the Edwardian period, earned her living by turning a mangle. However, Miss Moir, who had been a nurse when sighted, and Katie Pringle who was a book-sewer until she lost her sight at the age of 30, were among those listed as unemployed.

As suggested by the case of Patrick Reynolds, The Register also reveals that some outdoor blind people were also affiliated with the blind asylum as outworkers. However, the income annotated in The Register as coming from the blind asylum suggests that their work was perhaps intermittent or casual. Georgina McDonald, whose life appears in vignette in the next section, was, like Reynolds, one such worker. The sturdy Miss Hutch who turned the mangle also earned £4 annually from the blind

asylum, perhaps sending home-produced goods to the institution from her home in Dunbar. Some people on The Register earned £3 from the blind asylum, but £4 seems to have been the maximum permitted under the occasional duality of being on The Register of Outdoor Blind while also having some earnings from the blind asylum.

The Edinburgh Society did not undertake to seek employment for people on its books. This was not a part of its self-designated remit. Indeed, occasionally people were struck off the roll upon gaining admission to the blind asylum. While, by the 1900s, the Society provided some welfare support to people on The Register who were experiencing marked hardship, those cases who developed some link to the blind asylum might be regarded positively as this suggested they had some earned income even if it was only of a casual nature.

There were also people who were rejected by the blind asylum because they were not considered able-bodied or with potential to be productive. William Woods was born in 1888 and had been admitted to the blind school. He was 'sponsored' by poor law guardians under the English Poor Law as he came from Berwick-on-Tweed. However, in 1897, he was returned to Berwick by the blind school as he was 'making no progress in education'. Ten years later, Woods was found back in Edinburgh and surviving by selling matches at the Calton Street entrance to Waverley railway station. An appeal for admission to the blind asylum was made by no lesser person than the city's Lord Provost, yet the blind asylum declined the request because it considered him unsuitable because he was

'physically weak'. It was also noted that his present income was about 15 shillings weekly from the likes of alms, which, compared with the weekly income of Andrew Duff even before his sight loss, was not inconsiderable. Perhaps the main issue surrounding Woods was the lack of respectability associated with being on the street, but his rejection does highlight the tension that periodically arose across Scotland between missions to outdoor blind and the blind asylums, the former believing that the asylums took the cream of the crop for their productive output, while the missions assumed varying degrees of responsibility for the remainder, which, as they pointed out, were the majority. At any one time, there were around 500 outdoor blind people on The Register in Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland, while the blind asylum stated in the 1900s that it was responsible for 'about 250 Blind Persons [who were] Educated, Maintained, and Employed, and 130 Outdoor Beneficiaries', these coming from across Scotland and beyond.

Occasionally, people entered on the Register were described as being annuitants or having independent means. For some of these, their sources of income might have been modest, but others in these categories were able to live quite comfortably. It might be deduced that Sir Alexander Hope, 15th Baronet of Craighall (1824-1918), a bachelor who had served in the Bengal Civil Service, was not reduced to poverty when his sight failed after his retirement to Pinkie House in Haddingtonshire, a dwelling with a mere 41 rooms. The Society had elicited a modest annual subscription from Pinkie House over many years including half-a-crown from Sir Alexander Hope for 20

years until his death. Arguably, it was a token amount for someone of his status, the 'going rate' for subscribers in the locality who covered a broad social spectrum, and it is possible that it was during the course of collecting his annual two shillings and six pence that the Society became aware of his failing eyesight and consequently added him to The Register. The minimal entry suggests that he and the Society missionaries did not have much social intercourse, if any.

Education and Raised Type

Robert Meldrum, blind missionary in Aberdeen from the late 1860s, wrote in his comprehensive survey of blind asylums, schools, and missions, that Edinburgh's first school for blind children opened on South Bridge in 1833. Blind schooling in the capital was, however, placed on a firm footing a couple of years later under the patronage of Edinburgh printer, James Gall (1784-1874). During the 1820s, Gall had begun promoting a raised type, which Gordon Phillips describes as a 'relief alphabet ... based on the conventional Roman letters, but [it] replaced rounded by angular shapes'. Gall's embossed alphabet gained ready acceptance in both Edinburgh and Glasgow. Gall's first publication using his raised type, the Gospel of St John, appeared in 1832.

Gall's financial support and printing innovation enabled the education of blind children in Edinburgh to move from aural learning to reading ability. By the late 1830s, the Alston system found a period of favour. This had been developed by John Alston (1778-1846), honorary treasurer of the Glasgow Blind Asylum, but was influenced by Gall's system. However, Phillips suggests that the Alston system, like the Gall system, had a short tenure, the Edinburgh school '[having] a very good claim to be the first British establishment to introduce braille literature'. Braille, it seems, was being actively used by 1849.

In 1851, property at 2 Gayfield Square was purchased for £900 and this served as Edinburgh's blind school for the next 25 years. In 1867, there were 34 children on the Gayfield Square school roll. Also living on the premises

were a superintendent and a matron who both taught the pupils alongside their other duties. In 1876, the school joined with the blind asylum which then became the Royal Blind Asylum and School, located in new accommodation at Craigmillar. In 1911, the school had 43 pupils.

The aim of the Society for Outdoor Blind, from its founding in 1857, was to teach blind adults how to read raised type using the Moon System. William Moon (1818-1894) contracted scarlet fever during childhood. As a consequence, he lost sight in one eye and deterioration of the impaired vision of his other eye later resulted in his total blindness by the age of 21. He had aspired to be a non-Conformist clergyman, but was now inspired to develop a simple system of raised type for the use of people with vision loss. His religious convictions heavily influenced his roles in teaching blind people to read and in publishing the large embossed volumes that enabled them to do this. His aim was that they could access the Bible which, by 1858, was produced in its entirety in his embossed Moon system. The result was 60 large volumes consisting of approximately 5,000 pages.

Other systems of tactile print, created not only by Gall and Alston, but by the likes of Thomas Lucas (1764-1838) from the English West Country and Samuel Gridley Howe (1801-1876) in New England, USA, were already in use. However, Moon's system lay in its simplicity. When William Moon devised this in 1845, it consisted of 14 basic characters that could be set at different angles to create letters of the alphabet, common punctuation marks, and the commonly used words 'and' and 'the'. The system was readily adapted to other languages and alphabets, while



UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF

Her Most Gracious Majesty, The Queen.

Dr. Moon's Alphabet for the Blind.

Note.—THE DOTTED MARKS OF THE LETTERS PRINTED OVER THE ALPHABET FOR THE BLIND, SHOW WHAT PORTIONS OF THE COMMON LETTER ARE OMITTED, IN ORDER TO LAY THE CHARACTERS OPEN AND CLEAR TO THE TOUCH.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
h	l	c	d	e	f	g
h	I	J	K	L	M	N
o	i	j	k	l	m	n
O	q	p	R	s	T	U
o	l	p	r	s	t	u
V	W	X	Y	Z		
v	w	x	y	z		

G O D I S L O V E

g o d i s l o v e

THE ABOVE ALPHABET CONSISTS OF EIGHT OF THE ROMAN LETTERS UNALTERED, FOURTEEN OTHERS WITH PARTS LEFT OUT, AND FIVE NEW AND VERY SIMPLE FORMS, WHICH MAY BE EASILY LEARNED BY THE AGED, AND PERSONS WHOSE FINGERS ARE HARDENED BY WORK.

104, QUEEN'S ROAD, BRIGHTON, SUSSEX.

Dr Moon's raised type. (LHSAEUL)

the embossing process was also used to create tactile versions of maps, diagrams and images. To put his system and publications into practical use, Moon developed evangelically inspired Home Teaching Societies which spread across the western world and the British Empire where bodies such as the British and Foreign Bible Society enthusiastically embraced his invention. The Moon system was considered to be easy to learn, especially by people losing their sight later in life. It was often a gateway to the more technically complex braille system, readers 'advancing' to braille once they had mastered the Moon system.

At the inaugural conference of the Scottish Outdoor Blind Teachers' Union, held in Laidlaw's Temperance Hotel, Perth, on 9 and 10 June 1882, the Edinburgh Society's John Brown began the proceedings by telling delegates that 'twenty-five years ago a lady from England suggested to Sheriff Maitland Heriot, Edinburgh, that what was being done in London, Brighton and elsewhere through Dr Moon's embossed system should be attempted in Scotland'. This, he explained, led to the forming of the Edinburgh Home Teaching Society – even Brown found the need to abridge the Society's long and cumbersome title, which from 1899 had become 'The Edinburgh Society (including the South-East of Scotland) for Promoting Reading among the Adult Blind at their own homes, by Moon's System (Braille System also taught)'.

