Our Space Project

The University of Sussex is running an exciting project called ‘Our Space’. This aims to give the local deaf community opportunities to learn new things and share experiences. The last talk, on the 26th May at Friends’ Meeting House, Brighton was on Deaf History and the guest speaker was John Lilley, deaf, from Eastbourne.

He talked about his career as a Archives Conservator at The National Archives in Kew, London for 44 years up to his recent retirement. His job role involved restoring and preserving important archives. The archives, backdated, start from the 11th Century down to the present day. All various archives such as maps, plans, seals, photographs (since the Victorian 1840s), documents, books, original papers & wills from the Royal Family back to the William the First, Government papers, Royal Navy, RAF, British Railways plans and so on.

However there is a gap in some archives dating between 1100 and 1837. It is known that many were stored in the basements of many cathedrals, such as Westminster Abbey, the Canterbury Cathedral in Kent and a few others, also the most famous books, called the Domesday Books, were stored at the Tower of London. The Great Fire destroyed most of London in 1666, but fortunately, due to the scattering of these archives, some managed to survive. This was fortunate, as the fire would certainly have destroyed everything, and our history would be non-existent, there would be no research sources or documented evidence whatsoever.

In 1830, the Government was concerned about the scattering of archives, so they decided to store them in a new building at in Chancery Lane, London. Unfortunately there was an overflow of archives and some ended up in various Government departments. Around 1970, the building in Chancery Lane lacked enough storage space so they erected another building in Kew, Richmond. In 1994, this building had major extension work and all the archives from Chancery Lane were transferred to Kew. Today they are, finally, all under one roof for the first time ever in history.

When John was living in London, he was very involved in deaf clubs and deaf sports since his childhood. As acknowledgement, his local Deaf club at West Ham asked John if he could do some historical research and collect archives related to the club’s history, as part of their 100 years anniversary celebrations in 2005. It was shocking to realise that the club had no archives despite having been running for the last 100 years.

Fortunately, John knew that West Ham Deaf Club wasn’t the original name, so he began some research and discovered that it used to be called Fairbairn (East London Deaf) Club. It was named after a wealthy deaf and dumb man Sir Arthur Fairbairn, who used the fingerspelling method of communication. He was brought up in a private school in Northampton with his
deaf and dumb sister, Emma Constance Fairbairn. You might be interested to know that Arthur had a second home based in rural outside Brighton!

Around 1890, Arthur was the Treasurer of RADD (Royal Association for the Deaf & Dumb) always gave donations to the RADD. Emma herself, was desperate to have a deaf club to be set up somewhere in East London, when Emma died in 1904 a part of her will the monies goes to RAD then they found a venue at West Ham, hence the name, The Constance Fairbairn Memorial Church and Institute, All Saints. A book was created and published in time for the West Ham Deaf Club’s anniversary, based on its’ history from 1905-2005.

It may be important for you to note that your local Deaf Club would benefit from storing their historical records and archives in a safe, secure and suitable location. It is YOUR history after all, and we all need to look after it!

Come to the next Our Space talks on:

Tuesday 22nd September
Tuesday 27th October
Tuesday 24th November

The following meetings will be in Friends Meeting House Ship Street, Brighton from 6pm to 8pm, doors will open from 5.30pm.

Like John’s presentation, the Our Space meeting is an opportunity for the Deaf community share what is important to them. If you wish to present something you are passionate about, contact John Walker at University of Sussex to propose your ideas (j.walker@sussex.ac.uk) or find ‘Our Space’ on facebook.