

# Hearing Our History

RNIB Scotland research volunteers discuss the experience of blindness and sight loss in Edwardian Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Scottish Borders

Iain Hutchison

Published in 2015 by

**RNIB Scotland**

12-14 Hillside Crescent  
Edinburgh, EH7 5EA  
Scotland

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Hearing Our History: RNIB Scotland research volunteers discuss 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: 978-0-9934106-9-7

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Typeset in Scotland by Delta Mac Artwork  
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Printed and bound in Scotland by Bell & Bain Ltd,  
Glasgow

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Some of the Seeing Our History research team:  
Veronica Bell, Lizzy Ellicott, Victoria Ross, Moira  
McMurchie and Joan Kerr.

## Acknowledgements

Hearing Our History is a companion volume to the book, Feeling Our History, which are outcomes of the Seeing Our History project. First and foremost we thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for its generous backing of Seeing Our History, which has enabled the story and experiences of sight loss in and around Edinburgh a century ago to be explored and developed.

This book and Feeling Our History owe much to a dedicated team of volunteers. Our volunteers embraced the research challenges presented by the fragmentary nature of The Register of the 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.

The project team worked with Insight Radio, RNIB's radio station, to produce a set of six podcasts. These are an integral outcome of the research and they can be accessed at [www.insightradio.co.uk/seeingourhistory](http://www.insightradio.co.uk/seeingourhistory). This book presents transcripts of the recordings. We would like to thank Wilson Bain for his narration of the podcast introductions as well as Stuart Barrie and Steven Scott for their invaluable help. Particular thanks are due to Yvonne Milne whose broadcasting skills have been crucial. Input to the podcasts was also provided by research 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, 'Have a cuppa tea', inspired by the music halls of the Edwardian period. Sarah's rendition of 'Have a cuppa tea' is accompanied by Sally Clay (piano and accordion) and Seonaid Aitken (violin). The recording was produced, mixed and mastered by Duncan Cameron of Riverside Music Complex.

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 2014, facilitated further research of the Society's records and, as project partners, 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 William's story on one of the Insight Radio podcasts transcribed for 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.

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 discovered 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, 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, and for writing the foreword to this volume. Catriona's skill and diligence has ensured maximum efficiency, but more importantly, she has brought together strangers, and enthused and inspired them. After a few short months, she 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 image on the front cover is of William Finlay and was provided by Sheena Irving. The photograph on the back cover shows research volunteer Lizzy Ellicott during the recording of her Hearing Our History podcast. Photographs are by the author unless otherwise attributed.

Iain Hutchison  
Research Historian



(L-R) Catriona Burness, Joan Kerr, Lizzy Ellicott, Veronica Bell, Sarah Caltieri, Siobhan Aitken, Sally Clay, Moira McMurchie, Victoria Ross and Iain Hutchison. (Photo: [www.chriswatt.com](http://www.chriswatt.com))

## Foreword

The Register of the Outdoor Blind for Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Borders was not catalogued with the rest of the RNIB Scotland archive in 2012. Instead it was discovered in September 2012 after the death of Jimmy Cook, former Chair of RNIB Scotland, when I had the privilege of clearing his honorary desk at Hillside Crescent, Edinburgh. Jimmy was deeply interested in the history of blindness and had clearly prized The Register. He may have rescued it from an earlier Hillside clearout and had his own ideas about what might be done with it, but death intervened. The Register was soon recognised as the jewel of the RNIB Scotland archive and it became the focus of our Heritage Lottery Fund supported project, Seeing Our History.

Our research volunteers can confirm that The Register has duplicate entries, is haphazard, poorly maintained and often incomplete. Yet its entries introduced large numbers of people living with sight loss a century ago to fresh scrutiny, while some of the missing details have spurred our research volunteers on to greater investigative efforts. Thanks to them and the dedicated expertise of our project historian Dr Iain Hutchison and the musical interpretation by Sarah Caltieri we have a new understanding of the

experience of blindness in Edwardian Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Scottish Borders.

As Victoria Ross, one of the research volunteers said:

'It's been fascinating to learn about the lives of the individuals on The Register and it has often felt as though they have come to life through the telling of their stories! I hope that the people who listen to and read these stories will find them as interesting as we have!'

Catriona Burness

Senior Research Officer, RNIB Scotland



# Introduction

Hearing Our History is a companion volume to the book, Feeling Our History. Both publications are the result of the Heritage Lottery Fund supported RNIB Scotland project Seeing Our History. This project focussed on the lives of the so-called outdoor blind people in Edinburgh and its neighbouring counties during the Edwardian period. The outdoor blind were people with sight loss who lived in the wider community rather than in institutions such as Edinburgh's blind asylum.

The project sought to trace the lives of some of the people recorded in the Outdoor Blind Register which Catriona Burness discusses in the Foreword. Our team of volunteers carried out extensive research in the National Records of Scotland, sometimes expanded upon by additional research in other archival repositories, to put together the life events of the people described.

Key themes affecting people with sight loss were explored in order to place their experiences within the wider context of the continuities and changes that Edinburgh was undergoing at the beginning of the twentieth century. By this time, the missionaries to the outdoor blind had been active in Edinburgh and its

hinterland for half a century.

The Society for the Outdoor Blind focussed on teaching people with sight loss to read raised type and this was primarily so that they might access religious works. The system of raised type that was promoted was the Moon system, although by the Edwardian period the Society had also embraced braille and therefore offered instruction and library facilities in both methods of tactile print.

The Society also encouraged certain classes of employment, but it discouraged others which it judged to lack respectability. Of course the people whom the Society tried to reach out to and take under its wing often had their own ideas on how they wished to live their lives. Some of them thrived while others struggled, but this varied at different stages of people's lives as can be heard in some of the stories featured in the Insight Radio podcasts that are the focus of this book.

The podcasts are one of the key outcomes of the Seeing Our History project. The transcripts of the podcasts are presented in this book. The podcasts are narrated by the project's volunteer researchers and, in the case of William Finlay whose image appears on the front cover, by his great-great-granddaughter, Sheena Irving.

Each podcast is accompanied by music and song by Sarah Caltieri. She was inspired by the music that might have influenced blind street musicians, and by the story of Lizzie Hoseason and her daughter, Sophie (later known as Sadie). The background to their case is also given in this book along with the lyrics to the song, entitled 'Have a cuppa tea'. The story of Lizzie, and the other people featured on the podcasts, is told in greater detail in the book *Feeling Our History*.



Members of the Seeing Our History team (L-R)  
Victoria Ross, Joan Kerr, Moira McMurchie,  
Catriona Burness, Jill Doran, Dave Bakermault and  
Veronica Bell.