Data provided by William Auchincloss Arrol in 1886 shows the dominance of the Moon system in Scotland at that time. Of 1,348 'readers' on the rolls of the ten outdoor mission societies, 1,234 used Moon, 103 used braille of

whom 63 were affiliated to the Glasgow society, and only three used Alston, these again being affiliated to the Glasgow society. Similar information is given for three of the five blind asylums, Dundee, Glasgow and Northern Counties (Inverness). Of the 190 readers, 105 read Moon, 50 read braille and 35 (all at the Glasgow Asylum) read Alston. Aberdeen and Edinburgh did not provide data, but it is striking how strong a hold that the Moon system had, compared with braille which was still not widely accepted in Scotland. Alston's system had not survived beyond the city of its origin, and Gall's method had disappeared. In 1900, it was revealed that the Society had received '50 volumes of Scriptures in Moon type, from the Royal Blind Asylum ... as Moon's books are not used at Craigmillar'. The blind asylum, it seems, had made complete and absolute its commitment to braille by this time.

Louis Braille (1809-1852) was born in Coupvray, France, where his father, Simon-René, was a harness-maker, a master craftsman in this agricultural community, but a man who nonetheless had to work hard. It was a misadventure with his father's tools that caused Louis to lose his sight at the age of three. Louis initially attended the public school in Coupvray, but in 1819 he was admitted to L'Institution Royale des Jeunes Aveugles, the Royal School for Blind Youth, where he was one of the few students who successfully learned to read embossed letters that had been developed by the school's founder, Valentin Haüy (1745-1822).

Louis Braille developed his system from an earlier one, which was a 12-dot code invented by Charles Barbier de la Serre (1767-1841) for military application as 'night

reading'. This was a form of communication that soldiers might use requiring neither sound nor light. Barbier's system was a phonetic one, but Louis saw how it might be developed to embrace letters of the alphabet, an undertaking he had largely achieved by 1825 when he was only 16 years of age. However his system was slow to gain widespread acceptance, in part because of religion and politics. It was in the 1850s, after Louis Braille's death, that it began to gain universality, culminating in a decision at an international congress in 1878 that an 'unmodified braille code' should be adopted.

Following this endorsement, braille's use in Britain was encouraged by Dr Thomas Rhodes Armitage (1824-1890). In 1868, Armitage founded the British and Foreign Society for Improving the Embossed Literature of the Blind, which has been credited as evolving into the RNIB - although Mary Thomas has cautioned that the RNIB's origins are deeper and more complex than that. In Edinburgh, the inclusion of books in braille alongside the Moon volumes offered by the Mission to Outdoor Blind is first mentioned in January 1893. At that time the Society offered 53 volumes in braille - but 1,901 in Moon. However, of 48 new books added to the library in the preceding year, 31 were in braille suggesting that the arrival of braille was a year or two earlier and that a conscious effort was now being made by the Society to offer a genuine choice to blind readers.

In 1898, Brown declared that 'For the education of the young, [braille] is the best yet invented; and it is enjoyed by those adults who are able to master it'. However, Brown felt that braille tended to place excessive strain on the memories of blind adults - it was a young person's art.

However, a more practical explanation of the difficulty that adults might experience in learning a 'new' system had been advanced by John Bird (c.1812-1895) as early as 1835 when he wrote that 'little fingers in early years dipped into, traced and distinguished forms and peculiarities afterwards impossible'. It was therefore young, small, sensitive fingers that were adept at learning a 'new' type, rather than it being young minds not already ready set in their ways, that made a new innovation easy to embrace. In other words, older people, with adult fingers that were not as touch-sensitive as they were during childhood and youth, found new types more challenging simply because their sense of feeling as they ran their fingers over delicate indentations had declined as their years advanced.



The Society's reading room in Howe Street. (LHSAEUL)

Despite his ingrained allegiance to William Moon, John Brown conceded many advantages arising from braille. He felt it linked blind and sighted people - blind people could write it and then read what they had written; and sighted people could learn to write and so correspond with blind friends. Blind people, furthermore, could now create books for their own benefit. This last point was recorded in action during 1902 when some '[of the Society's] blind were engaged in embossing books into Braille', a service for which they were paid.

In 1898, because of continuing poor health, John Brown retired as teacher, although he remained the Society's superintendent. The missionary and teaching roles fell upon Charles Ness and Christopher Cairns. In 1900, Ness explained that readers of Moon often saw acquisition of braille as an extension of their skills and it enabled them to read additional books:

Having learned the Moon system, they have begun the Braille reading and writing. This we have fostered and encouraged, as it opens up a wider range of literature for them. It is also a relief to us, for if we have no new books in the one system to give, we can supply them in the other.

The ability of blind people to write in braille facilitated blind authorship of books. Ness reported receipt of two such volumes penned by a blind writer. The religious ethos was still strong, the late Dean Montgomery's volumes being entitled 'My Walk with God' and 'Good Friday Addresses'. During 1909, the Society's library lent more

books in braille (1,843) than in Moon (1,707).

The Register entries, compiled during the decade following the Society's accommodation of braille in tandem with Moon, noted, albeit haphazardly, whether the people listed could read tactile print. Nonetheless, while The Register asked if people were 'able to read from raised type', answers gave no detail about their levels of proficiency. Equally, it did not differentiate whether that ability related to Moon, braille, or any other system. But what is clear is that, by the Edwardian era, the Society embraced not one, but two widely-adopted and recognised styles of tactile print.

Religion

'If charity really did cover sins,' wrote Joseph Keith in 1908, 'Edinburgh would be the most apparently sinless place of its size anywhere.' 'Fortunately for the members of the cloth,' he continued:

A large stock of patent original sin remains on hand, and ample provision is made in the way of ecclesiastical buildings to reduce the stock to a minimum. In Edinburgh and Portobello there are 218 churches and chapels, and more are being built. Of these, 57 belong to the established Church of Scotland, 88 to the United Free Church, 24 to the Episcopal Church, 5 to the Free Church, 7 to the Roman Catholic Church, 4 to the Jews, 10 to the Baptists, while the balance are held by assorted bodies, including Original Seceders, United Original Seceders, Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists, Methodists, and hosts of others with titles as varied as those of our fire and life assurance companies.

Keith observed that 'The non-Sabbath-breaking members of the community are strong supporters of the Church, and on each Sunday evening the churches of the city are packed to overflowing.' It would seem that Edinburgh society was divided acutely between those who embraced religion and religious practice, and those who did not.

Four decades earlier, Gilbert MacCulloch, superintendent of the Edinburgh Blind School, had expressed his own view on this divide when he wrote that he considered blind people to be 'not religiously inclined'. He had been told by

one blind man that the Bible was ‘a matter of moonshine,’ and MacCulloch believed ‘that sentiments of the kind are by no means uncommon among his class’. MacCulloch was reluctant to admit nine-year-old deaf-blind Robert Edgar to the Blind School because of his deafness. When Robert was also rejected by the Edinburgh Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, on account of his blindness, MacCulloch relented and agreed to admit the boy ‘as an experiment’. MacCulloch then found, to his great pleasure, that Edgar was intelligent, hard-working, and had strong religious devotion. This last point struck a refreshing chord with MacCulloch. Bringing the word of God to blind people was clearly a challenge to those seeking to direct their lives, a challenge that they felt should be taken up with fervour.

In 1898, John Brown, Missionary for the Edinburgh Society since its inception in 1857, and now in declining health, sent out his annual appeal to donors. He explained the welfare objectives recently embraced by the Society in providing the ‘poor Blind’ with free tea and coals during the winter months. But Brown reminded its financial backers of the Society’s religious ethos and achievements, not only in Edinburgh and the Borders, but replicated by partner missions across Scotland. By teaching ‘many of the 3,200 blind’ to read raised type and by providing free libraries, he declared, ‘not a few of them have been brought to a saving knowledge of Christ through the instrumentality of the 22 Missionary Teachers’. ‘All Scotland,’ he continued, ‘has been overtaken, including Orkney and Shetland. To God be all the praise for such a great work among the adult Blind.’

SPECIMEN OF READING IN MOON'S TYPE.

C O M M U N I T Y M E A L L L
C O M M U N I T Y M E A L L L
& R U O B A L T A H T E Y
(S I V O L A L - A O - T T)
A R E H E A V Y L A D E N &
(A I T O T A V J L A T T N . S)
T S E R U O Y E V I G L L I W I
T S E R U O Y E V I G L L I W I

The first line is read from left to right and the second from right to left, to prevent the reader from losing his place.

MOON'S SOCIETY, 104, QUEEN'S ROAD, BRIGHTON.

