

eBook/CD in British Sign Language/English



James Herriot



A fictional autobiography

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James Herriot
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James Herriot

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DeafEducate

My life

by James Herriot

I was born in 1815 in Leith, near Edinburgh. My father worked on the ships. He pushed and pulled heavy loads on and off the ships all day. Down by the docks in Leith the houses were tall and dark. My dad didn't get enough money to feed us all.

I'm deaf. I'm the only one in my family that's deaf. So when I was six my father took me to the deaf school in Edinburgh. It was called the Edinburgh Institute, and at that time it was down by Chessel's court. Some people have to pay to go to that school. But for poor families it was free. So that's where I lived from when I was six till when I was twelve. Only my father said I was nine when I got there. That was the rule: you had to be nine when you started school. I had to keep remembering to add three years to my age when the teachers asked me! Luckily I was tall for my age.

It was a strange place for me at first. There were about fifty deaf boys and girls there. Some of the teachers were deaf and they had gone through the school themselves. They always

looked tired because they had to look after us in the evening as well as teaching us in the day. The headmaster was Mr Kinninburgh. He had his own parlour where he taught the richer deaf children who paid.

Some rich lady or gentleman paid my fees. We free pupils were taught in a big room. We all used sign language and we learnt how to read and write English. The deaf teachers explained everything to us in sign language. The hearing teachers fingerspelt everything to us, but most of the time we couldn't understand them. We were given little printed books with pictures in that helped us learn the English spellings.

School was interesting, but I missed my family. I found the first years very hard and I wished my father hadn't lied about my age. I don't think boarding schools are a good place for young children. I was only allowed to go back to see my family twice a year. Leith is not really that far from Edinburgh, only about five miles. But we

were counted in and out every day. They kept an eye on us all the time.

Every Tuesday lunchtime the deaf school was open for rich visitors. Some of them gave money to the school. The headmaster chose some of the best pupils to show off their skills in speaking. I don't really speak much. I prefer the sign language.

In the summer I used to go out with one of the older boys, John McRae. We used to go round all the rich houses in Edinburgh with a collecting tin. A lot of rich people in Edinburgh used to give a guinea every year to the deaf school. I saw how John used to bow and hand over his letter. Then the lady of the house would put money in a box. It was an easy way to make money.

When I was twelve (they still thought I was fourteen by then) the school apprenticed me to a tailor's. That meant I had to leave the deaf school and live with the tailor while I learnt the trade. It was a long day for a young lad. I had to wake up

at five o'clock in the morning and get the shop ready. Then I had to sew all day. We sewed everything by hand. The master had a sewing machine but I wasn't allowed to touch it. We sat in the window to get the best light to see by.

On Sunday I was allowed a day off. I walked down to Leith to see my family. Sometimes I went out to see my friend Isabella who was in service as a maid out in the New Town. We were courting.

Times were hard in the tailoring business. My master lost his business and I had to find a new job as a journeyman in someone else's shop.

In 1831 when I was sixteen I married Isabella in St Cuthbert's church in Edinburgh. Lots of my old friends came to the wedding. One of the hearing teachers signed the church service.

I went a lot to the Deaf and Dumb Congregation of Edinburgh at that time. It was like a deaf church. There were lots of lively deaf people in that group and I learnt a lot from them.

Alexander Blackwood was the pastor and he was like a father to me. They used to organise meetings and lectures. There were painters like Walter Geckie and scientists and printers in the group. It was an exciting place to be. I realised that deaf people could do all sorts of jobs.

Around that time I used to visit my uncle William quite a lot. He had a printer's shop in Leith and he employed about ten journeymen. They were training to be printers. My uncle used to show me his books. That was where he kept records of all the income and money he spent on his business. He was doing well as a printer. Much better than my father, who was still living in a horrible room in Leith. I decided to set up my own business as a tailor. I started business in 1833 but times were hard and my shop had to close down soon after.

I named my eldest son after my uncle William and also after my wife's father. My own father, George, was not such a good example to my family as he had turned to drink. My business went bankrupt and Isabella and I had to live apart with

our families for a while. We were lucky we didn't end up in the work house. I had to give up tailoring and go back to being a porter on the docks for a few years.

In 1837 we decided to move to England. Two of our four children had died because of the cold and disease that was sweeping through the courts and alleys of Leith. Times were hard in Edinburgh and there was no work there.

Manchester was the place to be. In the 1830's it was the fastest growing city in Britain. There were plenty of rich tradespeople in Manchester who needed new suits.

We arrived and I found a cheap shop to rent on Oldham Street in Salford. We lived over the shop. When I was walking round Manchester I saw that Market Street was the most fashionable street. The windows were lit up with wonderful things for sale from all round the world. The people near the Exchange at the bottom of Market Street were the richest. The businessmen

went in and out of the Exchange building to buy and sell cloth. I wanted to be part of the business world.

