



Signs of change

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Image
Courtesy of Action
on Hearing Loss

To mark Deaf Awareness Week, an annual event running this year from 6 to 12 May, we explore Margate's historic links to the deaf community and the initiatives shaping its future

Whether it's at the beach or the bus stop, people speaking in sign language is a very familiar sight here in Margate. But have you ever wondered why? Thanet's unique ties to the deaf community began in 1876, when England's first public institution for deaf children, the London Asylum for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor, opened a branch in Margate. Enticed by the promise of fresh sea air and increased space, the entire school relocated to the seaside town, becoming the Royal School for Deaf Children Margate and adding a further education department, Westgate College, in the 1980s.

Catering for profoundly deaf children with additional needs, the school attracted students from all over the country. But 2015 opened a dark chapter of its history, when the John Townsend Trust, which ran the school, suddenly went into administration. Amid allegations of abuse and financial mismanagement, the school closed almost overnight, leaving 500 staff jobless and students adrift. "The children were rehearsing for their panto the day they were sent home. They never went back," remembers Charlotte Jenkins, whose son Wilfred attended Westgate College and was living at St Christopher's, one of the Trust's supported living sites, at the time.

With mainstream education unable to meet their needs, some students were placed locally at specialist schools such as Foreland Fields in Ramsgate, while others were offered schooling as far afield as Brighton and even Doncaster. Rather than send their children hundreds of miles away, several parents such as Gail Joslin, a communication support worker at Palm Deaf BSL Training, opted for home-schooling. Gail's profoundly deaf daughter had been a day pupil since the age of four, but was offered no suitable alternative. "We had to fight for the education authority to fund us to employ staff to educate her at home," says Gail.

As well as impeding access to education, the closure broke up the tight-knit school community. Four years on, many ex-students still feel let down, reports Mary McCann, a BSL trainer and member of the deaf community. Although residents kept their homes and support thanks to UK charity Action on Hearing Loss (AoHL) taking over the trust's residential and supported living sites, a new service provider has inevitably brought changes in culture and expectations that not everyone is happy with, says AoHL's head of services for Kent, Tim Birchley.

Despite this, most former pupils opted to remain in Thanet to maintain their ties with the deaf community, rather than return home and risk social isolation. Wilfred, who is profoundly deaf

and autistic, now lives in his own rented flat in Westgate and enjoys a full life, aided by AoHL, social media and a can-do attitude. "If [staff] in cafés and shops don't understand me, I just write on my phone and show them," he says. As well as volunteering at Herne Bay's Cosy Cat Café and the Kent Down's Syndrome society, Wilfred lets off steam at Sundowners and goes bowling with deaf friends. Yet Wilfred's gregarious attitude is unusual among the deaf community, says AoHL's Tim. A lot of the time, deaf people don't have the confidence to integrate into society due to communication barriers, which can lead to feelings of isolation and poor mental health.

The situation isn't helped by cuts to council services like Thanet Gateway deaf services, a drop-in centre in Cecil Square offering information, guidance and advice, which has gone from three times a week to once a fortnight. Grassroots organisations have stepped in to support the community. Jon Palmer, a former teacher who is profoundly deaf himself, set up Palm Deaf BSL Training when the deaf school closed. Based at the Kent Innovation Centre, Broadstairs, Palm Deaf not only offers deaf awareness courses and BSL training at levels 1 to 6, but also organises a raft of events including an annual quiz and taking part in the Margate Pride parade. Most popular is the Deaf Café, a monthly meet-up at Ask Annie & Alpli café in Margate. "Anyone can come along. There's people with different signing skills. It's nice to encourage one another," says regular attendee Mary.

On the arts front, Palm Deaf work with Turner Contemporary to provide signed tours, and also with Westgate's Carlton Cinema, which offers Friday evening screenings of films chosen by the deaf community via a poll on Palm Deaf's Facebook page. For more active individuals, More Leisure runs a BSL seated yoga course.

While Margate is more deaf-aware than many towns, Jon says there's still some way to go. Employers, gyms, local businesses - indeed all of us - would do well to emulate the local Stagecoach drivers, who received basic BSL training from AoHL and use picture support books. "For the drivers, it was a case of being able to say hello, but also offer a pictorial reference if it wasn't clear where people wanted to go," says Tim.

If you're interested in getting involved with the deaf community, Action on Hearing Loss welcomes volunteers at its St Gabriel's day service in Westgate, joining beach clean-ups, group walks, art sessions and more. Or try a taster BSL course at Palm Deaf. "Learning sign language, even if it's just the basics, is probably the most important thing you can do as a hearing person," says Jon. "Don't be afraid of communicating with a deaf person - they're only human."