Moon and his followers were motivated by their strong religious conviction. (LHSAEUL)

Brown retired in 1899. Charles Ness, one of Brown's assistants who had been visiting and teaching for the Society for 20 years, now rose to prominence, assisted by Christopher Cairns who had been missionary teacher for 13 years. The Society's missionary zeal found continuity in the two men, Ness declaring that 'Our prayer still is, "Lord, establish Thou the work of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."' Brown died on 11 February 1903.

In 1907, the Society emphasised that 'Our Mission is quite unsectarian, for we seek to do good to all classes of the blind. To counsel, cheer, and comfort, to bring into fellowship with the Living One is the aim and object of all our visitation, for He it is that healeth the broken in heart and giveth eyesight to the blind'. One of the items of information that The Register was designed to record was 'religious denomination'. This information was recorded in the registers of many organisations and institutions active in Scotland, although what use it was put to is not always apparent. The compilers also entered the data with varying degrees of thoroughness, some registers recording church affiliation ranging from the mainstream Church of Scotland to lesser known groups such as the Christadelphians. The Society was content to enter such data within the scope of a limited range consisting simply of Protestant, Catholic, or Episcopalian. There was, however, a general assumption during this time that everyone held religious belief and had affiliation with a church of some description. Religious practice was another matter, and this had been a founding concern of the Society that blind people were, because of sensory

impairment, were being denied access to the word of God.

This concern was expressed in John Brown's very first report. By March 1858, he estimated that he had visited around a hundred blind people. He wrote:

I have ... invariably made it my practice, in addition to teaching them, to read the Word of God, and converse about the interests of their immortal souls. I find among the blind, just what I find among those that have not been so afflicted, a number of them God-fearing people, others utterly indifferent about the interests of their souls.

After 41 years of teaching and evangelising for the Society, Brown's commitment to the religious side of his 'calling' was undiminished. As the century was drawing to a close, he wrote:

It was the great Apostle to the Gentiles who said – “Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved”; and it was a greater than he [sic] who, having the same object in view, endured the cross, despising the shame. The agents of your Society ever keep this before them in their relation to those among whom they labour; and, to glorify God thus, this is the goal to which all the work tends.

The teacher-missionaries who continued in his wake, and who had worked under him for many years, were also ingrained with a sense of religious calling. Charles Ness, superintendent and missionary-teacher after Brown, was

more temperate in his religious rhetoric when making his reports than his predecessor had been. However, the religious ethos remained. The activities of the Society in 1908 included the Society's annual gathering in Carrubber's Close Mission Hall. It had a ladies committee which was addressed by Rev Matthews of Dublin Street Baptist Church. Fortnightly, blind mothers met to study 'The Women of the Blind' among their themes. And 'work' was carried out on the ophthalmic wards Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh on 'the Sabbath afternoons'.



John Donaldson, who lost his sight in an accident, impressed the Society with his religiosity. (LHSAEUL)

The religious conviction of the Victorian and Edwardian periods was therefore an inspiration and driving motivation among the Society's missionary-teachers, and this was filtered through social gatherings and activities, charitable giving and outreach to blind people. Some were inevitably more receptive to this than others, but the missionaries did have their successes, and like the reward MacCulloch felt half a century earlier when the deaf-blind boy, Robert Edgar, embraced religion, the Society also took pleasure when it made such breakthroughs. One such case was John Donaldson who had partial sight-loss after contracting measles at the age of 20. A former coal miner, Donaldson was aided by the Society to become a vendor of tea. 'Not only has he been successful in business,' the Society told its subscribers, 'but one of his customers has had the privilege of leading him to the "Light of the World," and he now takes an active part in Christian work.'

Part 2 – Feeling Blind People’s Lives

The story of the outdoor blind society is not a homogenous one. It is quite the opposite. The concept of ‘society’ is the sum of individual life experiences, yet these are often diminished when they are collectivised in formal records such as The Register, and are largely overlooked in annual reports and minute books. The work of the ‘Seeing Our History’ research team was aimed at tracing the lives of some of the people contained in The Register, and trying to retrace their life journeys. The importance of family and social networks quickly became apparent as the following ten narratives took on flesh.

Agnes McArthur (1872-1956)

Agnes McArthur is entered on The Register simply as Mrs McArthur, 18 Couper Street, Leith. Although this entry appears upon two occasions, there is no further information added. Agnes would have been in her early thirties when her name was written in The Register of Outdoor Blind. It seems probable that Agnes had enough to keep her occupied during these years without inviting the missionary to the blind over the threshold of her single-room tenement house.

Agnes Morrison was born in the Anderston district of Glasgow in 1872 where her father, Neil Morrison, was a journeyman boilermaker. Although her father had a trade, Anderston had been highlighted by Glasgow’s Medical Officer of Health as one of the most deprived localities in the city with, for example, high infant mortality. Agnes still

lived with her family in Anderston when she lost her sight at the age of 18. The nature and circumstances of her sight loss have not been identified.

When Agnes was 27, she married John McArthur. John was also born in Glasgow – in 1869. Little is known of John's early years, but his father, Donald McArthur, a 43-year-old married man, was lodging with the Morrisons in 1891. Although Donald McArthur also had a trade, as journeyman ship riveter, he – and his wife, Jane - were both unable to write. Why Donald was not with Jane in 1891 is a further mystery. He was not listed as a widower, so this suggests that Jane was living elsewhere at that time. Donald's presence in the Morrison household hints at how Agnes and John may have met. John married Agnes in Glasgow in 1898 – Agnes had been blind for nine years.

Their first child, named Jane after John's mother, was born in Glasgow in 1899. By the following year Agnes and John had moved to Leith, where John, a time-served iron driller, began work in the shipbuilding yards. It is striking that, although he was a skilled worker, John and Agnes had to settle for such modest accommodation as provided at 18 Couper Street.

In 1901, the one-room house would have been crowded enough for Agnes, her husband John, their two-year-old daughter and baby boy. But by 1911, Agnes had borne seven children and an eighth was on the way. With the birth of Thomasina on 10 June 1907, they then had six children in that confined environment – and Agnes had given birth to five of them in this single room. Two of the children died within five months of each other - baby

Thomasina of heart failure when only two weeks old, while two-year-old Isabella succumbed to bronchitis and convulsions in November 1907.

After these tragedies, all within the single room of their Couper Street dwelling, the couple must have been desperate to escape number 18's confines. They initially moved to 94 Kirkgate where Thomas was born. They had moved again, to a two-room dwelling in a tenement in Leith's Bangor Road, by 1911. Nonetheless, their living conditions remained overcrowded. They shared this accommodation with their five surviving children – Jane (12), John (10), Agnes (9), Mary (8) and Thomas (2). William was born during the course of that year, bringing the total number to six. Had Thomasina's and Isabella's lives not been cut short, there would have been eight. Agnes was now 39 years old.

At some point during their later lives, John and Agnes moved back to Glasgow, again settling in a working-class district close to the River Clyde – Tradeston. It might have been expected that, having had hard lives, their prospects of a long retirement would not be great. John had spent his life doing arduous work grappling with vibrating drills every day, and Agnes had experienced a constant cycle of pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing. However, John survived to the age of 81, dying in 1951, while Agnes died in 1956, aged 84. Agnes's loss of sight through six and half decades of her life seemed to have been of minor consequence when set beside the other tribulations with which she had to cope. William, their eighth child, undertook the duty of registering the deaths of both Agnes, his mother, and John, his father.

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Ann Hoseason (1873-1914)

Elizabeth Ann Hoseason was born on 5 April 1873 at 29 Hillhousefield, Leith. Her parents were Shetlander Peter Hoseason from the island of Unst, whose employment was variously described as shop porter, a warehouseman, general labourer and boot maker, and Margaret Taylor. They married on 27 November 1872 and over the course of a decade Lizzie was joined by four brothers, Andrew, William, Peter and John, and a sister, Margaret.

Lizzie was not recorded as 'blind' in the 1881 census when she was eight years old, but she was annotated as blind ten years later. However, Lizzie was admitted to the Royal Edinburgh Blind School on 18 October 1889 and, in the Institution minute books, it is noted that she 'became blind [when] 15 years old'. She had been recommended by St Cuthbert's parish, and left the school just under a year later. Other records appear where her blindness was not mentioned and it seems probable that Lizzie had sight loss, but retained some vision. Her blindness is not recorded in the 1901 census when she was looking after her widowed father, youngest brother and her two-year-old daughter in a single room dwelling at 20 Gilmour Street, which was located between Edinburgh's Nicolson Street and Pleasance.