Much of the Seeing Our History project research was undertaken in the National Records of Scotland at General Register House. This is General Register House in 1902. Behind is St James Square where the reading room of the Edinburgh Society for promoting Reading amongst the Outdoor Blind was located. In 1909, a new reading room, bequeathed by Elizabeth and Alexander Jamieson, was opened in Howe Street. (City of Edinburgh Council - Edinburgh Museums and Galleries [www.capitalcollections.org.uk](http://www.capitalcollections.org.uk))



# Audio Introduction

## Narrated by Wilson Bain

[Wilson Bain introduces each podcast with the three paragraphs below. The final two paragraphs conclude each podcast.]

Can you imagine what it would be like to be blind or partially sighted a hundred years ago?

Seeing Our History is an RNIB Scotland project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, that explores this question in Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Borders. Our volunteers have researched the lives of those referred to as the 'outdoor blind' because they didn't live in blind institutions.

In this series of podcasts, you can experience their struggles and successes, brought to life through the real experiences of people with sight loss.

This podcast is part of a project by RNIB Scotland, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which explores the experiences of outdoor blind people living in Edinburgh, the Borders, and the Lothians one hundred years ago.

For more information about the Seeing Our History project please go to [www.insightradio.co.uk/seeingourhistory](http://www.insightradio.co.uk/seeingourhistory)



In this 1918 image open windows of the Castle Lodging House ensure that it is benefitting from a good airing while a ventriloquist attracts an audience in the Grassmarket. (City of Edinburgh Council - Edinburgh Libraries [www.capitalcollections.org.uk](http://www.capitalcollections.org.uk))

## **Lodging houses – and the case study of John Richardson**

[Wilson Bain] Here's Moira McMurchie to tell us about lodging houses.

[Moira] In Edwardian Edinburgh, lodging houses were the borderlands of destitution.

There were several lodging houses in Edinburgh in the 1900s. They were occupied by men who were effectively of no fixed abode.

These lodging houses were some of the places that several blind men went to for cheap accommodation. Especially those who made their living from street entertaining, hawking or begging.

The Register kept by the Missions to the Outdoor Blind for Edinburgh and the neighbouring counties includes pages for what it called the 'Migratory Class'.

At any one time, we find some of these so-called migrants in lodging houses in the Old Town.

Loftus Lodging House in the Grassmarket housed 65 men. The Jubilee Lodging House on King's Stables Road accommodated over 170.

But the Castle Lodging House in the Grassmarket was

even larger than these. Purpose-built in the 1870s, at that time, it had small rooms for its inmates – and a corridor on each floor led to a communal privy.

However, in the 1880s it was re-structured. Its floors were strengthened to support huge dormitories which replaced the small rooms. In 1911, it held a transient population of nearly 400 men.

Our research historian for Seeing Our History is Iain Hutchison.

Iain, how did the men know how to find these lodging houses?

[Iain] We can guess that word of mouth guided them. This could be down to information passed on by other itinerants. Local traders or publicans might have suggested particular lodging houses. They may have been directed by the police or the poor law authorities.

[Moir] What would it have been like to live in a lodging house?

[Iain] Lodging houses were noisy, overcrowded places where people from all walks of life, but down on their luck, might get shelter. They offered no personal space or privacy. Lodgers could find themselves involved in brawls - and theft was a recurring problem. However, lodging houses had managers and they did

their best to impose order, enforce rules, and keep their establishments relatively clean.

[Moir] It is difficult to believe that the Grassmarket was home to all these homeless men?

[Iain] Well, many had work but they represented a mobile population. By the 1900s, the Grassmarket and the Cowgate was an area that was considered best viewed from the likes of North Bridge, but only to be explored by the more adventures traveller. It was a noisy area of street traders, taverns, and frequented by the occasional pickpocket.

If these itinerant men could not get enough money for a lodging house bed, their last resort was to appeal to the poor law for help. Such desperation might see them being admitted to a poorhouse.

[Moir] Iain Hutchison there, Seeing Our History's research historian.

One blind man who would have known what it was like to live in a lodging house is John Richardson.

In 1901, John Richardson, age 49, was living in the Jubilee Lodging House. After 30 years as a worker at the blind asylum, he had been dismissed for theft and drunkenness.

John was born in 1852 in Oxnam parish, a rural

community in Roxburghshire. His father was a shepherd. He was the eldest child of a family of five.

During his childhood, an accident caused him to lose his sight and by the age of nine he had been sent to the blind school in Edinburgh's Gayfield Square where he learned to read raised type.

In 1866, when he was fourteen, he entered the blind asylum as an apprentice weaver. He started on a weekly wage of six shillings and six pence. He was noted for his 'good character' and, by the end of that year, his wage had increased to seven shillings and six pence.

For the next 30 years John boarded with various families. In 1895, he was still working for the blind asylum, but was now a mattress maker earning a good wage of £38 12 shillings a year.

However, in 1896 he was disciplined and suspended from his work at the asylum for drunkenness and absenteeism. This pattern was still happening two years later and in 1899 he was caught stealing horse hair from the mattress workshop and selling it to a dealer.

He was convicted of theft and dismissed from his job at the blind asylum.

John continued to drink. Without work, he had to live

in cheap lodging houses such as the Jubilee and Castle Lodging Houses, which is when he came to the attention of the Society for the Outdoor Blind.

His situation continued to deteriorate and he died from a stroke in Craigleith Poorhouse at the age of 62. A secondary cause of his death was alcoholism.

Research volunteer Victoria Ross followed John's story and tells us more about the life of this fascinating man.

Victoria, why did the poor law authorities in Oxnam want John's parents to send him to the blind school?

[Victoria] The Poor Law provided relief to families in hardship. The parochial board would have been concerned that he would bring hardship to his family, especially as he grew older and be unable to work on the farm. The poor law authorities would want him to be able to earn a living in some way so that they wouldn't have to support him in adult life.

[Moir] In the long run, did this prove to be a good idea?

[Victoria] John learned to read raised type at the blind school in Edinburgh's Gayfield Square. He successfully learned the trades he worked in – weaving and mattress making. Therefore it is ironic that he left for Edinburgh to avoid being dependent on poor relief,

earned a craft, yet he died an alcoholic pauper in a poorhouse - as a pauper.

[Moira] What happened to his relationship with his family?

[Victoria] It's unknown whether he saw much of his family after going to blind school. If he did, it could have been a more distant relationship. However, he built friendships in the workshops of the blind asylum. And he may have formed close friendships in crowded accommodation where he lodged. This may, or may not, have been a good thing. John never married. Mixing with members of the opposite sex was not encouraged by the asylum. Although rules like this were there to be broken!

[Moira] As a young man, the blind asylum judged he was of 'good character'. Why did he later start drinking and stealing?

[Victoria] He could have started his drinking habit at any time of his working life. However it's noted that John stole the horsehair with three other workers. These workers may have been some of the friends and colleagues with whom he lodged. John may have been a bad influence on others. Or perhaps they were a bad influence on him ... we don't know. But he certainly fell under the influence of drink during his later years!



[Moir] That was Victoria Ross one of the Seeing Our History research volunteers.



