



Photo: Gregor Kuntscher

## The lawyer aiming to make a difference



### In this special edition:

- » Meet the first blind man to row across the Pacific
- » Debate: Is there still a need for Braille?
- » Register to vote in RNIB Trustee elections

# Welcome

**It's that time of year when resolutions are made and... well broken. Not Rachel Clements though, later this year she is running the iconic Virgin London Marathon for RNIB.**



Rachel Clements

Hello and welcome to this first edition of your Connect Magazine for 2019.

I'm Rachel Clements and this year I am hoping to fulfil my New Year's resolution by running the London Marathon for RNIB for the very first time. You can read my story on page 8.

Speaking of first's, Steve Sparkes, set himself the challenge of a lifetime, to become the first blind man to row across the Pacific Ocean.

Considered by some to be the world's toughest rowing challenge spanning 2,700 miles from California to Hawaii, he

endured a hurricane and rival teams dropped out due to sheer exhaustion and hypothermia. But did he do it? See page 20.

What do Bill and Melinda Gates, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki- Moon have in common with a blind lawyer?

All of them have received the prestigious Spirit of Helen Keller Award. The award, established during Helen Keller's lifetime commemorates her unique legacy and expresses appreciation for her role as a founder and trustee of Helen Keller International, as well as travelling the world on behalf of those with vision loss.

You can find out why Yetnerbersh Nigussie was a worthy winner on page 17.

Finally, one of the world's best-selling authors was set to hang up his typewriter. But he has returned with another fabulous read. Find out who it is on page 26.

**I hope you enjoy this edition and have a fantastic 2019.**

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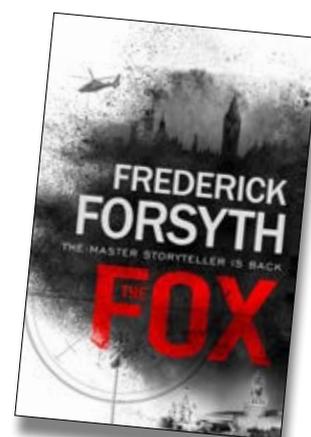
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A round-up of the latest news from RNIB

# Register to vote in RNIB's Trustee Elections



Register to vote now

As a member of the Connect Community you can register to vote in the elections for RNIB Trustees.

Up to 50 per cent of the Trustees on the RNIB Board are elected by the Connect Community. The process of electing Trustees to fill vacancies on the Board will be under way soon.

In order to take part in these elections you need to be registered as a voter.

To do this or if you are unsure if you can already vote, just follow these simple steps:

1. Email RNIB at **[connect@rnib.org.uk](mailto:connect@rnib.org.uk)** or call **0303 1234 555**

2. Provide your name and that you wish to be registered to vote.
3. You need to do this by 31 March 2019.

### You are eligible to vote if you are:

- a connect member
- aged 16 or over
- self – certified blind or partially sighted and live in the UK or Isle of Man.
- not employed by RNIB

Find out more about the work of our Trustees at **[rnib.org.uk/about-us](http://rnib.org.uk/about-us)**

# Sight loss is not a barrier to employment

The New Year is a great time to look for new career opportunities.

As a blind or partially sighted person you may be worried that you will be unable to find work or stay in your current job.

But there is help and support available from RNIB, voluntary organisations and Government.

For advice and information to help you get a new job, retain your current one or learn about successfully employed people with sight loss, call the Helpline on **0303 123 9999** or visit: **[rnib.org.uk/employment](http://rnib.org.uk/employment)**



## Recruiting young people to be community leaders

RNIB has launched a new project aimed at creating community leaders.

The Creating Young Community Leaders campaign, with funding from the Postcode Community Trust, is looking for young people with sight loss aged 18-30 to inspire their peers.

Initial recruitment will be in London, East of England, East Midlands and West Midlands.

No previous experience is required, but enthusiasm is a must. Additional qualities include being highly organised, a great communicator and a passion for uniting young blind and partially sighted people in your local area.

If selected you must be able to attend a training course in February. For further details visit: **[rnib.org.uk/young-leaders](http://rnib.org.uk/young-leaders)**

# A platform to communicate

**Richard Shuker, Community Facilitator for the South West, on how RNIB's Facebook groups provide a space for you to connect, share and air your concerns with the community.**



Founded in 2004, there is no escaping the major success of Facebook. As its co-founder Mark Zuckerberg reinforced in a tweet when commenting on the goals for 2018.

He said the aim of Facebook was to help people stay connected and bring us closer to the people who matter to us.

**"When we use social media to connect with people we care about, it can be good for our well-being and less lonely," he added.**

These words ring true for RNIB's 13 Facebook groups across the UK.

One of the main aspects of dealing with sight loss is the isolation it can bring. Having this platform allows people to connect with their peers, colleagues or people in the sector they want to contact.

It's really another opportunity and another way of engaging with friends, family and professionals in the sector – in a nutshell, it gives them a platform to communicate.

### **Moral support**

We have people who live in small communities, who don't have opportunities to engage with each other, so this gives them a chance to ask those questions and seek that support. For example, a lot of people are going through the Personal Independence Payment process and people will wish them good luck, help talk them through the process or just let people know that they are thinking of them.