My business did well. I was able to move my shop into Manchester. Then I found a shop at the top end of Market Street. Then as I did better in my trade, I managed to move down Market Street till I had a shop in the best possible place: just opposite the Exchange. I found work fitting out railway carriages with upholstery seating and I had to take on extra apprentices to keep up with the orders.

Businessmen used to come into my shop looking for fine material for suits and coats. My son Henry worked in the shop with me when he could, and he knew sign language very well. He let me know what the gentlemen were saying. But he was a scholar at school. So when he was out I would hand the gentleman a slate and we would write messages that way. I became a well-known figure in Manchester. Everyone liked my suits and told their friends.

I employed six deaf tailors under me. When I got them from the deaf school they didn't know anything about the trade. I was surprised that the Manchester school for the deaf didn't seem to be turning out deaf people who could read and write.

In the same year I moved to Manchester a huge new deaf school opened on the Chester Road. It was a grand building with a school for the blind on the left, a chapel in the middle and a school for the deaf on the right.

I managed to meet with a few of the deaf teachers who came into my shop from time to time. From what they told me, life in the school was very hard. The food was terrible. Some children died because of illness and cold.

The gentlemen who ran the school had raised all the money from people in Manchester. There were over 150 deaf children in the new school. The headmaster was a man called Andrew Patterson. But from what I could see, he didn't

have the knowledge that my old teachers had in Edinburgh.

From when I got my shop on Market Street a lot of deaf people from Manchester used to call in on my business. Some of them wanted me to help them find a job. Sometimes they were starving because their families wouldn't support them. A lot of deaf people in Manchester at that time had moved in from the countryside. They hadn't been to school and they couldn't find jobs. Hearing people had strange ideas about deafness. They didn't want deaf people to get married. So there were a lot of older unmarried deaf people about, many of them homeless. Sometimes they ended up in the workhouse. Nobody would want to live there. The food was just thin porridge. Most people didn't last long in the workhouse; they came out in a coffin.

I did what I could for my fellow deaf brothers and sisters. I had been brought up with the Church of Scotland. Although I believe in God, I don't mind whether they are Catholic, Protestant

or Jewish. There were all sorts in Manchester in the 1840s and to me they were just deaf people who needed a hand from their deaf fellows.

I opened up the back room of my shop and every Sunday deaf people came. I preached from the Bible. I found some of them jobs. I passed on bits of clothing that were given to me by rich customers. I taught some of them to read and write. I really wanted to set up a Deaf congregation like we had in Edinburgh. But when it came to writing things down like minutes of meetings, the Manchester deaf couldn't do it. They had been taught a different way at the deaf school and it had left them helpless. This made me angry.

I looked around Manchester for a place for a proper deaf association. The Church of Scotland on St Peter's Square had a room going free. We met there from 1846 we set up the Manchester and Salford Adult Deaf and Dumb Benevolent Association. It took up a great deal of my time, I can tell you.

There was so much to do because Manchester was full of deaf people who were unemployed. Many of them couldn't even sign because they had come from the countryside and hadn't been to school.

My committee were all deaf. We collected money from businessmen in Manchester. We also went round from door to door collecting subscriptions. We did it just the same way that I had seen John McRea do it when I was at school in Edinburgh. It wasn't hard to collect money. The people of Manchester were very generous. They were keen on paying for anything about religion and self help.

But we had a problem with the deaf school. They had their own collectors and by about 1850 the deaf school committee noticed that their income was going down. Our committee of deaf collectors was affecting their finances, or so they said. Patterson and his friends in the Church of England started an adult deaf organisation a bit like our one. It was called the Manchester Society for Promoting the Spiritual and Temporal

Welfare of the Adult Deaf and Dumb. It was a bit of a mouthful for hearing people to say, I believe.

A hearing missionary called the Reverend Buckley looked after the Church of England Adult Society. He didn't do much for the adult deaf. He just preached to them on a Sunday and brought along hearing friends of his to do magic lantern shows about foreign lands. Theirs was a Church of England organisation, whereas mine was open to all deaf people. But the school collectors went out to the suburbs and all round Manchester collecting for the school and their deaf adult organisation. The deaf school told their pupils not to come near my Association when they left school. Most of them took no notice and came anyway.

Then in 1856 a gentleman wrote to the Manchester Courier asking what was the difference between the two deaf adult organisations. He wanted to know which one to give money to. So I wrote in to the newspaper to explain how my organisation came about. The

teachers from the deaf school replied. The letter writing to the newspaper continued back and forth over several weeks.

The deaf school teachers were very against our deaf organisation. They didn't think that deaf people should run a society at all. In their minds deaf people were like children who should be looked after.

This made me angry. These teachers had not done a good job for the deaf young people of Manchester. They had no idea about deaf organisations that were set up in other cities, like the deaf congregation in Edinburgh, for example.