Victoria Ross, who researched the life of John Richardson, was intrigued by the unravelling of this promising young man's life.



Mary Howie's experiences arose from one of the first cases to be investigated by Moira McMurchie. Moira was soon on a mission to find out what happened to Mary following the death of her father in 1890.



Mary Howie spent her adult life at 16 Lochrin Place. (Photo: Moira McMurchie)

## **Poorhouses – and the case study of Mary Howie**

[Wilson Bain] Here's Joan Kerr to tell us about poorhouses.

[Joan] Poorhouses were the last resort for the destitute.

In the 1900s, The Register of the Outdoor Blind for Edinburgh and the neighbouring counties was arranged by localities. However, there are also pages dedicated to poorhouses where paupers were sent under the provisions of the 1845 Poor Law Act.

If someone was disabled, friendless and without a penny to their name, their last resort was an appeal to the Poor Law. Such desperation might see them being admitted to a poorhouse.

The Poor Law was funded by ratepayers. It was not designed to be generous. In each parish it was overseen by an Inspector of Poor. He might authorise food, a blanket, or a small cash allowance. But if claimants were in poor health and homeless, the Inspector had the option of placing them in a poorhouse.

In Edwardian society in the south-east of Scotland, blind people were found in various poorhouses. In

Edinburgh these were at Craiglockhart and Craigleith. Other poorhouses were in places such as Linlithgow, Peebles, Jedburgh, and Berwick. These so-called 'paupers' were people who were unable to support themselves and without family to take them in.

People who ended up in poorhouses might well have felt abandoned. Although the missionaries to the outdoor blind visited poorhouses, it is difficult to judge if they had much engagement with their blind inmates.

Blind people in a poorhouse may have felt that they had more pressing concerns than hearing the preaching of the missionaries or being taught how to read raised type.

In reality, many of the poorhouse inmates remained anonymous. First names were often not recorded by the missionaries. Indeed, there is an example of someone simply being entered on the blind register as 'woman'. She was in Hawick poorhouse where her anonymity was complete – she was unknown and seemingly unloved.

Seeing Our History's research historian is Iain Hutchison.

Iain, did paupers admitted to the poorhouse have to do work – like picking oakum?

[Iain] No. Scottish poorhouses were not like the

English workhouses. They were not open to the able-bodied, only to those disabled from working. People with sight loss admitted to a poorhouse would, therefore, have been judged as 'disabled'. However, poorhouse inmates would often be allocated duties of a domestic nature.

[Joan] What kind of people were to be found in poorhouses then?

[Iain] People who were not able-bodied, for example people who were disabled from working to support themselves. Besides people with physical, sensory or mental impairments, there were many elderly people disabled by chronic ill-health and frailty. There were also mothers with very young children – widows, deserted wives, and abandoned single mothers.

[Joan] So was admission to a poorhouse an easy option?

[Iain] It was often the final safety net for destitute people. But life in the poorhouse was a frugal one. Poorhouse managers were always under pressure from parochial boards to keep costs down – the ratepayers demanded to know that their money was being used sparingly and that people were not being admitted if they had other options.

[Joan] What other options could they possibly have?

[Iain] It was often believed that paupers must have relatives somewhere who should be taking responsibility for them. Efforts were regularly made to track down relations and to get them to take over the financial burden being carried by the ratepayers.

[Joan] But we are talking about Edwardian times. Poorhouses were still in use then?

[Iain] Yes, indeed. Many of the cases we have studied lived through the nineteenth century and would have been well familiar with the poorhouse. They were quite old by the Edwardian period. However, the poor law went through various revisions, and remained present until the creation of the National Health Service in 1948.

[Joan] That was Seeing Our History's research historian, Iain Hutchison.

Mary Howie is a case investigated by research volunteer, Moira McMurchie. It's an example of a woman who grew up during the poor law, but lived well into the era of the welfare state.

For six decades, until her death in 1964 at the age of 81 years, Mary Howie had lived in a tenement house at 16 Lochrin Place, in Edinburgh.

Mary's mother came from humble means, but her father, Lindsay Howie, was from an established family

of artists and portrait photographers.

Mary should have had a comfortable life, but by 1890, when she was eight, her father was dead. Her mother took her and her two brothers to live in her parent's overcrowded tenement house.

At that time, Mary was recorded as being 'blind from childhood'. Her widowed mother was supporting her children as a worker in the unpleasant environment of a rubber factory. But, with family support, her widowed mother and her brothers were lucky – they were not cast on the Poor Law to survive.

By 1911, when Mary was approaching her 29th birthday, her two brothers were working in the print industry. They were supporting Mary, her mother and her grandmother in a two-room dwelling at 16 Lochrin Place.

Mary's younger brother, Thomas, was killed in action during the Great War. George, her older brother, married in 1927 when he was already 47 years of age. After her mother died in 1935, Mary continued to live in Lochrin Place.

We do not know if she lived alone for the next 30 years, but it may be that she led a totally independent life during and beyond the Second World War. It is left to future historians to trace her story when census

returns for and after 1921 become available.

However, she did survive within society. By her later years, she was able to get an old age state pension. She could benefit from free medical care. Ironically, she died in what had been Craiglockhart Poorhouse. But not as a pauper. Craiglockhart had been taken over by the NHS in 1948. It was now Craiglockhart Hospital - offering full medical care to everyone without stigmatising them as paupers – and there were also care facilities for the elderly on the site.

Moira McMurchie is the research volunteer who investigated Mary's life.

Now, Moira, Mary seems to have had an unsettled childhood?

[Moira] She had no father figure it seems. Despite her parents having three children, they seem to have had an uneasy relationship. Her father died when she was eight and at that time he was living apart from his family - in lodgings.

[Joan] So, what happened next?

[Moira] Her mother returned to her parents' home in Fountainbridge and she had to earn a wage to help support her children so the portrait photographer's wife was now having to make rubber coats in a factory.



[Joan] What about Mary? Did she ever work?

[Moira] From the little evidence we have, it seems that she did some knitting in her early years. This was work that the Missions for Outdoor Blind encouraged. But apart from that, it appears that it was her family that ensured her well-being. Of course, by the time she reached old age, the welfare state had been introduced and that would have helped.

[Joan] How active a role do you think Mary played in the wider family relationships? What do you think Mary's relationship was with her brothers?

[Moira] Well, Mary was probably very close to her big brother, George. For example, when George eventually married Agnes, who had been a nursing sister in Bradford, it was Mary who acted as a witness. Obviously, she could not write, but The Register carries her mark in the form of a cross. When I found this on The Register, it was extremely exciting for me.

[Joan] That was Moira McMurchie the research volunteer who investigated Mary's life.



