

125th anniversary educating deaf children – the early years

Blanche Nevile School for Deaf Children celebrated its 125th anniversary of educating deaf children this year. Assistant Headteacher, **Kathryn McCarthy**, looks back at the history of the school and how the school adapted and managed the recent impact of Covid-19

Not many people are aware of the longstanding history of Blanche Nevile School. Our school was founded by Blanche Isabel Nevile who was born on 16th February 1871 and was the youngest of 13 children. It was never clear as to why Blanche decided to become a Teacher of the Deaf, but she trained with the Association for the Oral Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, at their school in Fitzroy Square, London. In 1894, at the age of 23, she received her first class certificate which enabled her to “take charge of Institutions, Schools or Classes as Principal”. This was the start of a remarkable career with a far-reaching impact on how deaf children would learn to communicate and actively participate in their community.



Following the Education Act of 1893, Blanche applied to educate deaf children in the Tottenham area of North London. Within a year, she was appointed to start a school for deaf children and she remained at the school for the next 30 years until her retirement in 1925. During this time Blanche studied new methods of teaching, visiting schools as well as institutions on the Continent and in America. She was also greatly involved in other aspects of deaf education which included her controversial address at the Conference on the Education of the Deaf in Brighton in 1929. At this conference she made the recommendation of having student-teacherships prior to a period of formal training which would result in better trained teachers. Blanche was also a firm believer that deaf children should be placed with Teachers of the Deaf as soon as possible and pupils should preferably attend deaf schools.

The Tottenham School Board was one of the first to set up a school for deaf children. The following year, at an Education Committee meeting in January, attendance officers had to report the number of deaf children in the area. There were 19 reported but it was felt this

was likely to increase with the population. It was recommended that a classroom at Downhills School would be set aside for teaching the identified children and a specifically qualified teacher should be appointed and receive an annual salary of £70. When the Committee met again in July it was agreed to set aside a room in the newly built Bruce Grove School for the teaching of 18 deaf children. On 14th January 1895 the school log for Bruce Grove Board School reads: “Deaf & Dumb Dept. opened. Teacher – Miss Blanche Nevile. Eight children in attendance.” Blanche herself commented on the children being “wild and uncontrollable” and later noted the need to rearrange her classroom so she could keep all the children “more immediately under my eye”.

By October numbers had increased to 13 and the children were reported to have been making very good progress. Letters of thanks were received from parents, and Miss Nevile was pleased the children had not forgotten any articulation or language when they returned to school after the holiday. Having seen the impact made on the children, an assistant was hired to support more pupils. The Tottenham board agreed to take scholars from the Edmonton school board and pupils were brought in by tram “by some responsible person”. This is very similar to the school set up today, as pupils attend from boroughs all over London and children travel by school buses or taxis with escorts.

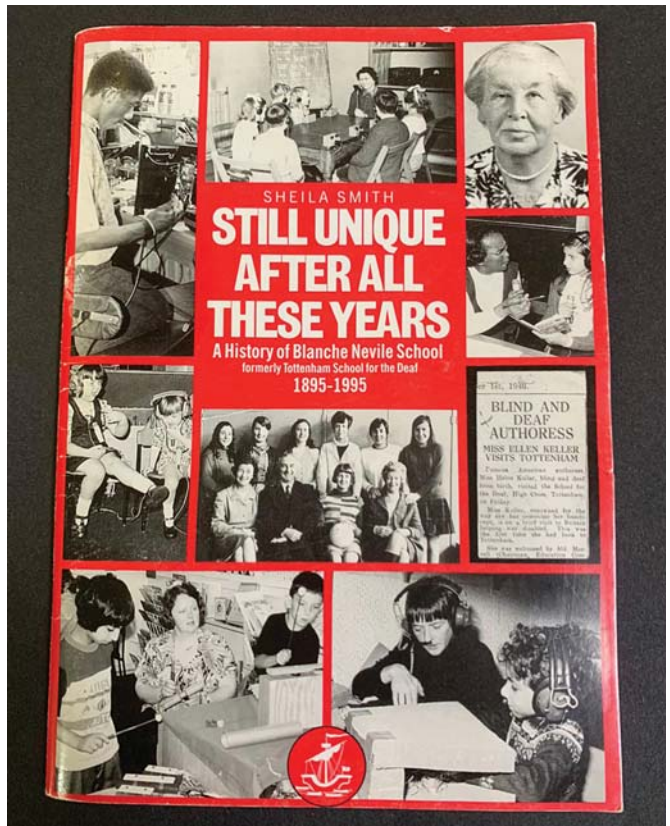
Over the next few years the school continued to do well and received a great deal of praise for the excellent teaching and leadership of Miss Nevile, which included Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) report. This resulted in grants as well as improved supplies and equipment. It was later