I think the moral support the group can give to people is fantastic, we (RNIB) don't need to post, we don't need to encourage conversation,

we just see the conversation growing organically by itself.

### **The South West group**

Our group was set up by my colleague Sophie Fox, and between us we've managed to grow into a very healthy community. It's not just our hard work; I think it's the hard work of the members because we rely so heavily on the members promoting the service. They do so much to encourage their peers and colleagues to come on board and join in. It's totally organic and run by the members of the group, and free from RNIB.

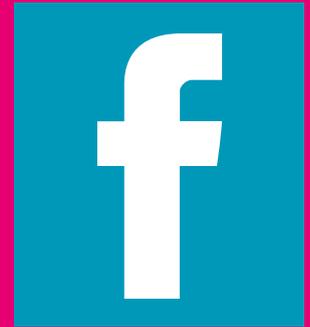
### **New friendships**

The friendships that the group form are important too. We have people who will post they live on the borders of Dartmoor and ask if there is anyone else who lives in the area. And all of sudden you'll get people who say they live in the same village and they plan to meet up.

### **A safe forum for discussion**

We have fantastic volunteers who help moderate the group and the important thing to remember is it's a closed group. People can only be invited to join by one of the admins, myself or Sophie or the moderators. Just come and try it. If you don't like it, leave, but we would prefer you to stay and join in with conversations.

**Laura Brennan**  
on how the group just gets 'where you are coming from.'



"I'd lost a lot of confidence in myself and got quite nervous about going out, but then I discovered the RNIB Connect Facebook site for the South West. I have made lots of friends, we all meet up once a month and go for a coffee or bowling. We talk about lots of different things, it isn't just serious things about losing our sight, we obviously do talk about that, but we have a lot of fun as well.

If you're having a particularly bad day, you can just go on to Facebook and rattle on. There will always be somebody there willing to listen, give advice or just say that they know how you're feeling. They get where you're coming from and that means so much. And also it makes you feel that you are normal, whatever that is, it's brilliant."

Find a Facebook group near you at [rnib.org.uk/facebookgroups](https://rnib.org.uk/facebookgroups), you will need a Facebook account to join.

# Marathon woman

What drove **Rachel Clements** to choose to run this year's iconic London Marathon to raise money for RNIB?



Rachel and her family

"You can do a lot with your sight, but it doesn't mean that you're dispensable if you haven't got it."

It was a day that Rachel would never forget. "I was sat in work and I noticed a shadow appear in my dominant eye, as part of the condition that me and my family have. I went to my local optician and they sent me to the local eye hospital. I was diagnosed with a retinal detachment, so I was straight into surgery to have it reattached.

Over the next 18 months she endured a number of operations, but nothing worked and eventually, she says her “eye gave up” and the only other option was to have it removed.

### **Stickler Syndrome**

It was a difficult time for her. Especially as this was part of a bigger condition she had called Stickler Syndrome.

The condition, a connective tissue disorder, means she doesn't create the collagen and the connective tissue correctly to what oversees a lot of your body. “So it affects my eyes, my hearing, my joints – it's something that I've grown up with. Something I have come to terms with throughout my life really thanks to my mum, who has it as well, and bringing the children up to understand and to appreciate what that means for us.

“I've got two children, two boys, a 16-year-old and a soon to be 13-year old. Both have inherited the Stickler's gene as well. My eldest is quite severely sight impaired, thankfully my youngest has got sight loss, but not as extreme.”

### **Leaving her job**

The condition has as you can imagine affected her life, especially at work where her previous employer was unsympathetic with her situation.

Rachel is unsure whether it was because it was something her employer had never experienced. She was also having a lot of time off work between numerous operations and when she did return to work the assistance wasn't fully there.

“It was a mutual decision really that it wasn't the best place for me to be. That dropped my confidence quite a bit, I'm not going to lie, I was facing what I was facing anyway and then to have that happen on top of it. It made me feel like I wasn't going to be able to go out to work and provide for my family and still have my own independence.

Things changed when her local vision expert from her local Specsavers put her in touch with RNIB. She was given advice on enlarging everything to using a tablet and her phone. “It gave me a bit of confidence that I could then go back into the workplace and there were things out there to help me so I could do just as good a job as anyone else in my position.”



## Running for Team RNIB

Rachel now works as a Data Analyst for the Office for National Statistics. "I'm a Civil Servant and they've been amazing, everything is in place. I've got visually impaired keyboards, larger screens, all the programmes that I need on the system to be able to access their systems in an effective way. So, they've been brilliant."

As a thank you to RNIB, she will run the Virgin Money London Marathon. Her training regime is going well. "I run with my husband as my guide runner and he ran the 2018 London Marathon, so I'm in as good hands as I can be really."

"He's really good and can make sure that I'm not hindered visually and pointing out of all the things that are in my way."

Her aim is to raise over £2000 for RNIB. Her husband raised £2500 and she is determined to beat that figure. "I'm hoping that if I could get over the £3,000 mark I will be very, very pleased," she adds.

Ultimately, she wants to show that sight loss is no barrier to achieving anything you want to achieve and that people can fulfil their dreams.