Life on the margins, as in this 1880 image of a match seller in Edinburgh's Old Town, was the lot of many outdoor blind people. (City of Edinburgh Council - Edinburgh Libraries [www.capitalcollections.org.uk](http://www.capitalcollections.org.uk)) Sight loss in later life could be challenging for people, such as William Finlay, who had been used to an active life. (Courtesy of Sheena Irving)



## **Employment – and the case study of William Finlay**

[Wilson Bain] Sheena Irving tells us more about employment during this period of history.

[Sheena] In Edwardian Edinburgh tea sellers and mangle turners were approved of. Street musicians were not!

Edinburgh's blind asylum had about 250 workers on its payroll, both as inmates and as outworkers. To gain employment at the blind asylum, workers had to be able-bodied blind. They had to be productive.

The outdoor mission serving Edinburgh and the neighbouring counties had about 500 people on its register. Many of these were elderly and frail. But it had about 80 people who were employed in some way, and another 24 who earned a livelihood 'on the street'.

In 1906, Christopher Ness, missionary for the outdoor blind, wrote:

'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.'

These employments gained the approval of the missionaries. They were seen as respectable - and the blind knitters, and hawkers of tea, were commended for trying to support themselves. A couple of sturdy blind people turned a mangle to squeeze the water from heavy laundry items. There were also music teachers, organists, and piano tuners.

The 24 who earned a living 'on the street' were, by contrast, frowned upon. Those who begged were not considered to be engaging in a respectable form of 'self-help'. Neither were those who performed for passers-by – musicians, or oratory readers of raised type.

Some blind people had to undergo a dramatic career change upon losing their eyesight. John Donaldson sold tea, apparently with success. He had previously been a coal miner until losing his sight in an accident. Donaldson was highly commended for his skill at developing his tea business. However, his income from it was considerably less than he had earned as a coal miner.

Our research historian for Seeing Our History is Iain Hutchison.

Iain, it seems that around a hundred of the outdoor blind were working and therefore able-bodied. So, why were they not being given work by the blind asylum?

[Iain] The key to answering this question is 'productivity'. The blind asylum endeavoured to operate as a business and it required workers who fitted that business model. For example, in 1907, no less a person than Edinburgh's Lord Provost appealed to the blind asylum to offer work to William Woods. However, the blind asylum turned down this request because it considered Woods to be 'physically weak'.

[Sheena] Music teachers seem to be held in high regard, but musicians were looked down on?

[Iain] Yes, music teachers, organists and piano tuners were indeed held in high regard – the blind asylum, for example, trained blind people in piano tuning. Music teachers and piano tuners might find work in the homes of the respectable middle classes, while organists would perform in places of worship. Musicians, by contrast, often found their business on the street, in public houses and performing in music halls. These places did not present the image of blind people that the missionaries sought. The same applied to readers of raised type who used their skill as entertainment - in return for money.

[Sheena] John Donaldson and people like him lost their jobs as the result of sight loss, often through an accident. How did people in this situation cope?

[Iain] Donaldson is interesting in that he fell under the

missions to outdoor blind which set him up as a tea seller. Perhaps the blind asylum might have found him to be a good worker. Some blind people did not want to be governed by oppressive rules and the Missions were less well-placed to control their lives. The blind asylum, by contrast, did indeed enforce rigid rules on its workers.

Adapting to sight loss after a productive life could indeed be challenging. William Finlay, for example, had an active working life until he met with an accident.

[Sheena] That was Iain Hutchison, our research historian for Seeing Our History.

I'm Sheena Irving, and William Finlay was in fact my great-great-grandfather. When I heard RNIB Scotland's Seeing Our History project being discussed on the radio, I got in touch, as I have a letter written in 1938 by his daughter, Annie, which gives an account of his life.

Joan Kerr, one of the research volunteers found out more about his experiences.

[Joan] William Finlay's passion was horses – one that would cost him his sight.

Born in 1845, William enjoyed an idyllic childhood on Torphin Farm, situated west of Edinburgh. The surrounding hills were his playground. Annie wrote, 'It

was his eager delight to scale the rocks to collect inaccessible plants for the elderly.' The hills were also a popular spot with visiting botanists.

At 15 he was apprenticed to a nearby blacksmith. So began his long association with horses.

Moving to Carriber Farm near Torphichen, brought him two loves. Horses - and Mary, the farmer's daughter.

Mary was pregnant when they wed. Perhaps Mary's parents didn't approve of the relationship as the couple had moved to Mid Kinleith Farm at Currie by the time, John, their son, was born. William was reduced from a ploughman to being a lowly agricultural labourer.

Mid Kinleith was tenanted by John and Mary Muir - an elderly, childless couple. Annie recorded that her father won many prizes for the couple, showing his well groomed, heavy horses.

William's hard work and loyalty was rewarded when he took over sole management of the farm on Mr Muir's death.

The 1880s was a turbulent period for William. A horse kicked him on the forehead triggering the gradual loss of his sight. This cost him his job of managing the farm.

Unable to continue working at Mid Kinleith, the family moved to Leith. William worked as a dairyman and subsequently for one of the railway companies, driving a horse-drawn wagon.

In 1888, his wife, Mary, died of erysipelas.

Just as he was on the brink of securing his dream job of monitoring the welfare of working horses on Edinburgh's Princes Street, his sight deteriorated further and he became unemployed in his mid-40s.

For the next 17 years, his daughters Marion and Annie looked after him. Annie described him as an intelligent man, a prolific reader. She said that it was a great deprivation to him to only read by the slow process of his fingers. She would read to him in the evening or they discussed literature with friends. He in return would fondly reminisce about his early years and young adulthood. William died in Edinburgh in 1906, aged 61.

Joan Kerr was the research volunteer who looked into my great-great-grandfather's life.

[Sheena] Joan we came across a lovely photograph of my great-great-grandfather.

[Joan] Yeah, it was an amazing photo. It really helped to bring him to life, Sheena. The photo shows William in mid-life. He's standing with one of his prized horses



readied for the show. Dressed for the occasion, he is wearing a bowler hat and tailed jacket, but it comes across as working garb in keeping with his status as a horseman demonstrating his craft. Tall and bearded, he appears a strong man at one with his prized Clydesdale horse, its mane pleated for competition.

[Sheena] You said that William's wife died from erysipelas? What is erysipelas?

[Joan] Its other name is St Anthony's Fire. It is a contagious skin streptococcal disease affecting the top layer of skin. The face develops a red butterfly rash that's hot, inflamed and it looks like orange peel. Other symptoms include fevers, chills, nausea and vomiting.

When Mary died there were no antibiotics so the standard treatment was to administer laxative 'purges' and then to paint the patient's face with iodine or silver nitrate. Mary was unlucky as the condition isn't normally fatal. She had acute rheumatism that would have weakened her immunity, probably allowing sepsis to develop.

[Sheena] How do you think William would have felt about being supported by his children after he lost his sight?

