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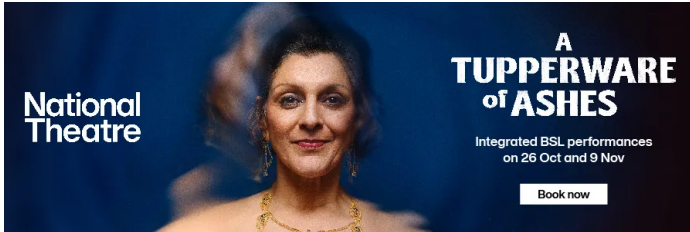
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The Limping Chicken

The UK's deaf culture, news and arts site! Laying eggs since 2012

Dr Rosamund Oates: What was life like for deaf children in Georgian London? (BSL)

Posted on February 9, 2024 by **Editor**



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What was life like for deaf boys and girls growing up hundreds of years ago? Young people – particularly deaf young people – rarely left sources for historians to find out about their lives, so we are very lucky that one deaf boy, William Gwilym wrote letters and a diary, much of which still survives.

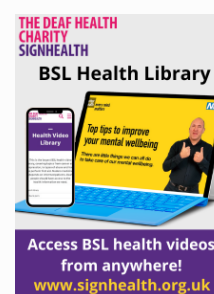
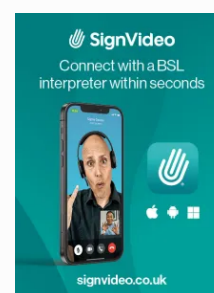
William Gwilym was born in 1723, to Robert and Jane, a wealthy couple who lived in Langstone Court in Hertfordshire. William had several brothers and sisters who were all hearing. He was actually named after an older brother – also called William – who died in 1717 which was not uncommon in those days.

When William was about 5, his mother died. Later William remembered: 'I was very sorry when she died, I cried a great deal for her death'. The family was devastated. His father moved to Hereford – apparently unable to stay in the family home any longer. One of William's brothers, Thomas, moved to London to be an apprentice to a grocer, another went to Oxford University. A few years later William was sent to London to study with Henry Barker, who claimed he could teach deaf children to 'speak'.

Henry Baker was interested in lots of different things. He introduced a new type of rhubarb to the British Isles, developed a new style of microscope and tried his hand at selling books. But by the 1720s he had established himself as a teacher of the deaf, with the sole aim of teaching

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The Five Orders of Periwigs, William Hogarth
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deaf children (and people with speech

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impediments) to speak vocally.

William was homesick and desperate to go back to Herefordshire. He wrote, 'when I can speak very well, I shall go and live at Hereford and come to London no more. I love Hereford better than London, because my father and friends live at Hereford'. In letters home to another brother, Charles, he said how much he loved Charles and missed him. But, William continued his lessons every week with Henry Baker, and when his father's friends came to check on his progress, they promised William that they would write to his father to tell him that William can 'speak very well, they all said that I was a good boy'.

Outside the classroom, William had a normal childhood. He spent lots of time with his brother Thomas, who lived nearby in London. One day they ran up the top of the Monument in London, built to remember the Great Fire of London. William's legs were tired after climbing so many stairs, and when he got to the top, he was worried about falling down

them all. He liked to spend time at the shop opposite his lodgings, watching the owner make saddles and bridles for horses. He loved the smell of coffee from the nearby coffee shop – there were around 500 coffee houses in London at this time. He was desperate to wear a periwig (a type of Georgian wig) like a grown up and planned to ask his father if he could shave his head and buy one. His favourite book was Aesop's Tales and he was furious when his landlady's daughter tore two pages out of his cherished copy.

William Gwilym met other deaf children too in London. Henry Baker had made a name for himself as a teacher of the deaf, and sometimes William travelled with him when Baker went to teach other boys and girls. William was particularly fond of a little girl called Molly, who was a year younger than him and lived nearby on Bedford Row. Molly and William were two of many deaf children and teenagers that Baker was teaching how to speak vocally. He claimed that he had invented a new method of teaching deaf children, but it seems he was actually using the same method as John Wallis (another TOD) had used fifty years earlier to teach deaf boys Alexander Popham and Daniel Wallis to speak.

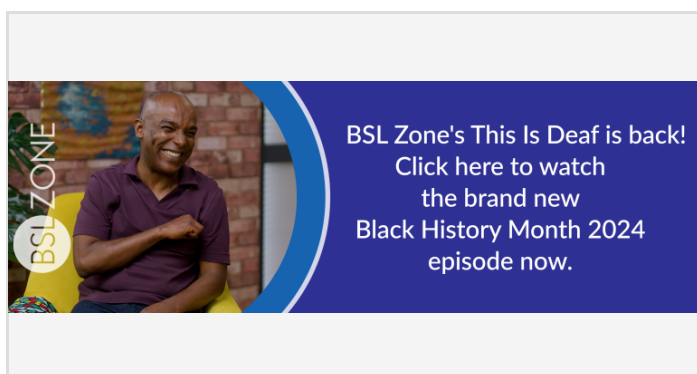
Why the emphasis on teaching deaf children to speak vocally? In part, because sign language was hard for many hearing people to learn, while some people did not consider it a proper language. However, John Wallis advised teachers of the deaf to learn how to sign, telling them 'we must endeavour to learn their language'. This is the first time I have seen deaf signing described as a language, and this was in 1698! Still, prejudice continued. A young deaf woman, Catherine Osbaldeston had been educated using 'proper signs' in the 1730s and yet many of her relatives refused to learn sign language to communicate with her. Some deaf children resisted the pressure to speak vocally.

The heiress Mary O’Brien, who studied with Henry Baker from when she was 8 years old insisted on using sign language when she went to court as an adult – getting Baker to act as her interpreter.

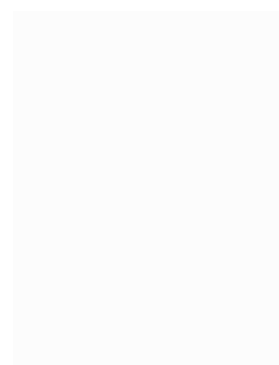
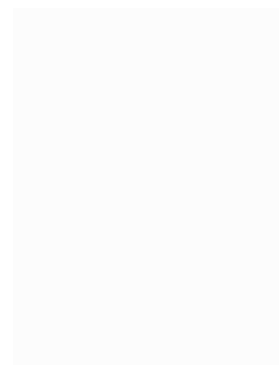
And what about William Gwilym? He did get to go back to Herefordshire and live with his family, but the Gwilym family faced serious financial troubles. The house had to be re-mortgaged; some of the estates were sold off; and William and his brother Charles moved to live with their brother and sister-in-law in Lancashire. Both William and Charles died soon afterwards, when William was aged only 25 or 26. William’s letters and diary entries provide a unique insight into the experience of a deaf child in the 18th century, as well as deaf education before Thomas Braidwood’s school for the deaf. Having read his diaries from his time in London, I hope William got to wear a periwig and drink as much coffee as he liked when he grew up!

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