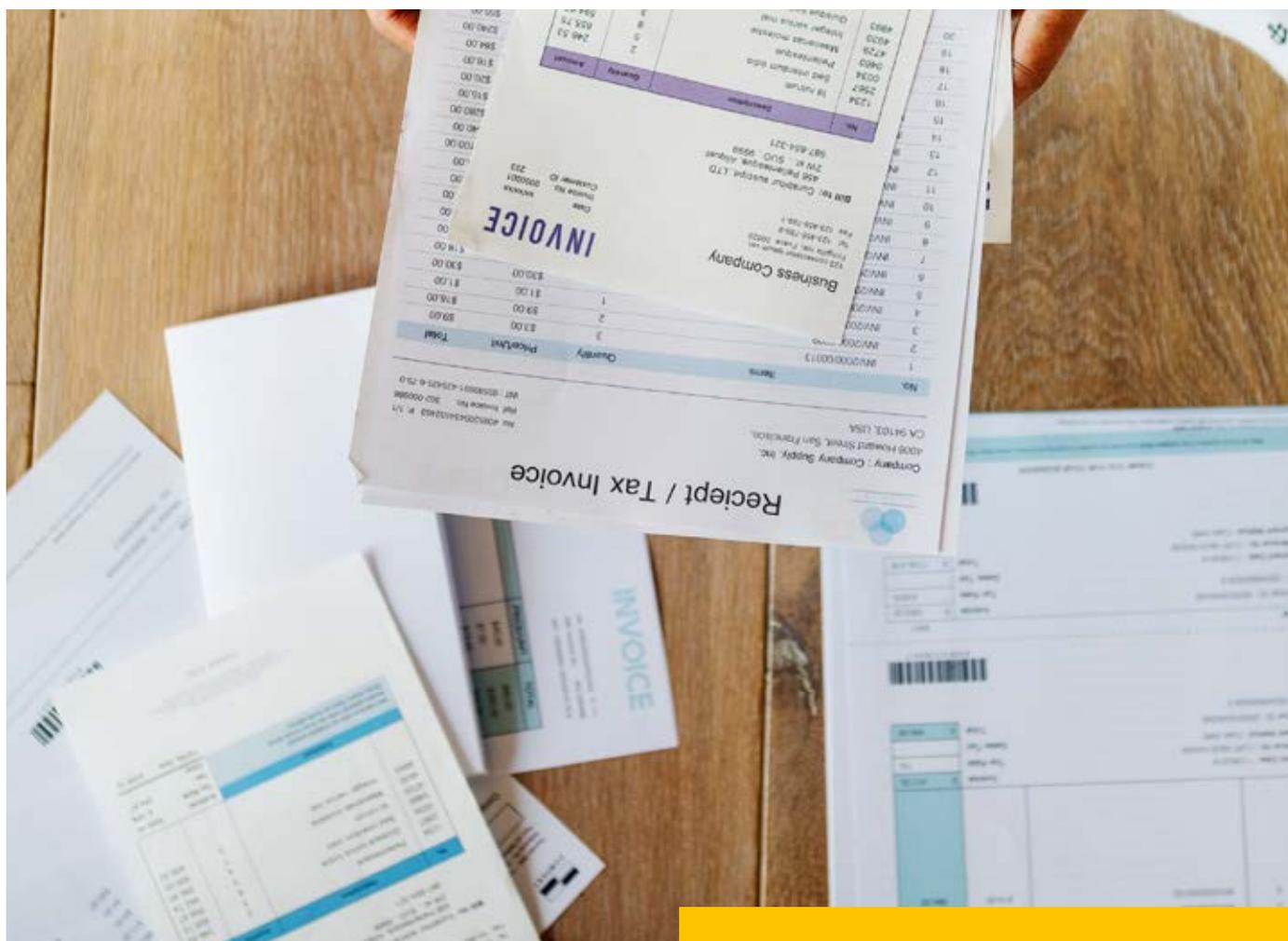
She says: "I really do want to thank RNIB but I also want to show my children and show others like me that it doesn't define you. Sight is such a minimal part of life, yeah it's a big part of life and you can do a lot with your sight, but it doesn't mean that you're dispensable if you haven't got it."

"If I could do that for just for one person, especially my children, then I'm happy that I've succeeded in my role and what's gone on with my life has helped to inspire someone else."

## Help Rachel reach her target

Rachel is running the London Marathon for RNIB on 28 April and you can donate at [justgiving.com/fundraising/rachel-clements8](https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/rachel-clements8)

# A two-year battle for accessible information



When **Sheila Townsend** asked for a letter to be sent to her in large print, she didn't realise it would take two years and support from RNIB to make it happen.

For Sheila Townsend it was a simple request. She needed some important information in large print. What she didn't expect was to wait two years for it to be actioned.

Sheila who lives in a leasehold property in Essex receives financial information about the

property twice a year. She wanted her service provider to provide this information in a format that was suitable for her.

She tells Connect: "I was just totally unsuccessful, no notice was taken, documents kept arriving in ordinary, normal print

and I couldn't make head or tail of them. And in the end I was really banging my head against a brick wall."

Sheila volunteers for Essex Sight and somebody there told her to contact the RNIB for support.