[Joan] You get the sense that he was very frustrated

following his injuries and particularly after his sight failed. A new job inspecting the welfare of horses did not materialise when he became blind and he lost his former independence. But the support of his daughters, Annie and Marion, must have been a positive thing for him – they stood by their father. They worked in the print trade, which, like the jute mills in Dundee, was noted as one of the few domains where skilled, independent women were welcome.

Annie wrote that it was ‘with youthful enthusiasm and inherited Scottish independence’, that they cared for their semi-invalid father – and they won through.

[Sheena] That was Joan Kerr, one of the research volunteers with RNIB Scotland’s Seeing Our History project.



Joan and Sheena discuss William Finlay, Sheena’s great-great-grandfather during the recording session.

# **Stereotyping and Mental Health – and the case study of Georgina McDonald**

[Wilson Bain] Here's Veronica Bell to tell us about stereotyping and mental health during this period of history.

[Veronica] Everybody is the same and everybody is different.

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

These case studies not only highlight the very different experiences of individuals and their wider family and social networks. They show that these identities and experiences vary considerably over each person's life journey.

The study highlights the tendency of 'mainstream' society to stereotype people who they see as different. People often had to fight against what other outsiders perceived that they can and cannot do – or should do.

This is seen in the world of work. Blind people were generally restricted to handcraft jobs. The outdoor

blind might be encouraged to engage in certain sales or merchandising jobs, or creative work in the field of music – but they were also told clearly what jobs they should not do even if they could do them.

Restrictions on blind people's lives could put them under social, economic and mental pressure. Of course, this could also occur with sighted people.

Lizzie Hoseason, whose family is featured in the theme tune to this series of Seeing Our History podcasts, led a traumatic life despite some early independence. She experienced depression, religious delusions and general poor health. She died in Bangour Village Hospital – which was the Midlothian mental asylum – at the age of 41.

Iain Hutchison is the research historian on the Seeing Our History project.

So Iain, how did people with sight loss cope with stereotyping?

[Iain] People reacted in different ways. For some, stereotyping of their abilities and inabilities nonetheless provided them with occupations.

Some skilled work that became available during the Edwardian period was braille typewriting. Some outdoor blind people became proficient on these machines in the Outdoor Blind Society's library and

reading room in Edinburgh's Howe Street. But this was also a combination of opportunity and stereotyping.

[Veronica] Are there other ways in which people made generalised assumptions?

[Iain] The definition of blindness itself caused confusion among people lacking experience of sight loss. This was even apparent in official circles. The ten-yearly census returns had recorded blind people since 1851. One commentator defined blindness as the inability to read normal sized type.

But in 1911, the census administrators decided that blindness meant being 'totally blind'. In the world of official statistics, people with some residual sight therefore became sighted again!

[Veronica] Was blindness a direct cause of mental breakdown?

[Iain] It could be. But there are many causes of mental ill health. Certainly, people with sight loss could be placed under extenuating pressures.

One of our research volunteers, Kirstin Cunningham, found one case where the initial admission to a mental asylum was contentious.

[Veronica] That was Iain Hutchison, the research historian, for the Seeing Our History project.

Let's take up the story of Georgina McDonald.

'She is most intelligent and with no signs of insanity as far as I can discover.'

That was the view of the Inspector of Poor for the parish of Scone in Perthshire when he visited Georgina McDonald, age 48, in Murthly Asylum in 1919.

Georgina McDonald was born in 1871 at 6 South Foulis Close, a passageway leading off Edinburgh's High Street. It was a single-room dwelling occupied by her parents, William and Marion McDonald, and two older sisters.

Georgina appears to have been blind by the time she was thirteen.

The story of her life with sight loss is part of a wider family narrative. Her parents met at the blind asylum where they both worked. And they were dismissed from the asylum's employment when the directors discovered them living together.

Her parents, William and Marion, however, were survivors. They married, had a family, and lived independently.

By 1901, age 29, Georgina was as a home-worker making mattresses. She was head of a household that

consisted of herself, her older sister, Helen, and Helen's five children. Georgina had taken on considerable responsibility at that time.

Ten years later, Helen had died, and Georgina was living alone, 'totally blind', in a one-room dwelling. She now worked as a tyke maker, making pillow cases as a blind asylum outworker.

In 1919, Georgina, 47, still lived alone. But she was prone to wandering the streets, and was described as being in a verminous condition. She claimed that she was being persecuted by neighbours.

The police intervened, and delivered her to the Royal Edinburgh Asylum mental institution. She was eventually sent to Murthly Asylum in Perthshire.

Georgina was discharged from the asylum after a few months and returned to Edinburgh. But having been in an asylum, she was now stigmatised as mentally unsound. She was sent back to Murthly Asylum where she died in 1925 at the age of 54.

One of the research volunteers for the Seeing Our History project is Moira McMurchie.

The blind asylum rejected Georgina's parents when they discovered that they had been co-habiting. That was a bit harsh, wasn't it?

[Moir] The asylum had strict regulations and a strong moral code. They were unforgiving when they learned of the relationship. The poor law authorities tried to intervene on William and Marion's behalf, but the asylum directors would have none of it.

While blind people under the asylum often married, they were expected to first get the directors' approval. William and Marion had broken the rules – but they did marry and had a long and stable relationship.

[Veronica] Like her parents, Georgina seems to have been a strong and independent character. What went wrong?

[Moir] When she was found wandering, she was described as delusional. But she may have been in genuine fear of tormentors - tormentors whom she could not see.

When she was sent to the mental asylum for the second time, her diagnosis was 'delusional insanity of persecution'. She was afraid of engine noises and she felt a motor vehicle was going to be used to abduct her. Remember, that Georgina had not previously seen a car. The sound may well have frightened her. Being apprehended by the police in a 'cab' would, in her mind, have confirmed her premonition of abduction.



[Veronica] Should she have been sent to a mental asylum?

[Moira] The inspector of poor doubted this. And the asylum doctors initially felt that she should not be a long-term patient because they discharged her. But Georgina could not settle – nor live independently again. It is probable that her mental health did deteriorate, but after her first admission to a mental asylum, that was enough to label her as a lunatic.

[Veronica] That was research volunteer, Moira McMurchie.



Veronica ready to go on air to describe the life of Georgina McDonald.



RNIB Scotland  
Director John Legg  
holds the  
microphone for RNIB  
Scotland Chair  
Sandra Wilson as  
she introduces  
Seeing Our History

and Deidre Brock MP  
explains the importance  
of the history of sight  
loss at the project  
launch in the National  
Records of Scotland.  
(Photos:  
[www.chriswatt.com](http://www.chriswatt.com))



## **Dependence and Independence – and the case study of Robert Ponton**

[Wilson Bain] Moira McMurchie looks at how easy it was for blind and partially sighted people to retain their independence during this period of history.

[Moira] The Poor Law was the very basic safety net for people facing destitution.

It only aided those who were 'disabled' from working. So, for each application for poor relief, it had to differentiate the disabled from the able-bodied.