Of course I wrote my views forcefully. I can explain myself well in English because I had a good education. And why shouldn't the deaf people of Manchester have the same?

Thomas Patterson, the headmaster, and William Stainer from the deaf school believed in getting deaf children into the school at a young age. They

would even like to have them from before the age of seven. I disagreed with this as I remember the harsh time I had of it as a young child of seven in the Edinburgh Institute.

The school teachers said I was taking money from subscribers into my own pocket. That was very far from the truth as my wife Isabella can tell you. In fact it was the other way round. I was giving up time in my business to work for deaf people. I was taking money away from my family to pay for food and clothing for some poor destitute deaf people.

William Stainer sneered at our association and called us journeymen. He meant that we were tradesmen, not gentlemen like him and the other school teachers. But what of it? We deaf people know best how to run our own affairs. If it wasn't for the work of deaf people throughout the United Kingdom, there would not be any organisations for deaf people at all.

At that time we had a movement in Manchester

called the Chartists. It was a movement all across the country, but there were a lot of them in Manchester. They believed in votes for all men, not just rich ones. And they wanted a new parliament every year. I went to a few of the Chartist meetings with my son to sign to me what they were saying. I could see that the richer factory owners and the churchmen didn't like the Chartists at all. But many of the shopkeepers like myself were interested in these ideas.

Over the 1850s and 1860s I was busy with the Adult Deaf and Dumb Benevolent Association. I travelled to Leeds, Huddersfield, Bradford, Halifax and Liverpool. I went by train all over the north of England. I had many deaf friends who came to stay at my house and we talked about the idea of running our own newspapers and setting up a deaf organisation in every town in the country.

In 1859 the school teacher at the deaf school, William Stainer, raised a huge amount of money with some bazaars organised by the wealthy women of Manchester. The school for the deaf

set up an Infant school and now the deaf school takes children from the age of six. I must say, I feel sorry for the little ones having to live in those grim surroundings from such a tender age.

I think the deaf schools in America are doing a much better job at educating deaf young people than the deaf schools in England. I have met a few well-educated American deaf people and I think their teaching methods should be more used here.

The Church of England deaf association in Manchester raised thousands of pounds from the public for a new building for their organisation. Just recently, in 1878, they opened a grand new building on Grosvenor Street in Manchester. It has a church room at the top. The place is run by the Reverend Buckley, who tells deaf people what to do. The school and the Church Adult Society are not keen on deaf people marrying each other. They find work for some deaf people, but only if they go to church every week and do what they were told.

My own association has carried on and we moved to 70 Quay Street. We don't have nearly as much money as the Church of England organisation. But at least we can run it the way we want to. We always have a deaf committee. We have had some help from hearing people too. For example a solicitor called Dr Thomas Southam helped us at the time when the deaf school was trying to shut our association down.

I'm an old man now. The deaf school in Manchester is still turning out deaf people who can't read or write well. The school tries to stop their ex-pupils from coming to my deaf association.

Of course there is a lot of talk now in deaf schools about the new oral methods. I remember in my own deaf school that some of my friends could talk. But for most of us it was a waste of time. To my mind the best way to teach deaf youngsters is to have deaf teachers using sign language. It was a shame when I was young in Edinburgh that the deaf teachers weren't in

charge. They got paid half the wages of the hearing teachers.

I had to give up my tailoring business; it didn't do so well after the Deaf Association work took up so much of my time. I think my son Henry will carry on with the Association after I am gone. It's up to the deaf people of Manchester themselves after that.

There are a lot of us deaf people in Lancashire, nearly 12,000 if the Manchester Statistical Society is to be believed. I am sure that the deaf organisations I set up will still be going strong in years to come. There will always be plenty of work to do to find jobs for deaf people and to teach them more than they learned in the deaf schools.

James Herriot
Manchester,
January 1879

This autobiography is fiction, but it is based on records from the time. If you want to know more about the original records, you can read this British Deaf History Society booklet:

Manchester and Salford Adult Deaf Benevolent Association. In: Deaf History Journal Supplement II, (1997) pp 15 - 45.

To contact the British Deaf History Society email:
bdhs-info@deaf-history.org.uk

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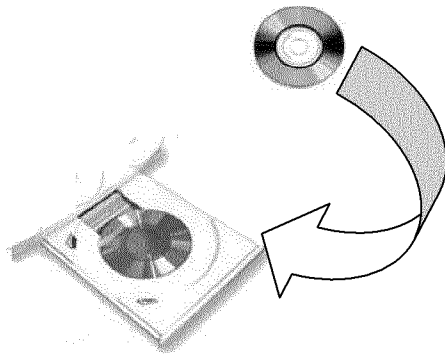
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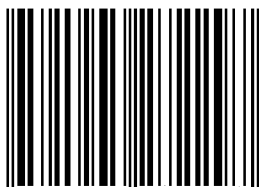


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