Philip Lane buildings, the school’s first and only purpose-built site, which opened to pupils in September 1924

felt that more suitable premises were needed so that additional classes such as woodwork and needlework could be included in the manual training programme. Approval was granted and the school moved in January 1903 to 'The Cedars.' In the early years of the 20th Century, Blanche visited schools in Germany and America in order to improve her own methods. She was granted leave for one week to observe the German school and was given an allowance of £5 to cover her expenses. By 1909 numbers had increased to 32 pupils and high standards continued to be maintained.

Blanche became a very well regarded Teacher of the Deaf whose influence and expertise extended beyond the London area. She was invited to give talks and visit a number of institutes and schools for deaf children around England such as the North Staffordshire School for the Deaf and the Swansea Institute. Numbers continued to swell to over 60 and by 1912 new premises were sought and the school made a temporary move to Ashton House and Linden House; by 1924 the construction for the new school building in Philip Lane had begun. The new building was opened in September 1924. Blanche was still dedicated to training Teachers of the Deaf right up until her resignation as headmistress. Blanche was a formidable lady who had very definite views and was part of a group of like-minded ladies involved in deaf education in the early part of the century. These included Mary Hare and her sister, who established their school in Burgess Hill; Miss Taylor, who founded Hamilton Lodge School; and Mary Corbishley, who founded Mill Hall. Blanche handed in her resignation in August 1925 and it was accepted, with her final entry in the school log book was on 29th October that year. So the following day on 30th October 1925, it had been 30 years and ten months after Blanche Nevile set up her school with eight children in one class in Bruce Grove, Tottenham leaving a thriving, efficient school known for its outstanding work for deaf children. The school continued to succeed under the new headmistress,



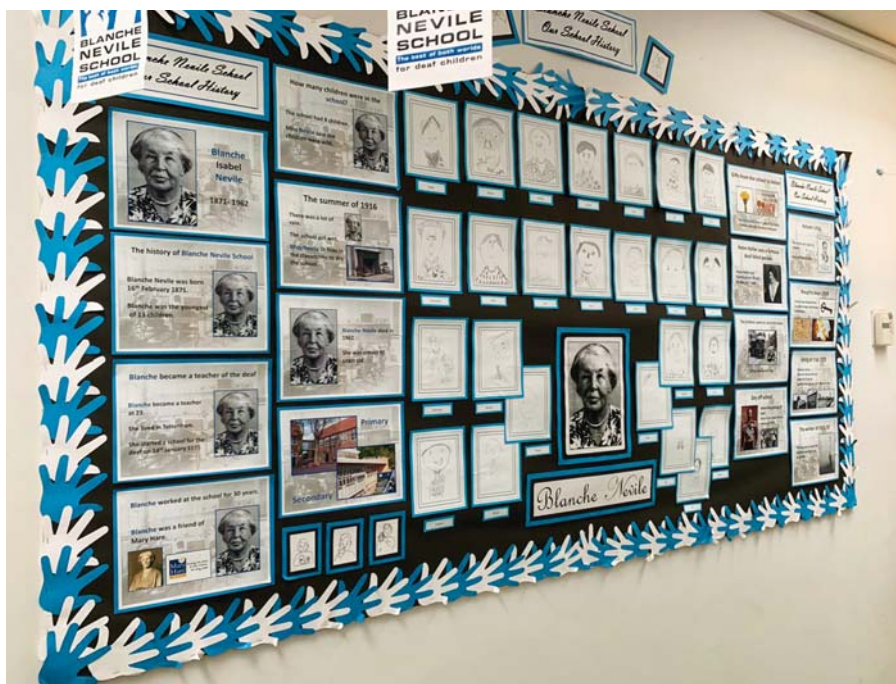
Miss Beckinsale, who was Blanche's first assistant so the good work continued in the same way.