In deciding whether some had a disabling impairment, the Poor Law's definition was often a medical one – but the judgement had profound economic and social implications for the person involved.

But everyone is different – and people might define themselves in a variety of different ways. People with sight loss in Edwardian Scotland had their own perspectives on whether they felt dependent – or independent. Their situation could, of course, go through various changes during a lifetime.

Adults working for the blind asylum, either as inmates or outworkers, were not portrayed as dependents, but as able-bodied and productive workers.

They had to conform to rules that regulated their private lives as well as their working lives. But their claims to independence were often asserted by challenges to those rules.

People who were not affiliated to the blind asylum came to the attention of the Missions to Outdoor Blind. The missionaries also endeavoured to exert a form of control – a moral one which embraced rational, middle-class values.

They encouraged religious practice and respectable conduct. But the missionaries were hard-pressed to exercise this kind of control. Many people on The Register of the Outdoor Blind were hard-pressed to be economically independent, but they were often able to exercise an independence of spirit not possible if they were employed by the blind asylum.

Iain Hutchison is the research historian for the Seeing Our History project.

Iain, are you saying that some blind people were disabled and some were not?

[Iain] Yes. The blind asylums portrayed their workers as able-bodied – they were earning a wage, and many of them were supporting a family. Poor Law officials might also see some blind people as able-bodied – if they could successfully argue this of an individual, it

removed their obligation to give them relief in times of hardship.

But most importantly, there were blind people who themselves rejected being labelled as disabled.

[Moir] How did blind people challenge rules?

[Iain] At the blind asylum, periodically they presented petitions to the directors. Sometimes with success. Or they would just break the rules anyway, but if caught could have their wages reduced, or they could be dismissed which meant being unemployed.

Outdoor blind people, by contrast, were relatively free spirits. If they did not like the missionaries' attempts to direct their lives, they simply spurned their advances.

[Moir] If a blind person was in poverty, how could they be independent? This is surely a bit idealistic.

[Iain] In many cases, yes, you are correct. Extreme poverty might mean admission to the poorhouse – and that also meant complying with Rules.

However, most people did not live in total isolation and the presence of supportive family networks could play an important role. This seems to have been particularly true in rural Scotland.

[Moir] That was Iain Hutchison, the research historian

for the Seeing Our History project.

One such case of apparent independence in the countryside is that of Robert Ponton.

Robert Ponton became blind in mid-life. Along with the help of his brothers, Robert lived independently until his dying day.

Robert was born in 1857, on Eastmains Farm in Whittingham, East Lothian. His parents were Thomas and Christina. Thomas worked as a shepherd.

Robert spent his childhood living in a one-room cottage at Whittingham Home Farm with his parents, four brothers and sisters.

His father, Thomas Ponton, died in 1866 of bowel cancer. He was 39. By 1871, at the age of 13, Robert was working as an agricultural labourer, along with his 15 year old brother Thomas.

Between 1871 and 1881 Robert's widowed mother, Christina, was recorded as having two more children, George and Alexander! However - as we will learn - this scandal was not all that it seemed.

Christina died in 1900. Thomas, Robert and Alexander became the nucleus of the family.

Thomas and Alexander still worked in agriculture. However, Robert, now 42, was officially retired. For the

first time he was noted as blind. Christina, their sister, was keeping house for them. She died in 1907.

By 1911, the three brothers had moved from East Lothian to Perthshire, where they seemed to find security. Thomas and Alexander remained farmers. Robert was shown as living on private means.

But this stability was short-lived. In 1912, Thomas died and Alexander married and moved to Dundee. Robert lived independently until his death in Perth in 1932. He had lived alone for 20 years and he died alone peacefully in his sleep. He was 74.

There is a twist to this tale. All along, I have referred to Alexander as Robert's and Thomas' brother. But in reality he was their sister Christina's son, their nephew.

The story goes that Christina was working as an agricultural labourer, when she fell pregnant with her first son, George. A decade later, in 1879, history repeated itself, and Alexander was born to Christina.

Only on Robert's death certificate is it confirmed that Alexander was indeed their nephew and not their supposed brother.

Lizzy Ellicott, one of our research volunteers, has been researching the case of Robert Ponton.

Lizzy, you said, when Robert was a child, there was a family of seven living in a one-room cottage. What would it have been like living in these overcrowded conditions?

[Lizzy] Yes, we know that it was a one-room cottage. What it was like for them needs some speculation. This one room that they all lived in was used for cooking, eating, relaxing, and sleeping - children and adults crowding into a couple of box beds built into the wall. Water supply, toilet facilities and laundry would have all been outdoors. The cottage had just one window and, before electricity, this would make it a very dark and dingy place - they may have used candles or oil lamps. As well, it would have been very cold and damp at times. All this combines to make crowded, tough and unhealthy living conditions.

[Moir] Why was Robert able to stay independent? Would he have been able to without his family?

[Lizzy] The extent of Robert's sight loss is not known. However he was recorded as blind in 1901 and not in 1911, when the census only noted instances of total blindness. This suggests that he may still have had limited sight. If this is true, it would have made life much easier for Robert. For example, he managed to live independently for two decades after the death of Thomas and the marriage of Alexander.



[Moir] What does the cover-up of Christina's illegitimate children tell us about this family?

[Lizzy] From the birth of her first child, it seems that Christina's family took her in and supported her through difficult times. Illegitimacy brought great shame to families. Christina's mother shielded her from this by making out that George and Alexander were HER children. Even although, as she was a widow, the shame of illegitimacy was then passed to her. Later, it seems that Christina's brothers supported her in return for her keeping house.



A light-hearted moment is shared by Lizzy and Moira during their exploration of dependence and independence.



The blind school at Craigmillar.

## **Education and Raised Type – and the case study of Bella Wood**

[Wilson Bain] Here's Lizzy Ellicott to tell us about education and raised type.

[Lizzy] Education was seen as the gateway to a fulfilled and productive life.

In Edinburgh, a school for blind children was first opened in the 1830s. The school joined with the blind asylum in 1876 and moved from Gayfield Square to Craigmillar.

The Missions to the Outdoor Blind served adults. Some had been blind from birth or childhood, while others had lost their sight during adulthood or old age.

The missionaries taught outdoor blind people to read raised type using the Moon system. The Moon system consisted of simplified embossed letters. The letters were read by touch and the readers' fingers travelled from left to right and then returned from right to left as they moved backwards and forwards along the lines and down the page.

The aim of the missionaries, by teaching blind people to read, was to give them access to the Bible. Religious texts in the Moon system could be read at

# SPECIMEN OF READING IN MOON'S TYPE.

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

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 type was used by missionaries to bring a religious message to the outdoor blind. (Courtesy of Lothian Health Services Archive, Edinburgh University Library)

the Society's reading room. The Society also had a lending service and the large books were delivered to the readers' homes. This was particularly useful to people who lived in the countryside beyond Edinburgh.