### Useful Toolkit

RNIB provided Sheila with a useful toolkit that provided advice on how to write a letter to the company asking for a reasonable adjustment and if that didn't work, RNIB would provide further support.

The provider responded with what she describes as a complete lack of understanding. "They said they would send someone here to put something on my computer and I could just zoom in on it - wouldn't that be lovely if everybody who had sight loss could do something like that? It doesn't work and I explained that to them and that was when I went back to RNIB."

RNIB's legal rights service wrote to the company and within weeks they responded. "I had a reply that they would deal with my correspondence for me in a format that would suit me.

"I was absolutely delighted, I wish that I had gone to RNIB before, they are just absolutely brilliant, they dealt with it so swiftly, and it was just amazing. I think once

they heard that from RNIB, they realised I was being serious about my complaint."

## Equality Act explained

It is not uncommon for blind and partially sighted people to experience situations where they are refused entry to a restaurant or a hotel with their guide dog, or are given inaccessible information by their bank.

The Equality Act 2010 is designed to protect you from unfair treatment and to create a more equal society; in short, no one should face discrimination because of their sight loss.

If you believe that you've been treated unfairly because of your sight loss, then you can challenge the service provider using the Act.

RNIB has a toolkit that can help or if you need help with making a complaint or using the toolkit, please contact RNIB's Helpline on **0303 123 9999**.

# Ring your bell

Regional Campaigns Officers for RNIB, **Terri** and **Mike**, are encouraging cyclists to ring their bell and slow down to avoid collisions with blind and partially sighted people.

One of the biggest challenges for blind or partially sighted people is getting around, whether it's inaccessible road crossings or approaching cyclists.

This year, campaigners Terri and Mike will launch a local initiative to get Oxford and Cambridge students to cycle sensibly and understand how to alert a blind or partially sighted person that they are approaching and cycling past.

## Bell and brake campaign

RNIB receive many complaints about bikes. Oxford and Cambridge in particular are bike central, so Mike and Terri joined forces. They realised after speaking to students that a clear message was needed to help them avoid collisions with blind and partially sighted people.

Terri adds: "What emerged was a very simple message, if you see me, ring your bell so I know you're there and slow down to give me time to register you. So in other words, **bell** and **brake**, and that became the title of the campaign."



## Reducing collisions

The initiative aims to give a person with sight loss a chance to know that someone is coming along on a bike. She adds: "If people give that person a chance to react to it, make sure they've heard, cover your brakes, be ready to stop, then hopefully we'll reduce the number of collisions with cyclists."

A poster campaign is planned that will target every Oxbridge college. If successful, the aim is to roll out the campaign to other parts of the country and where there are many cyclists. She says: "Who knows, perhaps eventually every cyclist will think 'bell and brake' if they see a blind or partially sighted person, that's my hope."

## Get involved

Visit [rnib.org.uk/campaigns](https://rnib.org.uk/campaigns), call our campaigns hotline on **020 7391 2123** or email [campaigns@rnib.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@rnib.org.uk)

# Will the last person using braille turn the lights out

As the world becomes more and more computerised, **Connect** explores whether there is still a place for braille.

With around 20,000 people using braille across the UK, is there really still a need for it?

Take a braille embosser, a machine that prints braille documents. Braille cells are larger than average printed letters, so hard copies of books are much bigger.

For instance, a sighted person can pop a paperback quite easily into a handbag, whereas a braille reader would need a suitcase. A book like Harry Potter and the Order of The Phoenix, is a 13 volume stack of paper, more than a foot high, but there is an alternative.

### Expensive braille technology

A portable refreshable braille display is an electronic reading device which allows the user to carry a large number of books and documents around with them in a digital format. Some of you may already have one, but with a price tag of up to £2,700 many of you will not.

Until recently, braille technology has actually been prohibitively expensive.

Claire Maxwell is a Senior Product Developer at RNIB, managing braille, tactile and educational products. As a braille reader herself she believes that high costs have meant people have had to turn their back on braille.

"There's a lot of people who have probably gone through school and come out the other end and looking for a job and in that interim period they haven't got access to perhaps the braille technology that they might have had in education."

Because of this, they opt to use audio books for example, rather than carry around volumes of hard copy braille. "I think that's where you can get people who fall into these gaps, who aren't able to afford that equipment for themselves, so there is a danger that people lose that skill when they don't use it."

She believes low cost, affordable, or more affordable braille displays need to be made more available.

One piece of tech is the Orbit Reader 20, it's the latest display which is around the £500 mark and even cheaper if you're a Connect

member. But it still may be out of reach of many people's price range. But could it help a braille revival?

"Had I not got my own braille display already and had that paid for by Access to Work then I would definitely have invested in the reader because I think it's absolutely brilliant. Braille to me is so important for a multitude of reasons," she says.

### Importance of braille

Sally Clay musician, musical director, musical facilitator and a mum, has been learning braille since she was 14.

She soon realised just how vital and life changing this medium was. It took her two months to learn. "I hammered my way through the code and basically learnt English, Maths, French, German and Science braille in about three months because I was absolutely desperate to read. It just felt like a revolution was going on in my brain".