When Lizzie's mother, Margaret, died on 11 October 1898 at the age of 54, it appears that she and her husband, Peter, were no longer living together. Margaret died of acute bronchitis and asthma after an attack lasting seven days during which she received no medical attention. Her father, Peter, died of phthisis in 1903 at the age of 57.

Four weeks following her mother's death, Lizzie gave birth to a daughter, named Sophia, on 9 November 1898. Twenty-five years of age, Lizzie was described as a domestic servant; however, the birth of Sophia took place in Craiglockhart Poorhouse.

The years overlapping the old and new century were clearly not happy ones for the Hoseason family. The Register holds minimal information about Lizzie and it seems likely that the Society had been advised of Lizzie as vision-impaired, but did not have any meaningful contact with her.

Lizzie died in 1914 at the age of 41 in Bangour Village Hospital. This was the district asylum for Edinburgh and it was located near Dechmont in Midlothian. Its location in a rural setting was typical of many asylums where the fresh air and tranquillity of the countryside were hoped to be conducive to improved mental and physical health. She had been admitted as a pauper patient to Bangour Village in 1910 when her daughter Sophia, or Sophie, was ten years of age. The descriptions of Lizzie during her time at Bangour Village are not flattering. She is described as depressed, weak, having various debilitating conditions and as experiencing religiously-generated delusions. She is noted as being feeble-minded, but not of being blind. Her hospital record photograph shows opaqueness in her eyes as her head is held towards the camera. Of small stature at 4 ft 10¹/₂ inches, she weighed 7st 2¹/₄lb upon admission and had reduced to 6st 2lb by the time of her death.

It might be argued that things began to deteriorate for

Lizzie in 1898 when she became pregnant and her mother died. Sophia's story was clearly affected by the final decade of her mother's life. She was ten years old when her mother was admitted to Bangour Village, and two years later, in 1911, Sophia was boarding with James Clingan, a blind basket-maker, his family and another blind lodger. It is one of a number of instances where blind networks appear to be at play in arranging accommodation, either as lodgers or as householders. Sophia was attending school.



Lizzie Hoseason spent her final years in Bangour Village Hospital. An attendant holds her head for the photograph that was taken for her medical case record. (LHSAEUL)

In 1922, Sophia was in employment as a restaurant waitress. She had been known as Sophie through her childhood, but had adopted the name of Sadie when she married Leith trawler fisherman, Livingstone Izett. However, she was widowed in 1941 when Livingstone was killed during war service with the Royal Naval Patrol Service in Scapa Flow, Orkney, while an engineman on HMS Alberic. This vessel was a steam trawler which had been pressed into naval service the previous year as a minesweeper. The vessel was sunk with all hands lost when it was hit by the Royal Navy destroyer, HMS St Albans. Sophia died of a cardiac condition in 1951 at Edinburgh's Western General Hospital, age 52.

Georgina McDonald (1871-1925)

Georgina McDonald was born on 8 October 1871 at 6 South Foulis Close, one of the many passageways that were entered from Edinburgh's High Street. It was a single-room dwelling and she joined her parents, William and Marion McDonald, and two older sisters, Isabella, age nine, and Helen, age three. Georgina's mother was born in Leith and her father was born in Scoon [Scone], Perthshire – a titbit that became relevant to Georgina's later life.

There are considerable inconsistencies in the records concerning William's and Marion's ages – it would appear that both were unsure of when they were born and these inconsistencies are found on census returns, death certificates, and blind asylum records. These records jointly suggest that William was born somewhere between 1825 and 1837, while Marion's birth year is indicated as

somewhere between 1826 and 1837. However, the truth about William is revealed by the record of Scone parish church which recorded his birth as 9 November 1826, while another similar register of baptisms shows that Marion's birth date was 12 September 1828.

William's birth is further corroborated by the Edinburgh blind asylum which placed him on its roll in 1838, aged thirteen, as a basket-maker on a weekly wage of seven shillings and sixpence. The asylum register states that he was 'partially blind from birth'. In 1895, he was still working in the asylum's weaving department, earning £18 2s that year, and the asylum recorded his death occurring on 18 September 1896. Marion Kirk, born in Leith, had been a resident of the blind asylum since 1848. Marion's death certificate recorded her as being 61 when she died on 28 April 1899 – she was actually 71.

The regime at the blind asylum was both strict and rigid. For example, the rules applicable to Marion in the female asylum required the women to rise at 6.30am in summer or 7am in winter, attend worship at 8am, followed by exercise before spending the day in the workshops. After their evening meal, for a further two and a half hours the women were to be 'engaged with Education and Work' - followed by evening worship and then be in bed by 10pm. Absence from the institution was limited to a few hours at the weekend and only with the matron's sanction. One might think that there would be little opportunity to exercise any freedom of choice. But rules are there to be challenged and broken, and the inmates found ways of doing this.

William and Marion came to the notice of the asylum directors in 1854. On 10 April, they recorded that:

McDonald was ordered to withdraw from the Institution and Marion Kirk was delivered over to her relatives by the Matron, both confessing their guilt and refusing to remain in the house. It is understood they have since been married. It was resolved to discharge them from the house finally, and remove their names from the list of inmates.

Scone Parochial Board subsequently attempted to intercede, requesting that 'one or both of them be restored to the benefits of the Institution'. However, the directors of the asylum were not sympathetic to such overtures, 'the offences committed by them being so flagrant, that it was impossible to entertain for a moment the hope of them being re-admitted ...'. It was summary justice. The asylum aim of nurturing the self-support of able-bodied blind people was secondary to adherence to the institution's moral code and rules.

However, William was a survivor. He subsequently worked at a range of jobs including labourer and silversmith's wheel turner, as well as a sack maker and mat maker. These were jobs traditionally deemed suited to blind people, but they were also offered to sighted people beyond the asylum, such as by Nicolas Martinot's 'Grand Magasin Français' in nearby Nicolson Square. William even reappeared on the asylum's roll for a few months in 1870, by which time the directors may have lost track of his previous 'offences'. He was noted as having 'total opacity

of cornia', had been recommended by Scone Parochial Board, and given 'outside work'. William's return to the blind asylum in 1870 had been a brief one. Yet after working away from the asylum as a labourer, he re-established a relationship with the asylum workshops as an outworker mat maker and sack maker throughout his later years.

Marion and William already had two daughters, Isabella (9) and Helen (3) when Georgina was born in 1871. Marion registered her birth, signing the register with an 'x'.

Georgina's own blindness was first noted by census enumerators in 1901 when she was 29 years old. However, although she had not been recorded as blind in earlier censuses, the 1901 entry states that she was 'blind from thirteen years of age', a clear indicator of the unreliability of census returns in recording sight loss – and perhaps of varying perceptions of how to define blindness.

In 1901, Georgina was a home-worker making mattresses. As 'head' of the household in a two-room tenement house at 213a Pleasance, she shared it with her older sister, Helen, who had married James Clarke in 1886, and Helen's five children aged from three to 12 years of age. James is notable by his absence. Georgina's father, William, had died in 1896 and her mother, Marion, had passed away in 1899. Her sister, Helen died in 1909, age 41, from phthisis, i.e. tuberculosis.

Ten years later, Georgina was living alone, 'totally blind', in a one-room dwelling at 11 Dalrymple Place – where her sister, Helen had died two years earlier. Georgina had employment as a tyke maker, making pillow cases for the

blind asylum as an outworker. So, during the period when Georgina was recorded in the Society's Register, she was independent, in employment, and helping to support her elder sister and her five children, although it would appear that Dalrymple Place offered modest living conditions.

What occurred during the next decade is more difficult to establish, but on 22 August 1919, when she was 47, Georgina was taken by the police from an Edinburgh address to a mental institution, the Royal Edinburgh Asylum. She had been living alone and 'looked after herself', but no longer served the blind asylum as an outworker. Although in receipt of a small allowance from the blind asylum as a 'pensioner', she was a pauper by this time and was, in reality, not caring well for herself. She was described as a stout woman, dirty and in a verminous state. She was also said to be delusional, believing that a man and woman living opposite her were speaking ill of her, following her and persecuting her. Because of this, she wanted to move to a new home, had taken to wandering the streets and had unsuccessfully sought refuge at the blind asylum. From the information given in the Royal Edinburgh Asylum case notes, we have to consider whether she was really delusional in terms of her mental wellbeing, or if she was in genuine in fear of tormentors - tormentors whom she could not see and who perhaps created an atmosphere where she no longer felt secure in her own home.