But educators had a wider aim, especially in teaching children. That was to teach skills that would help them to earn a living as adults and to survive in sighted society.

They were taught the three Rs, craft skills, and music. Religion was, of course, not neglected!

Iain Hutchison is the research historian for the Seeing Our History project.

Iain, did the missionaries not teach braille?

[Iain] The missionaries were highly dedicated to the Moon system. When they set out in 1857, Moon was widely used while braille was in its infancy. The Missions to Outdoor Blind did not begin to include braille until the 1890s, by which time it was well-established in the Edinburgh Blind School.

[Lizzy] It sounds as if they were rather prejudiced against braille?

[Iain] Well it's a bit like moving from, for example, videos to DVDs. Your whole system has to be

changed. The Society's libraries will filled with volumes in Moon, so when they eventually offered braille too, they had to stock two types of books.

[Lizzy] But what did blind people want?

[Iain] The missionaries found that braille was popular with young people. Not least because they could write braille as well as read it. The older people found the dots difficult to read and preferred the system they were familiar with, which was Moon.

[Lizzy] The blind school taught other skills. Did these set them up for life as adults?

[Iain] Many blind school children ultimately depended on the blind asylum for work. Mostly, this was craft work such as basket making, weaving, making mattresses and so on. If they were dismissed from the asylum workshops, they often struggled to survive.

[Lizzy] That was Iain Hutchison, the research historian for the Seeing Our History Project.

Bella Wood is a case of dismissal from her position at the blind asylum. Bella was sacked from the blind asylum where she taught music in the school. For most blind workers this would have been disastrous, but Bella was a survivor.

She was born in Aberdeen in 1868. Her father, John

Wood, was a pattern maker in the city. Her mother was Williamina. Bella was blind from infancy. Soon after her birth, the family moved to Penicuik in Midlothian. John worked there as a millwright in the paper mills.

Bella entered the new blind school at Craigmillar in Edinburgh. Bella appears to have been a good pupil because, upon completion of her education, she was kept on as a music teacher.

However, when she was 21, after around seven years as a teacher, she was dismissed for 'disobedience to the orders of the Headmaster and Lady Superintendent'.

Later, she asked for a letter of reference. The directors decided to give her 'a Certificate of Attainment only, but not Character'. Bella, now home with her family in Penicuik, wrote a letter of appreciation!

From home, she continued working as a music teacher. This started in 1891, by which time she had six brothers and sisters aged from two to 16. She was still working from home 20 years later, living with her widowed father and two of her younger sisters.

Later, she worked as a braille copyist and, by her sixties, she was living in Musselburgh by the sea. In 1936, she applied for a place in the Thomas Burns

Home for Blind Women and was accepted. She was 67 years old and was to live there for nearly three decades.

She had a long life – a third of which was spent in the Home. It concluded with the stark words in the asylum report.

‘Death - Miss Isabella Wood on 4 September 1964, aged 95. Reported.’

Bella Wood died in the Royal Blind Asylum’s Thomas Burns Home for elderly blind women. This is the abrupt manner in which the end of a long life was recorded.

Veronica Bell is a research volunteer who looked into the life of Isabella Wood.

Veronica, how important was the influence of the Blind School on Bella’s life?

[Veronica] Bella was lucky in that Edinburgh had a school dedicated to educating blind children. Her home city, Aberdeen, did not have a blind school. It may be that Bella’s family moved to Penicuik for this reason, so as to be close to the blind school. This would have been a big decision for the family. Bella thrived at the school. She developed a passion for music and her musical talent sustained her for much of her life. The school was clearly important in



developing this particular skill.

[Lizzy] Why was Bella later dismissed from the school?

[Veronica] Why Bella was dismissed is unclear. The Asylum records only say that she had been 'guilty of disobedience to the orders of the Headmaster and the Lady Superintendent'. This 'disobedience' resulted in Bella being reported to the School's directors who then expelled her. It would, of course, be unusual for them to undermine the headmaster's authority by overruling his decision.

The directors did not like insubordination and Bella obviously challenged the system. It was not uncommon for people employed at the institution to take issue with rules. Bella was obviously not afraid to challenge authority and she would have known the risks. Interestingly, the directors gave Bella three months salary in lieu of notice. Maybe they felt an element of guilt over their decision.

[Lizzy] How did this affect Bella's life?

[Veronica] Bella seems not to have let her sacking hold her back - and she even thanked the board for the reference that they grudgingly gave her. The reference nonetheless endorsed Bella as a competent music teacher. Bella continued to teach from home for

many years. She later worked as a braille copywriter for the Society of the Outdoor Blind, a skilled and important job.

Bella seems to have thrived as an independent woman. However, as a braille copywriter in the Society's reading rooms, she would no doubt have enjoyed the companionship of working with others.

[Lizzy] Did Bella remain close to her family?

[Veronica] Bella moved to Musselburgh in her sixties, but we know nothing of her life there. When she was 67, she applied to enter the Thomas Burns Home for Blind Women – and was accepted. She remained at the Home until her death at the grand age of 95. How much contact her family had with her there we do not know. She possibly outlived all close family members. Her death was not registered by a relative, but by an employee at the Thomas Burns Home. The brief and abrupt reporting of her death in the Asylum's records seems sadly dismissive of the long life of a woman who had both skill and character.

[Lizzy] That was Veronica Bell, a research volunteer on the Seeing Our History project.

## **Our Musical Accompaniment – Lizzie and Sadie Hoseason**

The Seeing Our History series is based on research carried out by project volunteers on people who were on the roll of outdoor blind. The Society for the Outdoor Blind's main aim was to teach people with sight loss to read raised type – primarily so that they could access the Bible. The Society endeavoured to inculcate its religious, moral, middle-class values on blind society. It had mixed success in achieving its aim.

In particular, the Society frowned upon blind people who earned a living through street entertaining. This disapproval was, for example, directed towards blind street musicians. Their activities marked them out as free spirits who thwarted the Society's efforts to direct their lives.

What style of music and repertoire did these street musicians perform?

There is not a definitive answer to this question, but their music was intended to attract donations from passers-by so it is likely that they would wish to offer entertainment that was familiar to, and popular with, their audiences. This was the era of a British Empire on which the sun never set. It was also the era of the



(City of Edinburgh Council - Edinburgh Museums and Galleries  
[www.capitalcollections.org.uk](http://www.capitalcollections.org.uk))

music hall in its prime – and music hall was both imperial and international. In addition to Scottish favourites such as Harry Lauder and, later, Will Fyfe, performers came from other areas and from across the Atlantic. In the musical accompaniment to our podcast you may detect the influence of ‘Queen of the Music Hall’, Londoner, Marie Lloyd (1870-1922) who achieved international acclaim with numbers such as ‘My Old Man (Said Follow The Van)’.