**"It was absolutely amazing and so I think I placed an enormous value on braille for a very long time and still do actually."**



Sally uses her braille reader in all aspects of her life from writing music to acting and theatre directing to teaching music, but she's now found it's taken on an even greater significance.

"Actually the most important use of braille for me right at this moment is to read to my two girls who are 18 months and seven-years-old."

Both her children are sighted but it has opened up a wonderful range of books that they can read together.

"I could be reading the braille and she could be reading the print or looking at pictures, a really bonding experience. And then with my youngest daughter who's 18 months, I still read braille books to her quite a lot, although she takes

the books off me quite a lot, she doesn't want me to read them, she wants to read them"

### A key tool for literacy

But with so much audio technology available, is there still a need to use braille? Claire says she hears a lot of people saying that braille isn't as widely used or as useful as perhaps it used to be. But she adds: "Braille is a key tool for literacy and I think it's really important to remember that.

"Audio skills are fantastic and they have their own role to play in being able to listen to things read to you, that's your choice whether that's for reading for leisure or through using a screen reader. But I also think that literacy needs to be taught at a different level and being able to read either in print or in braille is a totally different skill."

Reading in braille, she says, for example, gives you pointers on and the correct use of punctuation which is not always spoken through screen readers unless you specifically set that.

"I think we really need to see that it is so important for people to be able to have that literacy skill as well as the audio skill," she adds.

Connect Radio Presenter Steven Scott agrees. He adds: "I have felt since my sight has got worse that my understanding of English has almost gone out the window, I

prided myself on spelling, I prided myself on the ability to write without ever having to use a spell checker. I can't do that now. I have to write at the bottom of my emails – sent using a screen reader, apologies for any errors – that's not good enough.

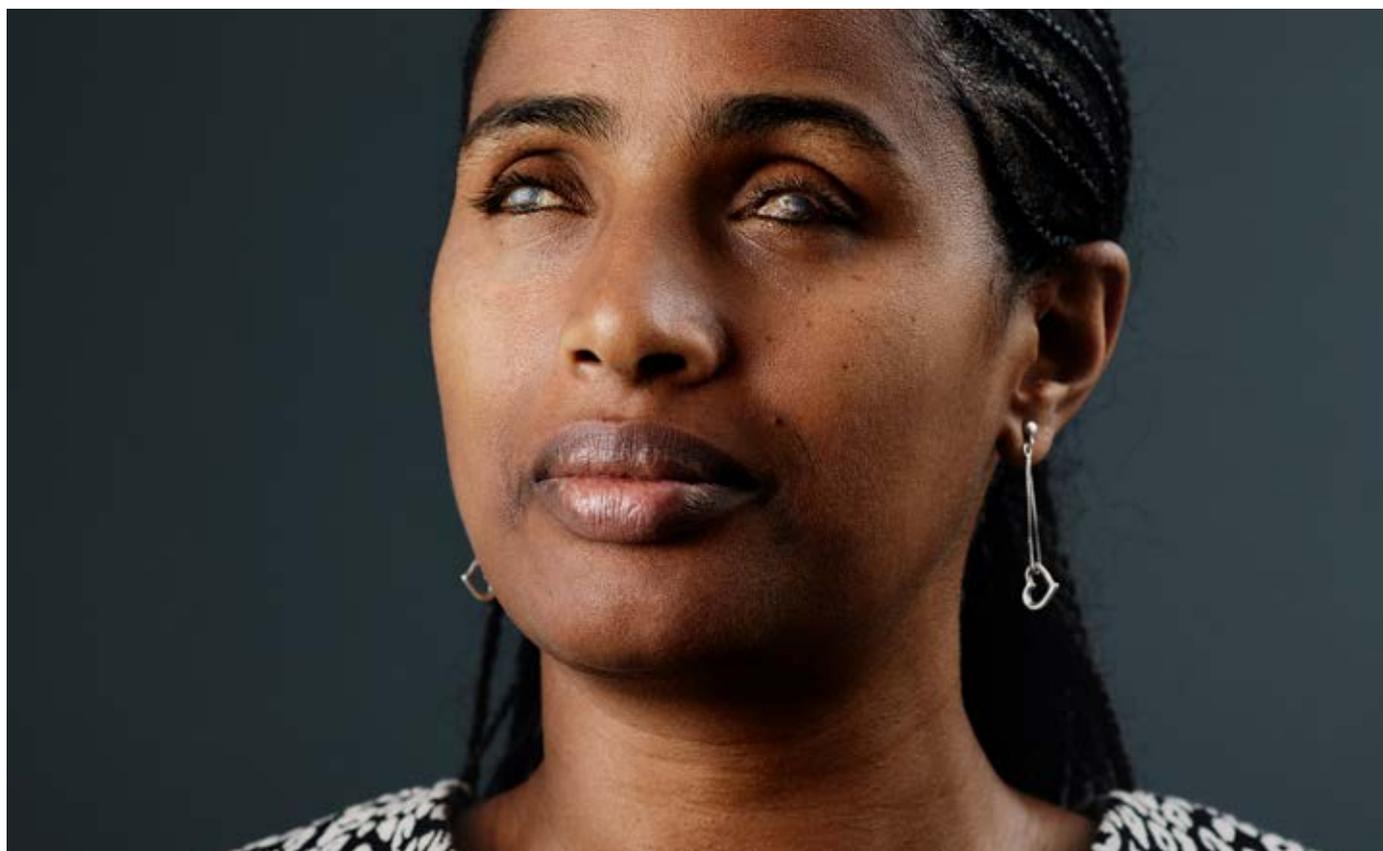
For him, the new braille reader, although affordable, may be a little too late. He adds: "And that's my worry about braille, not that people don't want to use it, not that people don't have an interest in, it but because the cost of technology has been so high for so long that it's pushed people away from using it and now we're in a position of those who want to, like me, can't get the classes, can't find the resources and that's not good enough because braille is important. "

Steven adds: We have the technology, it's now affordable, now we need the resources or braille doesn't have a bright future."