On 9 October 1919, the day after her 48th birthday, she was removed from Royal Edinburgh Asylum. Three days earlier, the medical superintendent judged that she was no longer delusional having been quiet and contented

during the preceding three weeks. However, rather than being discharged in order to return home, she was sent to Murthly Asylum, this being the district asylum for Perthshire. As an adult who had lived in Edinburgh throughout her life, Georgina should have been received by the poor law authorities of an Edinburgh parish if she had become destitute. However, Scone Parish accepted her as 'being still on her father's settlement' and took responsibility for her. This is why she was removed from Edinburgh to this largely unfamiliar environment in Perthshire.

Was Georgina mentally ill at this time? Not in the opinion of the Inspector of Poor for Scone who found her to be 'most intelligent and with no signs of insanity as far as he could discover'. The parochial board eventually requested her discharge from Murthly, this occurring at the end of February 1920 and she returned to Edinburgh where she boarded with a friend. However within five weeks, on 3 April 1920, she was again admitted to Royal Edinburgh Asylum where she was once more judged to be insane. The diagnosis was 'delusional insanity of persecution' which, it was noted, was confirmed by her belief that noises she heard were variously from a motor car, and an aeroplane, conveyances to be used by people who intended to abduct her.

Remember that Georgina had no residual vision and was 'totally blind', the examination upon her second admission to the Royal Edinburgh Asylum recording that her eyeballs were atrophied. Being removed forcibly by the police in a 'cab', in Georgina's mind, would have been confirmation of her belief that she was to be abducted in a vehicle of

some sort. Indeed, in 1920, what might Georgina's notion of a motor car or an aeroplane have been? The very concept of such contraptions, as they may have been described to her, might have been frightening. Georgina's asylum case notes also record a report on her behaviour and activities given by a neighbour, Mrs Robertson, who proclaimed her recent 'noisy and excited' behaviour, and this also resonates with Georgina's belief that people were spying on her.

The Royal Edinburgh Asylum admission register noted her previous admission in 1919, so it would appear that this in itself was taken as confirmation that she was mentally impaired. She was discharged as 'relieved', as opposed to 'cured', on 15 May 1920, and once more she was sent to the parish of Scone. The parochial board arranged for her to be boarded with a Mrs Paterson as a pauper lunatic, an arrangement that lasted for three months. However, on 10 August, the parochial board were informed that 'Georgina McDonald had become so troublesome that Mrs Paterson could not keep her any longer'.

The Inspector of Poor wished to transfer her to the lunatic wards of Perth Poorhouse, but as these newly-constructed facilities had not yet been granted a license by the Commissioners of Lunacy, she was admitted to Murthly Asylum for a second time. She was now 49 years old and described as having no relatives and no employment.

On 10 November 1925, like her father three decades earlier, Georgina died from 'phthisis pulmonalis', tuberculosis of the lungs – and this occurred in Murthly Asylum where she had now been resident for five years.

Although Georgina had spent most of her life in Edinburgh, it was to Scone, her father's parish of birth, that she was dispatched to live out her final, troubled years. By the time of her death she had reached a low in terms of mental health, physical health and ability to support herself. This was in stark contrast to her situation in 1911 when she was relatively active and independent. But it does have to be questioned whether Georgina was initially mentally disturbed when first brought to the attention of the asylum system and poor law authorities - who perhaps had poor understanding of the fears and concerns of a totally blind person, once self-sufficient and self-supporting, but becoming more vulnerable to economic uncertainty and perhaps certain malicious neighbours as she advanced towards her late forties.

Isabella (Bella) Wood (1868-1964)

Isabella Wood was born in Aberdeen on Christmas morning 1868 to John and Williamina Wood. She died in Edinburgh on 4 September 1964 at the venerable age of 95. John, an Aberdonian, and Williamina Pyper, from Torry in the Kincardineshire parish of Nigg, had married the previous year and Isabella was their first child.

John was a pattern maker and therefore a skilled tradesman. He continued in the engineering trade throughout his working life. In the early 1870s, the couple moved to Penicuik in Midlothian where John became a wright in the paper mills. In Penicuik, the family expanded so that, over a 20-year period, Isabella was joined by four sisters and two brothers.

Isabella, known simply as Bella, became a pupil at the blind asylum's school when she was eight years old. At her enrolment in 1876, her eyesight loss was attributed to cataract and she was noted as being blind from at least the age of two. Bella appears to have flourished at the blind school because, upon completion of her education, she was retained as a pupil-teacher.

However, in 1890, when she was 21 years old, she was dismissed under a cloud. The asylum records are not forthcoming about the nature of her misdemeanour except that she had been 'guilty of disobedience to the orders of the Head-master and the Lady Superintendent'. The Head-master had suspended Bella and she was reported to the Board of the blind asylum which concluded that she should be dismissed. There is no indication in the asylum records that Bella was invited to appear before the Board to give her version of events, but it was not uncommon for people employed at the institution to challenge rules that they found oppressive. The Board nonetheless decided to give her three months salary in lieu of notice, although it made a point of stating that it was under no obligation to make such a gesture.

Following her dismissal, Bella requested a 'certificate' from the asylum. The Board discussed her request and concluded that they would provide her with 'a certificate of attainments only, not character.' This suggests that there was no dispute that Bella was good at her job, but that, to the asylum managers and Board, discipline was everything. But it appears that Bella was happy with her 'Certificate of Attainment' because, in April 1891, she

wrote to the Board expressing her thanks. She was living with her family in Penicuik at this time – and working from home as a music teacher.

In 1891, Bella was aged 22. In Penicuik, the family consisted of her parents, her brothers, James (16) and Leslie (11), and her sisters, Isabella Mary (14), Annie (7), Margaret (3), and Hannah (2). It might be questioned why Bella's first sister was also called Isabella, but Mary was the name by which the younger Isabella became known.

Bella continued to live with her family during the next two decades although, of course, the family structure changed during this time. Her mother died in 1906, and in 1911, besides with Bella, only Mary and Margaret remained with their widowed father who, at the age of 66, was still working as a pattern-maker. The household was completed with the presence of a lodger.

We do not have details of Bella's years of middle age. But we do know that, during this period, she worked as a braille copyist. By the beginning of the twentieth century, developments in technology had brought braille to the fore. People with sight loss might learn to read Moon and other systems of raised type, but braille could also be written by blind people conversant with Louis Braille's system. The Society now embraced braille alongside the Moon system, and from 1902 some of the people on the Society's Register worked in its reading room and library, using braille typewriters to produce text. They were paid to do this work and Bella may well have been one of these braille copyists even although she continued to live in Penicuik throughout the Edwardian era. It appears that

she was both a talented woman - and a woman of independent spirit.

By the time she had reached her sixties, Bella had moved to Musselburgh. We know nothing about her life there, but in 1936, when she was 67, she evidently felt the need for support and applied for a place in the Thomas Burns Home for Blind Women. Her application was supported by Midlothian County Council and although she was initially placed on a waiting list, she secured a speedy admission. This Home had opened during the 1920s, came under the auspices of the Royal Blind Asylum, and accommodated 56 women with sight loss.

Bella had come full circle. She had entered the blind school as a child, continued there as a young adult teaching in the school, and returned to the same institution in old age when she entered the Thomas Burns Home. Of course, the tormentors who had instigated her dismissal in 1890 had long gone by this time.

Bella remained in the Thomas Burns Home for the remainder of a very long life. The asylum minutes recorded her journey's end starkly and succinctly: 'Death – Miss Isabella Wood on 4 September 1964, aged 95. Reported.' That was it!

John Menzies (1853–1905)

John Menzies was born to John and Helen Menzies and was baptised in the Free Church of Scotland, Morningside, on 5 September 1853. The Free Church had been created ten years earlier when the evangelical clergyman, Rev

Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), led nearly half the clergy and members of the Church of Scotland to form the new church that, he believed, marked a return to doctrinal purity and which the established church had lost through succumbing to the patronage of Scotland's landed classes. John's father was described as a geographical engraver or map-engraver and may have worked for the Bartholemew company of mapmakers.

By 1861, when John was approaching his eighth birthday, he had four younger siblings, James (6), Mary (4), William (2) and Francis (1). At this time, parents and their five children shared a two-room dwelling at Wright's Houses adjoining Edinburgh's Bruntsfield Links. The family continued to expand. During the next decade or so five more children arrived - Hugh, Isabella, Ellen, Louis and Robert. In 1871, John, now aged 17, was an apprentice compositor while 16-year-old James was an apprentice engraver. The family of eleven were now living in a three-room dwelling on Fountainbridge West.

Over the following two decades, expansion of the family's accommodation suggests growing prosperity as the children transitioned from school to trades. James became a silver engraver; William, a pocket book maker; Francis, an engineer; Hugh, a meal salesman; and Louis, a watchmaker. However, the five-room dwelling in Lothian Road in 1881, six-room dwelling in Glengyle Terrace in 1891, and five-room dwelling in Queensferry Street in 1901 would also have been considered desirable, perhaps essential, for the large family, especially as the children's attainment of adulthood was marked by little immediate urgency to break away from the family home. At 82 years

of age, their father appears to have still been working as a map engraver. Indeed, the energetic father lived to the ripe old age of 91.