Over the next few decades the school continued to flourish and the students enjoyed many exciting events and trips as well as special visitors, one of whom was Helen Keller in 1932. The school closed especially for this exciting event to enable staff and pupils to attend the Queen's Hall for the special visit.

During the Second World War, plans were put in place to evacuate the pupils and the instruction finally came on the 30th September 1939. Pupils were evacuated to a

holiday camp at Kessingland, near Lowestoft. Later the children were sent to North Wales to five schools for the deaf but the log book does not give details of the numbers that were sent away. When the school reassembled in 1940 it was moved to West Green School where the accommodation was safer but returned to Philip Lane in 1943.

Over the following decades the school continued to grow and further sites were opened. These included the Devonshire Hill Partially Deaf Unit (PDU). It wasn't until 1956 that the school was renamed in honour of its first headmistress and became known as 'The Blanche Nevile School.' Miss Blanche Nevile, then aged 85, visited the school to mark the special occasion. A further site was opened at Markfield Secondary School, a



Senior PDU that later became known as Drayton School. In 1962 the news reached the school of Blanche Nevile's death at the age of 91.

The Blanche Nevile School was now very different to the single classroom being managed by one teacher. It had now evolved into a comprehensive service for deaf children which included the peripatetic service as well as an audiology clinic which opened in 1960, and later the Administration & Resource Centre (ARC) and Teacher Advisory Service.

Over time, the various schools, units and provisions scaled down in size. The school had moved away from an oral approach and instead was offering a Total Communication approach. This was to later become the sign bilingual provision we offer today. By 1989 all secondary staff and pupils made the transfer to Fortismere Secondary in

Muswell Hill, and in 1994 the primary pupils and staff transferred to Highgate Primary in Highgate, London. This is where our primary and secondary departments remain to this day, sharing the sites with our partnership mainstream schools, easily accommodating meaningful inclusion as well as the separate specialist teaching provided by our school team. In 1988 a Teacher of Sign was appointed at the school. This meant that staff, parents and pupils could further develop their signing skills and the profile of sign language was raised. Today we continue to have BSL tutors in school who teach students, staff and families BSL as well as providing Deaf Studies to students in school. We believe our provision, as well as our bilingual philosophy, live up to our motto by providing our pupils with 'The best of both worlds'. Both BSL and English are given equal importance and pupils have access to both depending on their preferred language.



Covid Museum that was set up by our Secondary staff and students



The temporary primary classroom set up at the secondary site

125th anniversary – meeting needs during a pandemic

Our school has clearly adapted and changed over the years. Fast forward to 2020 and little did we know that our year-long celebrations for our 125th anniversary would come to an abrupt halt. Luckily we had our Victorian day on the actual anniversary date on 14th January, where the primary pupils were transported back to the Victorian school and even had an appearance from Headmistress, 'Miss Nevile'! Our secondary students enjoyed a special assembly learning about our history and how our school has evolved over time. In February we were all gathered at our secondary site for a fabulous talent show followed by an opportunity for both schools to socialise.

Not long after, it was announced that schools were to close from the 23rd March due to Covid-19. Anticipating this scenario, the senior leadership team (SLT) had made provisional plans. We decided from the outset that our

school would remain open for our vulnerable families and those of key workers.

As part of the forward planning, staff members created work packs for each pupil. These included essential school equipment as well as work linked to their topic and learning. Initially, this was planned for a two-week period as this would take us up to the Easter break. Pupils who were in school were able to take home the packs. Those pupils who were not in school had packs delivered by staff members. This covered the 15 boroughs in London from where our pupils attend. Every family received a personal call to explain the situation and the school's plan.