### Reader offer

As a perk of being a member of RNIB Connect you can purchase the Orbit Reader 20 at the discounted price of £399, excluding VAT. Call the helpline on 0303 123 9999 to place your order.

# “Blindness is the lottery I won in life”



Picture: Gregor Kuntscher

**Yetnebersh Nigussie**, a blind Lawyer has been awarded the prestigious **Spirit of Helen Keller Award**, joining the ranks of Bill and Melinda Gates and Ban Ki Moon.

Raised in rural Ethiopia, Yetnebersh Nigussie believes that when she lost her sight at five years old she escaped the foreboding life which awaited her.

But does she genuinely see her blindness as her liberator?

Definitely. Her mum got married when she was 11 and gave birth to her three years later. Her mum

was victim of an early marriage and when a girl is born in that family, the expectation is the amount of dowry and the quality of a son-in-law she will bring into the family.

“So when I lost my eyesight at the age of five, people said this is the end to her life and so many people told my mum, it was better if she died.



**"My mum said, it's okay I can take care of her until I'm alive and then God will take care of her."**

Three years after she lost her eyesight, Yetnebersh was taken to the capital to a hospital, but doctors could not restore her sight, but they could refer her to a special school.

"I became the first girl in the community where I was able to get the chance to be educated because all the other girls in the community were candidates for early marriage, so that's why I said this transformed my life and I sometimes say that blindness is the lottery I won in life to be who I am today."

### **Early years**

Her sight loss affected her relationship with her family, back then. "When I was three-years – old I already started looking after the sheep and the cattle in the family, so when I turned blind I was left at home."

She had no role to play like the girls her age who helped clean the house, collect firewood or fetch water. As she explains "I was considered useless."

"Later on when I went to the special school, that bond also became very, very loose because I had to go 900 km away from my community, so I only visited my family two months in the year, so I grew up a child of the missionaries".

Being miles away from home was at first tough, but she played with other children who were also blind from all across the world. "I enjoyed playing and we had no stereotyping, no stigma and no discrimination, so it gradually became like we established our own small family where you have different diversities. "

This changed when she went to a mainstream school. "We had 76 students in the classroom but I had no friends because none of them had seen a blind girl in the classroom. That's the isolation I felt and that's where I felt the impact of exclusion, growing alone and being isolated from mainstream society ".

But it was this feeling of exclusion that has helped shaped her today.

**“I was always told that I’m the person to make it happen. I was always told that I’m an achiever”**

I can do it. I was challenged, when I joined the mainstream, where I was told everything was difficult and everything was impossible for me. I had to use a lot of leverage and courage from the early days to get myself back into the mood that I can say I can do it.”

Yetnebersh excelled at school and was top of the class. She became president of the student council, made more friends and became active in the school. She learnt braille and also relied on friends reading out books to her.

### **Making a difference**

She always knew she wanted to challenge the myths that people had about her.

Even from her high school days and beyond, Yetnebersh felt that people have to be accountable for the discrimination and stigma they put on people with disabilities. “The only way you can hold them accountable is through

the court system, so I always felt that I had to be a Judge and make sure that these people who discriminate people with disabilities including blind people need to be penalised.

“For example, blind people were not allowed to sign in banks or become Judges. I decided I have to become a Judge and make sure the court penalised these people.”

She went to law school and embraced human rights advocacy which reinforced her view point as well as introducing her to the teaching and awareness-raising strands of advocacy.

Her goal is to change the way people think about disability and discrimination?

“I feel that is a process which involves not only me, as an individual, but the whole society. It requires a lot of partnerships and alliances. If you have to change people’s minds it’s not as easy as fixing a door of a house.”

Ultimately, we all have a voice and we all have to use it, don’t we?

“Absolutely, it’s no longer the time that we have other people to speak for us because we really need to work, because rights do not come as Christmas gifts. We really need to demand them otherwise people will say that’s fine, they’re okay with what they have.”

# Row, row, row your boat...

Last year, **Steve Sparkes** set himself the challenge of a lifetime, to become the first blind man to row across the Pacific.

It's considered by some to be the world's toughest rowing challenge, 2,700 miles from Monterey Bay in California to Honolulu in Hawaii.

But 57-year-old, ex-Royal Marine, Steve Sparkes, and rowing partner, Mick Dawson, were determined to conquer it.

They set off from a very peaceful Monterey, but from day one the seas were never kind. He says: "We didn't see the sun for five weeks, basically we rowed out and that was it."