However, John did not share his father's good fortune. It is not known when or how John's sight was impaired or lost, or if was linked to the visually demanding nature of his profession or not. The Register does not indicate how or when he lost his sight although it does say that he had learned to read raise type. Such claims have to be interpreted cautiously as, while it might have meant that John was highly competent at reading Moon or braille, it may equally have meant that his skill amounted to no more than a rudimentary ability to identify alphabetical characters. We do not know.

John did not marry. When he died in Longmore Hospital of cerebral tumour, paralysis and blindness in 1905, he was 51 years of age.

John Richardson (1852–1914)

John Richardson, 'lawful son to Adam Richardson, shepherd, Oxnam Row, was born 28th July 1852' – in the parish of Oxnam, Roxburghshire. In 1861, John's father, and mother, Margaret, continued to live in Oxnam Row with their children: Margaret (7), James (5), William (3), and Adam (8 months), and with 13-year-old school girl, Margaret Cranstoun who is described as a 'boarder', but who appears to have actually been a cousin of the other children and a niece of Margaret whose maiden name was Cranstoun. John, however, was not present in the household on census day in 1861.

The Register indicates that John lost his sight through an accident at the age of 14, and that he was still attending school at that time. However, the mystery deepens when it is revealed that in 1861 he was a pupil at the blind school in Edinburgh's Gayfield Square. His age is shown as 12 but in reality he was only nine years old. On 30 October 1865, he was one of a dozen names placed before the committee of the blind asylum for their consideration and, finding favour with the committee, he was employed by them as an apprentice weaver at the beginning of 1866. The cause of his sight loss is recorded by the blind asylum as amaurosis. Amaurosis is a lesion of the eye. He had been recommended to the blind institution by his parents and the parochial board of Oxnam. The involvement of the parochial board in advancing his case infers family hardship and parish concern that it might be at risk of having to support John under the Poor Law when he reached adulthood.

In 1871, when John would have been 18, his parents, along with James, William and Adam were living in Southdean, a parish adjoining Oxnam. John's father was still tending sheep and his three brothers were still going to school. Seventeen-year-old Margaret had left home. John, having gone to Edinburgh to attend the blind school, had made the capital his home.

John was boarding with a stonecutter and his family in a tenement house in Pleasance in 1881, and working as a weaver at the nearby blind asylum. Another blind lodger in the household was a basket-maker. John was now 28 years old. Ten years later, he crops up as a visitor in the household of blind mat-weaver John McAskill from

Dingwall who, along with his wife and infant son, shared his tenement house in West Richmond Street with three male boarders, one of whom was a blind brush-maker.

At the beginning of his career as a worker at the blind asylum, John was noted as being of 'good' character. In 1866, he entered upon able-bodied adulthood as an apprentice weaver earning six shillings and six pence weekly – and increasing to 7s 6d by the end of that year. As a teenager, John was portrayed as a model worker.

However, 30 years later, still employed at the blind asylum, John's character appeared to have changed. In 1895, he earned a respectable annual wage of £38 12s 4d. However, John was evidently unhappy with his lot by this period and he was to express this in two ways – to his eventual downfall. In 1896, with others, he was reprimanded and suspended, for drunkenness and absenteeism from his work as a mattress maker. As a punishment, his wages were reduced. This behaviour reoccurred through 1898 by which time his drunkenness had become habitual, but it was in 1899 that he fell completely from grace and was dismissed from the asylum. On this occasion he was one of four mattress makers found to be stealing large quantities of horsehair from the workshops and selling it to a dealer. John Richardson was reported to the police by the asylum managers and he was convicted when the case went to court. He was dismissed from the asylum on 24 July 1899.

Now unemployed, by 1901 he was found living in the Jubilee Lodging House at 1 King's Stables Road off the Grassmarket. With an addiction to alcohol, it was during

this period that he eventually came to the attention of the Society. However, this appears to have taken some time. The Register states he was 55 years old when first entered on its pages. That would suggest him being ‘discovered’ by the Society’s missionary-teachers in 1907. The Register also indicates that he could read raised type – was the Society responsible for teaching him, or had he learned while a pupil at the blind school? Did he use Moon or braille, or perhaps both?

John died in Craighleith Poorhouse in 1914 at the age of 62. The primary cause of death was cerebral haemorrhage. He had never married and his ‘normal’ address at this time was 75 Grassmarket; in other words he lived in the dormitories of Castle Lodging House. His occupation was described as a former mattress maker. Because of his ignominious dismissal from the blind asylum, he had lost his ‘trade’. In terms of his drinking habits, since being dismissed from the blind asylum he had apparently not reformed, nor had the Society for Outdoor Blind succeeded in reforming him – the secondary cause of his death was recorded as alcoholism.

Admission to the blind school and asylum had been prompted in part to prevent John becoming a charge under the Poor Law – dismissal by the blind asylum because of his misdemeanours meant that John did ultimately become a pauper.

Mary Isabella (Isobel) Howie (1882-1964)

Mary Isabella (Isobel) Howie was born in an apartment at 108 George Street in Edinburgh’s fashionable New Town.

Her father was George-Frederick James Lindsay Howie (c.1854-1890), a member of a family of significant standing as artists and, adopting new technology, photographers. Mary's mother, also Mary, came from more humble origins, in Edinburgh's Fountainbridge, where her father, Thomas Liddell, was a hay carter. When Mary Liddell (1860-1935) married in October 1880, she was already heavily pregnant with her first child, George, who arrived a month later. At this time, Lindsay Howie, as he was known throughout his life, was established in the Howie family's photographic business in Princes Street and they lived in an apartment adjoining the studio. Lindsay must have seemed a good prospect in the eyes of a carter's daughter. George, however, was born in the Liddell household in the crowded confines of their two-room Fountainbridge tenement. There were nine occupants, four adults and five children, including Mary and her baby, but Lindsay Howie was not living there, nor was he in attendance at George's birth.

Although all seemed not well with Mary and Lindsay's marriage, their daughter Mary was born two years later in the more salubrious environment of George Street and Lindsay was present at the birth. The Register indicates that Mary was blind from infancy. When a third child, Thomas, arrived in 1885, Lindsay was also present at their apartment, in elegant property at 37 London Street.

Lindsay Howie's occupation has been designated in various ways: photographic artist (1880), portrait painter (1882), and artist (1885). However during the last five years of his life, Lindsay Howie seems to have seriously come off the rails and become estranged from his wife and

children, and also from his brother who now ran the Princes Street photographic studio. By 1890, he was a pauper, living in a lodging house in the Cowgate and, as it happens, an environment frequented by some of the blind people listed a decade later in *The Register* as members of the 'Migratory Class'. In other words, this was the uncertain world inhabited by people of no fixed abode. As a pauper, Lindsay was being aided under the Poor Law by Edinburgh City Parish; his occupation was described as 'street artist'.

On 21 October 1890, on the orders of the Inspector of Poor, Lindsay was admitted to Edinburgh Royal Asylum in a delirious state, uncommunicative, unwilling to eat, abusive and unkempt. Upon examination, the asylum doctors concluded that he was of sound mind, but that was of no consolation to Lindsay. Less than 48 hours after admission, Lindsay Howie died from cerebro-spinal meningitis. Lindsay's next of kin was recorded as his brother rather than his wife. Whether or not it made any great difference to his children by this point in his downward spiral is a moot point, but eight-year-old Mary was now quite definitely fatherless.

As autumn turned to the spring of 1891, Mary, along with her brothers, was still living with her grandparents, her 60-year-old grandfather now a railway porter, and her widowed mother working as a rubber coat maker. Mary was a pupil at the blind school.

When Mary's name first appeared on *The Register* around 1905, she was 23 years old and she had moved, with her brothers, widowed mother and grandmother, to a tenement dwelling at 16 Lochrin Place in an industrial

locality in the west end of Edinburgh. Here, she lived over the years, initially with her mother, grandmother and brothers, George and Thomas. George left Lochrin Place when he married; Thomas's later life has not been traced – did he die during military service during the Great War? Mary died at Craiglockhart Hospital in 1964 at the age of 81, but 16 Lochrin Place remained her home until the very end of her life. She had lived here for six decades. Mary did not marry.