Then came the biggest challenge of the situation. Our headteacher made the difficult decision to move our primary pupils and staff to our secondary site. This was quite an undertaking but the safety of the pupils and staff

was the priority. As our secondary site in Muswell Hill is a self-contained building with a separate entrance and car park, we could have the full oversight and manage the entire building therefore reducing risks. This was a big challenge but as usual our dedicated staff took it in their stride! Within a day we had turned one of the secondary teaching spaces into a massive primary classroom with tables, chairs and welcoming colourful displays and resources for our youngest pupils. Without realising, this was marking an important moment in our history as we were all reunited once again on one site. The first time this has happened in our more recent school history.

When we first made the transition in March, we didn't realise that it would become primary's new home until the end of the school year. As a SLT, we met regularly and planned on a two-week basis that was regularly reviewed. Over the weeks that followed, we were able to offer places to our key worker families as well as those we identified as being more vulnerable. Some families were unable to take our places due to the shielding of other family members, but our numbers steadily increased. Staff members were working on a rota and teachers quickly adapted to providing high quality remote learning for our pupils at home as well as teaching pupils in school. Our BSL tutors also continued to provide BSL lessons to family members at home and regular video calls were made to families by the class teams and SLT. The role of our home school liaison officer was vital at this time to ensure our families were supported at home and that the welfare of our pupils was paramount, working alongside other professionals where needed.

We were also proud of our increased social media presence. We had been creating videos for our pupils to access from home and we quickly realised they could be enjoyed by deaf children and their families beyond our school community. The school team created BSL signed stories, 'Wednesday Workouts' as well as mindfulness sessions, science experiments and art challenges. These were then uploaded to our school Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages. They became so popular that we received many requests to create a YouTube channel so they could be shared and watched easily. It was lovely to receive so much positive feedback that it continued to spur the team on during a challenging time.

Thankfully during this time we did not have a single confirmed case at school. This is probably due to the stringent measures we put in place and continually reviewed during the entire period.

We also had some celebrations during this time. We had a fond farewell for our Year 11 leavers as they ended their school journey with us at Blanche Nevile. A carefully thought out and planned socially distanced celebration meant they could celebrate their achievements with their friends, family and the school team. We will save the big celebration for when it is safe to do so and where the whole school community can be involved. Our Year 6 pupils enjoyed our first ever virtual transition into Year 7 which was another great success and a tribute to the staff for adapting to the times.

This year, 2020, was due to be a busy year with a range of events as we were due to celebrate our 125th anniversary. Due to the global pandemic this was not to be the case. However, this is a period of our history that we will remember, as a challenging time and, due to the amazing resilience and dedication of our staff team, we proudly remained open.

We continued to give our pupils a high standard bilingual education but more importantly provided support and communication to them and their families. We continue to adapt and change to meet the needs of our pupils and their families. Last year we established our baby & toddler group for both Deaf and hearing families; it has been a huge success and has become an important support hub for families. We are always proud of what our students go on to achieve and we have great links with various colleges post-16. We enjoy hearing of past students and their successes and achievements. We were especially happy to hear this year that one of our past students had won the Ted Hughes Award for his work in poetry, and another past student currently has his work displayed at the National Portrait Gallery. I'm sure that Blanche Nevile herself would be proud of the school we have become today and we look forward to what the next 125 years may bring. ■

Special thanks to Sheila Smith, author of *Still Unique After All These Years: – A History of Blanche Nevile School Formerly Tottenham School for the Deaf 1895-1995* which was used as a source for this article.

Blanche Nevile School for Deaf Children is a bilingual, child-centred school in Haringey, North London for pupils aged 3–16 years. The primary and secondary departments are on separate sites, which are co-located with two excellent mainstream schools, and they welcome pupils from all over London. Further details can be found on their school website. You can also follow them on their various social media platforms for regular updates about their school.

Website: <https://www.blanchenevile.org.uk/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Blanche-Nevile-School-for-Deaf-Children-967663219996683/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/blanchenevile-school/>

Youtube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQDn2xBF0Xjhm0s88MPHGhw>



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