## Swept overboard

Reaching dry land in August last year, it took them 82 days to



complete and it certainly wasn't all plain sailing. At one point during the mammoth journey Steve was swept overboard and was only saved due to the fact that he was tethered to the vessel at all times.

Mick says: "It wasn't too much of a panic for me because he had actually scraped back onto the boat by the time I got out to check if he was still there, it's an occupational hazard, but it's no less serious for that."

Steve adds: "I got back onto the boat because I was tethered and once the boat righted itself, it pulled me back on. The first thing Mick said when he came out of the cabin was 'are you alright?' I said yes, are you alright to carry on rowing?"

## Eye of the storm

With the team name Cockle Shell Endeavour, Mick and Steve were the third of five teams to complete the Great Pacific Race. Two teams dropped out along the way, one



Picture: Ellen Hoke

due to hyperthermia, another due to exhaustion and on the last leg, the two men were offered a tow as a category five hurricane set in. They refused the offer of assistance.

Steve adds: "When the hurricane decided to upset the proceedings, we were told basically we can get you a tow, get you a lift or you can ride it out.

**We'd come all that way, 25 miles to finishing, there was no way we were going to get off that boat after all that, no way."**

### **Safety first**

Steve has a huge affinity for the royal blue, 21 foot long and six foot wide at the beam boat,

calling it the love of his life at the moment. "She kept me safe for 82 days," he adds.

The boat has a small cabin at the front and bigger one at the back – providing just enough room for the pair to squeeze into when necessary. He adds: "She got battered every day by horrendous waves, she stood the miles, she did the distance and she looked after us and looked after us well."

Having completed the challenge Steve Sparks broke the record for the first blind man to row across the Pacific.

The journey wasn't just for the fun of it though. Steve and Mick have already raised more than £11,000 for Blind Veterans UK and the Royal Marines charity.

Mick adds: Both those charities, they just do fantastic work, they help people, they helped Steve and that doesn't happen for nothing, so they need support."

# Talking technology

From telephones to a talking microwave, **Steven Scott**, **Sean Price** and **Tim Schwartz**, review the latest gadgets.



## iPhone Xs

First reviewed by the panel back in Sept 2018, Steven Scott was struggling with it, but has anything changed since then.

### The problem back then

The thing that's annoyed me was the swiping gesture from the bottom to get to the home screen or to get to your apps. I find it a bit fiddly and I'm not there with it yet.

This is essentially how this all works, you swipe halfway to get you back to the home screen and you've got to swipe almost three

quarters of the way to get you to the apps, which I have to say is very hit and miss.

I get a strange thing on my lock screen that keeps saying heading not found, I've no idea what that is and that's only on the lock screen. I think there are a few voice over bugs in it at the moment and that will no doubt be resolved over time.

I feel in a way it's a bit over the top for what I need because it's a lovely phone, but it's got a stunningly good screen, it's got a beautiful camera, I don't feel like I really benefit from a lot of that, so do I really need it, truthfully? I miss the home button already.

### A few months later...

Steven is getting on better with his phone. He says: "I'm getting on much better with it now. One thing that really appealed to me about the iPhone Xs was the dual sim. This lets me have my own phone number as well as my work phone in the same device and it's absolutely fantastic. The only problem is that it is only available on certain networks in the UK, such as EE and Vodafone, but hopefully this will roll out to other networks.



**Alexa, Cook me a jacket potato**

### **Amazon Basics Microwave**

The small 700 watt microwave aims to bring the simplicity and convenience of voice to a compact microwave.

According to Amazon, the thinking behind the microwave is that customers only use a fraction of the features available on a standard microwave.

So the microwave includes dozens of quick-cook voice presets, so you can cook just by asking Alexa. It comes with a built – in Ask Alexa button, that you need to press, so you can give it a command like: “two minutes and 30 seconds on medium” to start cooking.

But you will need an Echo device nearby in order to make it work.

The microwave is currently available in the USA, but experts predict it will launch in the UK.



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# Innovation in eye health

**Professor Andrew Lotery** outlines why registration rates for blindness are falling and exciting advances in eye health.

## Macular degeneration

In terms of treatment of macular degeneration the outcomes have really improved because of the use of new types of drugs in the treatment of this condition.

By that I mean monitoring all antibodies that target a specific molecule in the back of the eye. We can now stabilise or even improve vision quite successfully in people with wet macular degeneration.

As a consequence of that, we've seen registration rates for blindness decreasing over the last few years, so I think that's a mark that we're actually making some progress.

That's an innovation that actually started over 100 years ago when the notion of having a drug that could target a specific organ or tissue was first suggested and it's taken 100 years to develop the idea of monitoring all antibodies.

They're now used in cancer therapies and rheumatology and one of the most successful used has been in the treatment of macular degeneration.

These are drugs that people might have heard of such as, Lucentis or Eylea. All very successful in treating wet macular degeneration.

## Eye imaging

Another big innovation has been in imaging of the eye with a technology called optical coherence topography which allows us to take very accurate images of both the front and the back of the eye, the retina and see exquisite detail of the tissue which makes it much easier to make a diagnosis say of a retina problem. This technology is now widely used through the NHS and it's changing how we manage patients.