Robert Ponton (1857-1932)

Robert Ponton is an example of a Register entry so lacking in data to be suggestive that his presence came from anecdotal information rather than him being personally known to the Society's missionaries. Indeed, the two entries that record his name, appear to do so incorrectly, as 'Punton' - or do they? While his family's story is indicative of the tribulations experienced by so many people through the later nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, there is little to be traced on Robert insofar as his visual impairment is concerned. That itself perhaps makes Robert Ponton a case of interest.

Robert was born to Thomas Ponton, a shepherd, and his wife Christina, née Carr. This took place on 14 April 1857 at Eastmains in the parish of Whittingham in Haddingtonshire (now East Lothian). Robert had three older siblings, John, Christina, and Thomas, and two years later they were joined by a baby sister, Jane, the whole family living in a one-room cottage at Whittingham Home Farm by 1861. In 1866, their father was struck down by

bowel cancer, and the task of registering his death fell to his eldest son, John, age 16. At this point, Christina's maiden name is given as Kerr rather than Carr, but this aberration does not seem to be solely down to an error or shortcoming on the part of John as the lad undertook this onerous task. Christina's maiden surname vacillates between Carr and Kerr on documents created during the following decades.

Following the death of Christina's husband, the family sustained itself moderately in their adversity, this being made possible by the older sons taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. By 1871, Thomas, age 15, and Robert, age 13, supported their widowed mother and younger siblings, working as agricultural labourers in the parish of Stenton. Their elder brother, John, and sister, Christina, had left home, but they had younger siblings, Jane, age six, Jessie Ann, age eight, and George, five months. At this point, attentive readers might be raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

Over the remainder of the nineteenth century, the nucleus of the family consisted of George and Robert, neither of whom married, and their 'brother' Alexander – indeed the three men appear to have been the stabilising force of the family. Their mother, Christina, died in 1900, and by 1901 Thomas and Alexander were both ploughmen on Adniston Farm in Gladsmuir parish, and as such were probably important members of the agricultural community. Christina, now 38 and, like the men, still single, kept house for them, while also present was Robert, age 42, and a 'shepherd, retired' – it is at this time that his blindness is first recorded.

A decade later, the three men, Thomas, Robert and Alexander appear to have found increased financial security. They had moved from Haddingtonshire to the parish of Fowllis Wester in Perthshire where Thomas and Alexander were recorded as farmers while Robert was attributed as living on 'private means'. Robert's sight loss was not recorded at this time, suggestive that he had retained some residual vision since the 1911 census only aimed to record 'total' blindness. Their sister, Christina, had died of heart disease in 1907, age 53.

Thomas died in 1912. Robert continued to live in Perthshire, moving into Perth itself where he appears to have lived independently. At the age of 74, he succumbed to bronchitis at 28 Pomarium Street in the heart of Perth town. It was recorded that he had been 'found dead in bed at 5am; last seen alive March 4th, 11pm'. Alexander had moved to Dundee where he was a restaurateur although over the decades the family had mostly remained loyal to the land that they tilled. Brother George enjoyed greater longevity than his siblings, passing away in 1956, a retired farm servant aged 86.

But who truly were the siblings of Robert and George? Of John, Christina, Thomas and Jessie Ann, there is no doubt. 'Jane' turns out to be not one sister, but two – the first Jane was born in 1860, but died in 1862 in her second year; Thomas and Christina then had another daughter in 1864 for whom they adopted a widely practised custom of using the same forename of the deceased child for a new arrival. But as Thomas senior died two years after the birth of the second Jane, in 1866, and Christina, his wife, had not remarried, who were the mysterious George and

Alexander? Although these children were passed off as Christina senior's children, in reality both George and Alexander, born nearly ten years apart, were the illegitimate sons of her daughter Christina who, incidentally, could not write.

Young Christina was working as an agricultural labourer, aged 18, when she conceived in neighbouring Stenton parish, although she returned home in 1870 to give birth to George before returning to Stenton village, alone, to work as a domestic servant. A decade later, history repeated itself when, in 1879, she gave birth to Alexander in the family's home parish of Whittingham. Christina never married. It is tempting to speculate that there was the belief that the scandals of the illegitimate births were best absorbed by Christina's widowed mother so that only one Christina might be ostracised in Whittingham rather than two. Additionally in 1870/71 when George was born, Christina junior was passing herself off, and her baby, as Punton rather than Ponton – Punton was how Robert was recorded in the Society Register in the 1900s. It will be noted that Christina senior had already demonstrated creativity with family surnames by using both Carr and Kerr as her maiden name. Jane also exercised enterprise when she married 23-year-old James Jeffrey in 1897 – she passed herself off as being 28 when she had just marked her 34th birthday!

As for Robert, the cause and extent of his sight loss is not known, but together with his elder brother, Thomas, and his younger brother-cum-nephew, Alexander, he remained central to the evolving family unit throughout most of his life, and although he died alone, that solitude during the

final hours also appears to have been a hallmark of his lifelong independence. The Society, it seems, had little or no engagement with him and he had no need of their intervention.

How did the men feel about their mothers? We have no real way of knowing, but there may be one clue. Alexander married Jessie Dow in 1912, and they had a daughter the following year. Their daughter was named Christina Ponton.

Thomas Smellie (1831-1904)

Thomas Smellie lost his sight late in life. His father had been a tailor and his grandfather, a ploughman, but Thomas's job descriptions show him as a craftsman in the Edinburgh jewellery trade; he worked variously as jeweller, jeweller's workman, jeweller journeyman, and goldsmith. However, he did not progress from being an employee and enter into business on his own account. In 1901, when he was 69, he was still working, but when he was 70 he was in receipt of a charitable pension.

Thomas was born in Edinburgh on 12 November 1831. His father, Henry, born around 1799, had been a tailor, and his mother, Margaret Whitelaw, a domestic servant. His mother must have had some private income as, in 1881, she was described as an annuitant. For much of her later life she lived on her own means, although nearby to Thomas. She finally moved in with him and his family when she reached her eighties. She died in 1883 at the age of 84.

Thomas married twice. His first wife was Ann Dickson and when they wed in 1857 both had been living in the same

Edinburgh street, Fountainbridge, Ann working as a nursery maid. They had two children, Margaret, born in 1860, and Thomas, born in 1864. Ann died in 1890. In 1895, now living alone, Thomas embarked upon his second marriage when he wed 46-year-old spinster and dressmaker, Janet Edwards, Thomas was 64 at this time.

Thomas lost his sight when 70, leaving him 'unable to work'. He applied to the Trinity Hospital Committee for financial aid, this being an ancient Edinburgh charity, founded in 1460 as an almshouse and named Trinity Hospital. On 23 September 1902, the Trinity Hospital Committee granted him a 'lower scale' pension of £8 annually, and on 1 March 1904 he was elevated to their higher scale of £10 per annum.

It is possible that it was the Trinity Hospital Committee that referred Thomas to the Society which recorded him as being 'discovered' in February 1904, the time at which his application for a pension increase lay before them. The Society Register notes that Thomas, in 1904, could read raised type, although his skill in doing so may have been at a rudimentary level. Coming from a trade that required him to work with small, intricate items of jewellery may have meant that he had a sensitive touch that eased his way in learning tactile print. However, Thomas did not benefit from either the Society's attention, or his increased Trinity pension, for long. He died on 15 October 1904.

William Finlay (1845-1906)

In 1938, Annie Finlay (b. 1876), wrote of William Finlay: 'When a laddie, it was my father's eager delight to scale

the rocks [on the hill behind Torphin Farm in the Midlothian parish of Currie] and procure, for the elder folks, inaccessible plants.' This would have been in the 1850s, and Annie wrote that the fertile hill hosted a profusion of wild plants that attracted botanists from far and wide.

In 1880, William, now 35, and his wife, Mary, along with three children, moved from another farm, Mid Kinleith in Currie parish, where latterly William had been its manager, to Leith. 'Leaving Mid Kinleith was the beginning of many troubles for the family,' wrote Annie, herself only four at the time. In Leith, they appear to have lived in relative comfort in a four-room house at 88 Coburg Street. However, three years later, Annie continued, they moved to Edinburgh and it was here that life became particularly tough for William. In 1888, his wife, Mary, died of erysipelas (a severe disease of the skin) and acute rheumatism, leaving him to care for his three surviving children. He had been kicked on the forehead by a horse when they were at Mid Kinleith and it was the effects of that injury that caused him to leave the farm. The damage 'set up a creeping paralysis which gradually robbed him of his sight,' explained Annie.

William Finlay was born at the quaintly named Cowfeeder Row in the south-west lea of Edinburgh Castle on 19 August 1845. He was the first-born of John Finlay and Marion Girdwood. By the time he was five, he was living with his parents at Torphin Cottages on the farm described by Annie, and he had commenced his education at Colinton parish school.