One of the findings of the Seeing Our History research volunteers has been the important influence of family circumstances and networks on the lives of the blind individuals whom they investigated. Our singer-songwriter, Sarah Caltieri, was inspired by the story of Lizzie Hoseason and her daughter, Sophia, later known as Sadie.

Lizzie Hoseason was born in Leith in 1873. Her sight deteriorated when she was 15 and she is recorded as being a pupil of the Edinburgh Blind School in 1889. Lizzie was 25 when her mother died. Four weeks after her mother’s death, unmarried, and heavily pregnant, Lizzie gave birth to Sophia in Craiglockhart Poorhouse. Such institutions were referred to as ‘palaces for paupers’ because of the often impressive architecture employed in their construction. So, as Sarah Caltieri’s song intimates, Craiglockhart Poorhouse was Lizzie’s - and Sadie’s - ‘Buckingham’.

Lizzie, depressed, weak and debilitated, died in 1914 at the age of 41 in Bangour Village Hospital, Edinburgh's district asylum. Sophia was ten years old when her mother was admitted to Bangour Village. Three years earlier, Sophia had been boarded with a blind basket maker and his family and she was attending school.

In 1922, Sophia, was working as a restaurant waitress. It was around this time that she appears to have become known as Sadie. And it was in 1922 that she married Leith trawler fisherman, Livingstone Izett. However, as Sarah's lyrics narrate, Livingstone was killed in 1941 during war service with the Royal Naval Patrol Service in the Orkney Isles. His vessel, HMS Alberic, was a steam trawler that had been pressed into naval service as a minesweeper. Livingstone died along with all other members of the crew when the Alberic was hit by the Royal Navy destroyer, HMS St Albans.

In 1951, Sophia died of a cardiac condition – or was it a broken heart? After all, 'she'd seen a place she'd rather be, with all them upstairs, having a cup of tea'. She was 52.



Lizzie Hoseason, Sadie's mother (top left) died in Murthly Asylum (below). Their story was researched by Kirstin Cunningham (top right). (Images: Lothian Health Services Archive Edinburgh University Library; Kirstin Cunningham; Courtesy of Perth Museum & Art Gallery, Perth & Kinross Council)





Sally (left), Sarah (right) and Seonaid (below) performed music hall numbers at the launch of the companion volume, *Feeling Our History*. (Photo: [www.chriswatt.com](http://www.chriswatt.com))







(Photo Iain Hutchison)

## Have a cuppa tea – Sarah Caltieri

Sadie was just ten when her maw was whisked away  
To the place for them who've lost their heads  
(or so they say)  
She'd led a sad, hard life  
(domestic servant to her own)  
Then landed in strife in the poorhouse all alone

[Chorus]

Come on in, come on in  
Welcome to our Buckingham  
We'll squeeze you, squeeze you in  
How d'you like your tea?  
Come on down, Come on down,  
Welcome to our Buckingham.  
Just half a crown, half a crown  
For the princes of the town.

She was taken in, by a basket-weaver and his kin  
Got a job in a restaurant bar  
Where she met Livingstone  
But then he was called up by HM Naval in Orkney  
A destroyer smashed their boat  
And the rest is history

Chorus [twice]

When Sadie got the news, she decided

it was time to go

That she had paid her dues

(it was a cardiac, the records show).

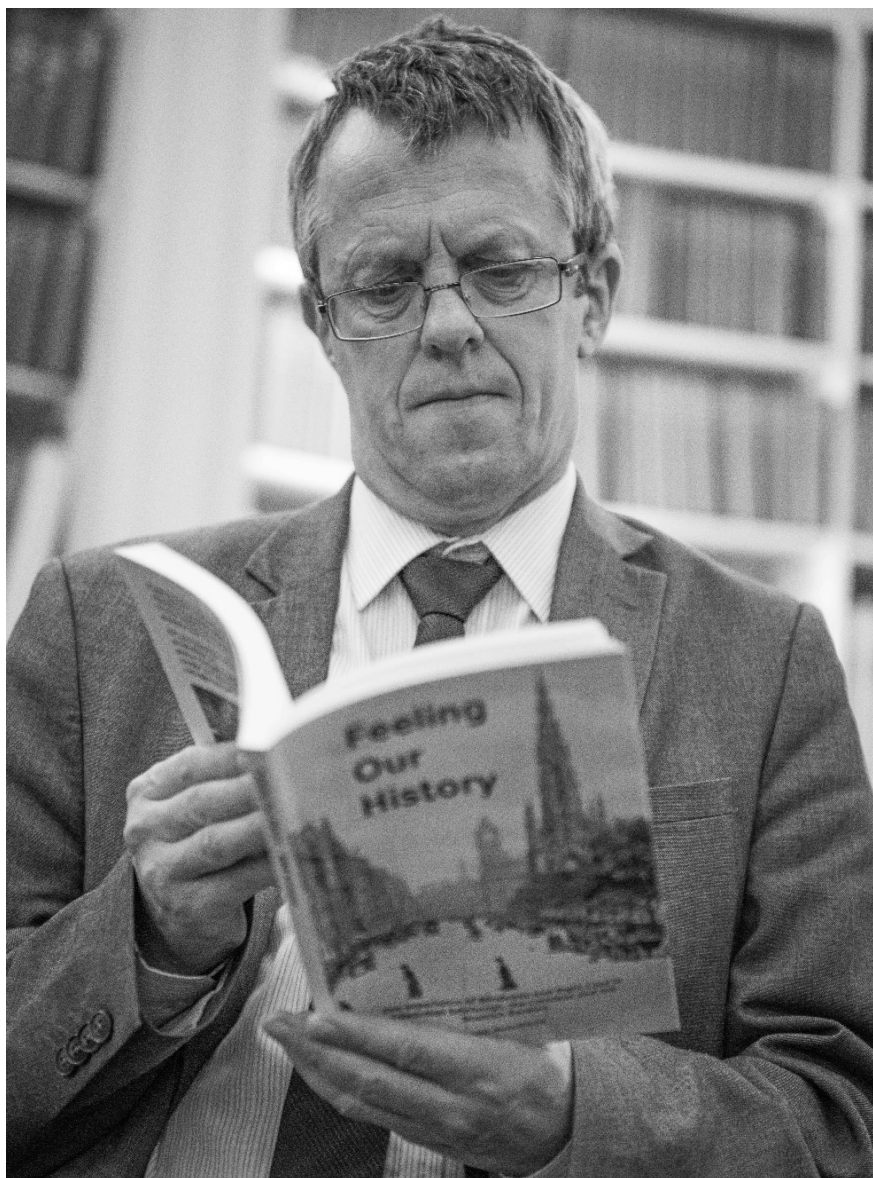
But Sadie was wise, she'd seen a place she'd rather be

With all them upstairs

Having a cup of tea.

Chorus

The princes of the town.



Ian Tasker, STUC Assistant Secretary, gets to grips with *Feeling Our History*.  
(Photo: [www.chriswatt.com](http://www.chriswatt.com))