The big challenge is of course lack of capacity, to see patients as quickly as we want. So with this new imaging technology, increasingly we're developing what are called virtual clinics where patients have an image of their eyes taken but they don't necessarily see a doctor on that visit because the imaging is so good that we can reliably look at the pictures and we can see a lot more patients.



### Cataract surgery

Cataract surgery has got much better over my lifetime as an ophthalmologist. Previously it required stitches and a few days in hospital and a long recovery time. Now most cataract surgery is day case surgery, the operation takes 20 minutes in most cases and patients have a very fast recovery and don't require any stitches because we can, with modern materials, put a new lens in the eye through an incision that's maybe only 2mm in size. So the technology, better artificial lens for cataract surgery, better equipment to do cataract surgery has meant that the operations are faster and people heal quicker.

### Genetic diseases

The other thing that has happened is our understanding of genetics of eye diseases. This

has led to new ideas on how to treat macular degeneration. We know that faults in a pathway called the Complement Pathway in the body are to blame for people developing macular degeneration, so drugs targeting this pathway are now being developed.

We're also starting to see gene therapy, replacing a faulty gene, being developed for eye diseases, this is still at a very early stage but the first licenced gene therapy treatment for any disease in the world was actually for an eye disease and that's just been licenced in the United States for a rare form of inherited blindness called Leber's congenital amaurosis and there's now efforts to have this treatment brought to the UK.

This work started with clinicians and scientists working together to find the genes that caused this early onset form of blindness and after many years of research, it's now become a licenced therapy that patients in the United States can get access to. It's very new and will hopefully become available in the UK in the next couple of years.

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**Professor Andrew Lotery** is Chairperson of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists Scientific Committee.

# The return of Frederick Forsyth

The best-selling author vowed his last novel, *The Kill List*, would be his last, but as it turns out, he had another book in him. **Kim Normanton** met him.



Picture: © John Swannell

Following the overnight success of his first novel *The Day of the Jackal*, back in 1971, Frederick Forsyth has now sold over 70 million books worldwide.

It was widely reported his last novel would be his last, but speaking at last year's Cheltenham Literature Festival, Frederick revealed why he wanted to write *The Fox*, his latest tale about an 18-year-old schoolboy with Asperger's who can hack through firewalls and access top secrets.

When the idea hit him, he felt it was a pity to waste it and his wife, agent and publisher encouraged him to do it.

He set himself an "impossibly, crushingly tight schedule" to complete it and nearly killed himself in doing so.

## Compelling read

Without giving too much away, the book is a compelling read and looks at the poisonings in Salisbury and incorporates many very current and worrying events.

But was he worried that the book could slightly date because some of these things are still unfolding and may well change?

He says: "It got rather weird halfway through the writing period, I was reading my paper in the morning before going to my typewriter and thinking 'oh gosh, you guys slow down a bit, you're doing it all before I finish the book'. So yes, I did borrow, I borrowed from the Skripal affair and now we're still living with it because we're getting more and more revelations.

"And there was a young man with this bizarre gift of being able to burst through the firewalls that surround the most secret databases in the world and the Americans wanted us to extradite him, they were going to put him in prison. We didn't and he's now living quietly in this country so, it's drawn very much on recent past with a tad maybe of the future".

### Once a journalist

It's a surprise to hear that he still writes his stories on a typewriter. But, does it have any effect on the substance that he writes.

He says: "No, I don't think so. Basically, I still feel in my bones I'm a journalist still and a foreign correspondent, which I was for years.

"Two things about foreign correspondent, in those days you had your typewriter with you, it was a portable typewriter and you wrote on it.

"The other thing about being a foreign correspondent is you can't say to your Editor, after the deadline, can I have it back I'd like to re-write it? The answer is no, this has been published. So a foreign correspondent has to get it right the first time and whatever I submit to the publisher's is the first draft and that's what you read, I don't do re-writes."

So you don't ever re-read your books and think, darn I wish I had picked that up?

"No, no, I'm afraid I don't.

It's, it's a bit like being in the papers as being in the book, it's passed, draw a line, next story, what's the next story?"

Frederick gives a lot of himself in his books, but what is the most dangerous thing he has ever done?

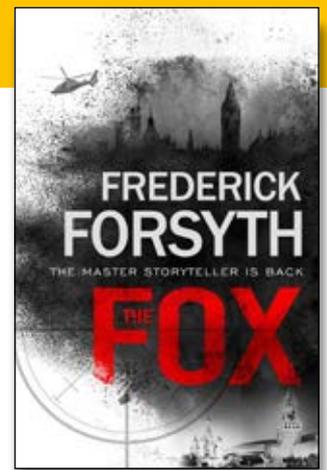
"When I was 18, I was flying single seat jet fighters in the RAF and yes, there were some scary moments then, it didn't have an ejector seat so it was a bit of a flying coffin because if anything went wrong you couldn't get out.

"I wouldn't want to pick one particular incident, suffice to say that I think probably the scariest ever was being caught in a cyclone in the middle of the Indian Ocean in an open fishing boat and watching 45, 50 foot walls of water coming towards us, I thought I'm not going to be alive tonight, I'm dead."

Thankfully, he survived and gave the world some glorious books to read and debate.

### RNIB library

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