

Introduction

To begin with a practical message, those readers who are primarily interested in the history of the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and visual impairment might want to start with Part I. Those who are more interested in broader charity history, social welfare policy, charity management and organisation might like to start with Part II.

RNIB is one of Britain's largest charities. It was founded in 1868 in an inspirational way that would still be impressive today. Dr Thomas Rhodes Armitage was a surgeon who went blind. With four blind friends he founded the British and Foreign Society for Improving Embossed Literature for the Blind with the primary objects of the education and employment of blind people and the provision of embossed literature which included braille.

The society's foundation was inspirational in several ways: blind people came together to help each other and others in the same situation – an example of mutual aid; instead of using sighted experts, they conducted their own research to find the best methods and tools to help blind people to be independent; the organisation was led by a blind person, Armitage, and for the first nineteen years of its existence all board members had to be blind; and the Board tried to be as objective as possible in its conclusions and actions. Take the example of embossed writing. In the nineteenth century there were over a dozen different forms of embossed writing for blind people. The group tried them all out and chose, not one of the several English systems, but the one of a Frenchman,

Louis Braille. It was Armitage and his blind colleagues who guaranteed the dominance of braille across the world.

This exciting start and the activities which followed were recorded in the history of RNIB by Mary Thomas who covered the first 88 years to 1956 (Thomas 1957). June Rose in her history included the period up to the late 1960s (Rose 1970). My contribution starts there and ends in 2010.

I hope you will not judge this history on terminology. Our use of language changes regularly, especially terms associated with groups discriminated against, in general, and disability, in particular. Over this 40-year period (1970-2010) we have had 'the blind' (e.g. as in the National Federation of the Blind of the UK); we have had 'visually handicapped', 'visually impaired', 'sight loss' and so on. There are supporters even now for each of these terms. I have used the full panoply, often choosing a particular term according to preference of the decade. Personally, I have always preferred 'blind and partially sighted people', except it takes so long to type!

I should declare an interest – I was chief executive of RNIB for 20 of these 40 years from late 1983 to the end of 2003. I am not an historian. However, even historians come with points of view, while seeking to balance the dual contributions of evidence and interpretation. Clearly, I am favourably disposed towards RNIB and cannot claim to be neutral but, as an academic, I have tried to be as objective as possible in presenting evidence. The advantage I have is that, having been actively involved as chief executive or vice president for approaching 30 of the 40 years, I have much more inside knowledge than an external historian could collect, both about RNIB and the voluntary and community sector of which it is a part. The role of what I see as 'activist observation' needs more attention in the fields of history and memory studies, especially where participant memories are triangulated with records and interviews as I have done (Keightley and Pickering, 2013; Fivush, 2013; Brown and Reavey, 2013). For this study I am grateful to RNIB for unfettered access to records and the official archive, to the dozen RNIB staff and

trustees who have read and commented on drafts and to the hundred or more people to whom I have spoken to check facts, recollections and interpretations.

To make fuller sense, a history of RNIB has to be set in the context of the changing role of charities and disabled people in society. Here are my observations (Bruce 2018) on the changes which have taken place in and to charities in general over the 40 years, 1970 to 2010, into which the history of RNIB nestles (I draw on other views, facts and figures later):

- The growth of the sector – both money and people – has enabled a major scaling up of sector roles such as service delivery, policy promotion, innovation and co-ordination.
- Changing support/popularity of causes: environment and arts – up; disabled and old people – down; children, animals and social welfare – unchanged.
- Skills developed: in finance, human resources (HR), marketing, market research, fundraising (F/R), governance, communications (especially social media) and strategy.
- Policy developments embraced: lobbying, campaigning, public education, use by government of our (and the commercial) sector to test controversial initiatives or ideas, charities' statements of recommended practice, diversity, governance and social media.
- Policy changes forced on us: marketisation, commissioning, statutory transfers (of services and assets), the entry of more and more powerful commercial providers into our markets (e.g. Serco, Capita).
- Policy implementations regarded with ambivalence: mainstreaming versus specialisation, mergers, beneficiary rights, European Union (EU) impact, co-operation with professional associations and employment law.

For those interested in an overview of how RNIB responded over 40 years to these various impacts, Part II might be a good place to start reading.

In Part I, recognising the inspirational first two nineteenth-century decades of RNIB's history when blind people ran the charity, what better subject to start with in this book than the heady time between the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. This was when representative blind people effectively wrested control of RNIB back to themselves. This start-time also resonates with the finishing decade of this history when in 2001/02 RNIB changed from being an organisation 'for' the blind into one 'of' the blind by becoming a membership organisation with a legal requirement for the majority of its trustees to be blind or partially sighted.

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To the extent that RNIB has been successful, this has been achieved by thousands of people over the 40 years. I have tried to mention some but clearly most are omitted. If you are one such, or feel under-recognised and are prepared to share experiences, please do contact me.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my three chairs: Sir Duncan Watson, Sir John Wall and Lord Colin Low who all gave me such great encouragement and support, so vital if a chief executive is to stand a chance of being successful. Our

relationship endured long after I stepped down from my role of director general – I dare to call them my friends.

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