Ten years later, John and Marion were living on Carriber Farm in Linlithgow parish. The family had now expanded to also include Agnes, age nine, John, seven, Thomas, four, and Marion, two. By this time, William had left school and matured to manhood, the 15-year-old being apprenticed to be a blacksmith.

In 1867, William, now 22 and a ploughman on Carriber Farm, married Mary Shanks, the daughter of James Shanks, the tenant of the farm. Mary was four months pregnant at the time, and their first child was born on 25 January 1868. Had their shotgun marriage caused ructions at Carriber? Certainly by the time of John's birth, William had come down in the world, working as one of six agricultural labourers on 140-acre Mid Kinleith Farm. William and Mary had two more sons who died in infancy. Annie followed on 1 May 1876, and two years later saw the birth of Marion Girdwood Finlay, named after her grandmother. Annie explained, when writing in 1938, that Mid Kinleith was tenanted by a childless couple, John and Mary Muir. William ultimately became steward of the farm, taking over its management on behalf of widow Mary Muir when she was in her sixties. William had obviously developed a secure and responsible position at Mid Kinleith, and Annie recorded that 'he won many prizes, for Mr and Mrs Muir, for his well-kept horses'. But then he was injured as the consequence of an accident with one of the animals he loved.

Consequently, in 1880 they left Mid Kinleith Farm to move to Leith. There, William worked as a dairyman for a time, but when, in 1888, his wife, Mary, died at the relatively young age of 47, he was a railway lorryman, a term



William Finlay preparing a horse for show. (Courtesy of Sheena Irving)

suggesting that he drove a horse-drawn wagon for one of the railway companies. Widower William now lived in a more humble two-room tenement at 161 Fountainbridge with his children. John, the eldest, 23, was still present but accompanied by Elizabeth, his 26-year-old wife whom he had married the previous year. Although William had had the prospect of a job as an inspector to police acts of cruelty to horses in the centre of Edinburgh during the 1880s, this did not transpire and by 1891 he was blind and unemployed.

In 1891, Annie was 14 and had begun work as an apprentice compositor. Marion, her younger sister, followed her into the print business soon after. Annie recalled:

My father, although sightless and oft times suffering great bodily pain, never depressed others. His high intellectuality, kindness and charm of manner drew many kind friends around us. He had been a reader, consequently a thinker, and it was a great deprivation to him only to read by the slow process of his fingers; but 'we twa', both being in the printing trade, told him all that was going on in the works. I read to him in the evenings; we discussed literature in one circle of friends; or he lived over and over again his boyhood at Torphin and his young manhood at Carriber and Mid Kinleith.

By 1901, William was living with his two daughters, Annie and Marion, in a one-room tenement house in Edinburgh's Lauriston Place. Annie was a compositor and Marion, a book-folder, the girls supporting their father. It is revealed that William had, by this time, been blind for twelve years, the census enumerator noting that William had been 'blind since 1889'.

William spent his last days at 26 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, and he died there on 9 December 1906. His daughter, Marion, died in a tragic accident in 1917, being run over by a motor bus which fractured the base of her skull and her pelvis. Annie lived until 13 January 1954.

Conclusion

Tracing the experiences of people with sight loss in Edwardian society in the south-east of Scotland has taken research volunteers on a journey that has spanned a much longer time period than those years falling between the death of Queen Victoria and the onset of the Great War. Some of our subjects were born in the 1830s and 1840s while their parents may have been born in the late eighteenth century. Others were still young men and women when their names were entered on The Register of the missions to outdoor blind – ‘The Edinburgh Society for Promoting Reading amongst the Adult Blind in the own Homes on Moon’s System (Braille’s System also Taught)’, as it was titled at the beginning of the 1900s. Some, like Elizabeth Jamieson, were of advanced age and in their declining years when they were first came to the attention of the missionaries.

For these reasons, and for many others, the several hundred people recorded by the Society between c.1903 and c.1911 represent diverse life stories. Every one of them was an individual and their life courses embraced varied experiences of dependence and independence, vigour and ill-health, assertive willpower or deteriorating mental well-being. Many of their experiences reflected those of fully-sighted members of society, a point that should not be overlooked.

One characteristic of the people featured in this book is the importance of their social circles. Historian Gordon Phillips suggests that, around the middle of the nineteenth

century, Edinburgh Blind Asylum outworkers were noted as ‘a community marked by mutual support and co-operation’. Yet, while The Register managed the names entered on its pages by localities, there is no strong evidence of there being ‘blind’ communities as such. In the 1900s, blind people continued, of course, to live close to the blind workshops on Nicolson Street, in tenement-lined thoroughfares such as Pleasance. Many in this area would have been friends and neighbours. These connections would, in some cases, as highlighted by the case of John Richardson in 1891, have resulted in blind people lodging together, just as they may have worked together. However, other instances of blind people living side by side, as in the cases of 45-year-old William Finlay and eight-year-old Mary Howie, at 161 Fountainbridge, also in 1891, appear to have been no more than coincidental.

Greenside was a neighbourhood of tightly-packed tenements nestled below Edinburgh’s Calton Hill. Many of those tenements have now been demolished – although not only do Greenside’s cobbled streets remain, but a drying green with ancient clothes poles stands testimony to a once vibrant community. The Register designated Greenside as a specific locality for its missionary endeavours. Yet tenement inhabitants were notoriously transient because of the often one-year duration of rental agreements and in 1901, for example, there were only five blind people recorded in Greenside on census day. Even although four of them were young people aged between 20 and 25, it would require firm evidence to suggest that they mixed together and represented any kind of network. One of them, 20-year-old John Roadnight, lived with his

18-year-old wife in a two-room tenement dwelling and earned his living as a street musician – the single entry in 1901 suggests that John was doing alright. The other three young people, Hannah Paton, Myles Lees and Archibald Bathgate, were living with siblings and one or two of their parents and were without occupations. Henry Walker was the other person, a 55-year-old ‘retired hawker’, and he lived alone.

While people with sight loss in the villages and rural communities of Edinburgh’s hinterland might have been more isolated from other people sharing their circumstances than was the case in the city, this was of debatable importance and needs to be more deeply investigated. Individuals had varying degrees of independence and in their choice of social circles.

Did the Edinburgh Society play any role in creating a ‘community marked by mutual support and co-operation’ as Phillips suggests? There were shared activities under the auspices of the Society, such as the Howe Street library and reading room, and the Society’s holidays to Jamieson Cottage in Kirkliston. However, it may have been that it was only those who bought into the respectable ethos of the Society who felt comfortable in using these facilities.

Family networks were another matter. The vignettes tracing the lives of some of the individuals on The Register demonstrate the importance of family cohesiveness and also show instances where this was lacking, often to the detriment of a blind member’s wellbeing. Robert Ponton led a largely independent life, but the support from his

brother and nephew appear to have been important, and this was equally true of William Finlay who was able to reply upon his loyal daughters. Elements of this were true for Mary Howie and Georgina McDonald, while in the long run, John Richardson's detachment from his family, upon being sent from rural Roxburghshire to the Edinburgh blind school, perhaps denied him of family support to his detriment since wider community networking led to his downfall. Of course, the likes of long-term sibling support was not limited to people with sight loss, as is seen with the Jamieson brothers and sisters who lived together throughout their lives, all remaining single. It is also seen in the case of Agnes Inglis (c.1831-1904) from Berwickshire. She was recorded on The Register, but at no point during her life was she acknowledged as blind in official records. Her sight loss was possibly age-related, occurring in her last five years during which she had a 'disease of the brain', the reported cause of her death. While Agnes's older brother and sister went their own ways upon marriage, her younger brother, George, was with her throughout her life, again neither sibling marrying.

Children, such as John Richardson, leaving home to attend a residential blind school, and young blind adults leaving home to seek work in city asylum workshops, meant that they were more likely to develop so-called blind networks. This can be seen in Edinburgh, particularly if they spend a portion of their lives in a residential institution. The experiences of people on The Register who were geographically scattered and were diverse in their social and economic circumstances, were personal and individual. The nature and timing of their sight loss, their

family and health circumstances, and their diverse social and religious values, all challenged the notion of an identifiable community – but to prove or disprove such a notion would need to be the subject of a focused investigation.

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Feeling Our History has been compiled from research undertaken by volunteers participating in the RNIB Scotland project Seeing Our History, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

An accessible word version of the book is available at www.insightradio.co.uk/seeingourhistory. To order braille or audio formats please email info@rnib.scotland.org.uk.



Feeling Our History is an exploration into lives of people with blindness and sight loss in Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Borders at the beginning of the twentieth century. It narrates major themes that include family networks, independence, education, employment, communication, religion and philanthropy.



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