

A Short History

Over the period of time the beginnings of any organisation tend to be lost. This can easily happen with changes of personnel and, with the passage of time, the passing of those who were originally directly involved. However, we are fortunate in that some of the early records have been preserved, and this short history is drawn from these documents.

Traditionally teachers of deaf children who taught orally also taught lipreading. In Sydney, during the period of the nineteen twenties and thirties a good deal of teaching was done privately by Mrs Edith Earlam. She had been a teacher of the deaf prior to her marriage to Harold Earlam, who in 1911 became Superintendent of what was then known as the NSW Institution for Deaf Children. This was located at Darlington opposite the University of Sydney. Today these buildings are part of the University. This Institution is now known as the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children and is located at North Rocks.

Harold Earlam, who came from England, an experienced teacher of the deaf and blind, occupied the position of Superintendent with distinction for thirty-six years. Other teachers who taught lipreading to children in those early days were a Miss Koeffloed and Miss Elinor Wray, generally regarded as the founder of the Speech Pathology profession in Australia.

Mrs Earlam found that she could not cope with the demand for lipreading and so other staff from the Institution was called in prior to the first evening class for adults being commenced during 1934. One of the staff members who taught this group was Miss A. Dorothy Burns. At the conclusion of the course five young women met together on 26 September 1935 and constituted themselves as the "Sydney Lipreading Practice Circle". One of these women was Mrs Dorothy Jackson (née Perry) and another Mrs Hilda Wilson (née Boissery). The names of the others are now not known.

The members of the Practice Circle paid a fee of one pound for twelve lessons which, in the first instance were taught by Miss H McIntyre from the Institution. The fee was used in part to pay the teacher while the Institution kindly lent a room and provided duplicated lesson material. This was the first time in Sydney that an adult lipreading class was offered.

During 1936 this small group grew to twenty-six members. It met weekly and the School for the Deaf gave invaluable assistance.

At the end of 1936 it was decided to try to reach a greater number of hard of hearing people in New South Wales, and the formation of a larger body was discussed. It was decided to form the "N.S.W. Lipreaders' League" and at a meeting held at the School at Darlington on 8 December 1936 a constitution was adopted. Mr Harold Earlam accepted the office of President – a position he held until 1944. Today, we celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the formation of this group.

The question has been asked as to whether there was any connection between the commencement in 1932 of the Victorian Branch of Better Hearing and the commencement in Sydney of Lipreading classes for adults in 1934? The answer – from no less an authority than

the prolific pen of Mrs Dorothy Jackson – is “no” and that similar conditions in the two States lead to the same spontaneous results. Yet is this the whole story?

The first Victorian adult class in lipreading was conducted at the St. Kilda Road School for Deaf by 1931 by its Head Master, John H Burchett, MBE. (Mr Burchett commenced as a “student teacher” in 1912 and as Head Master in 1927. He served in this role until 1950.) One can only surmise that with both branches being indebted to schools for the deaf for their commencement that correspondence between the two School principals on the subject of lipreading for adult hard of hearing persons led, in time, to the commencement of the two branches.

Throughout 1937 the League functioned and by the end of the year numbered about 95 members. Both afternoon and evening social gatherings were held and three circles were organised where those who had gained some proficiency in lipreading kept up their practice.

In December 1937 the League commenced “The Alert” – no mean feat for an organisation just twelve months old! This was the first magazine produced in Australia specifically for the hard of hearing. Branch magazines were exchanged between the State organisations until replaced by a national magazine in 1947.

Efforts were made to secure clubrooms for the League, and during 1938 almost one hundred pounds was raised. The Institution then made available a large hall standing in the grounds and so this money was spent on furnishing this hall. This building was situated at the corner of City and Darlington Roads about opposite Carillon Avenue. Here the League carried out lipreading practice, socials and other activities.

Not until about 1938 was there any communication between Mrs. Marie Henderson, Social Secretary of the Victorian group and Mrs Dorothy Jackson, Secretary of the Sydney group. Marie Henderson introduced Dorothy Jackson to the South Australian branch after its commencement in 1939.

Lipreading classes for adults continued to be held by the Institution. One rather different class was for older folk, with an average age of about 80. This class was held in school hours, so of course, the teacher was not paid. It was a difficult class to teach, but interestingly enough, even those whose lipreading skills were quite meagre benefited from the understanding contacts and help with hearing aids. Several pupils did derive enough help to make their burden a little easier and a few joined a Practice Circle.

Another class was held for those adult pupils who had to travel a long distance. One, at least, travelled from Lithgow - nearly 120 kilometres each way for a weekly lesson. All these classes took place pre-war. About the same time (1939) the first country branch of the Lipreaders’ League was established – at Goulburn. Correspondence courses were also used to teach lipreading in some situations.

The outbreak of War in 1939 caused a number of changes. The School for Deaf was requisitioned by the R.A.A.F. during 1942, but the building used by the League was not required as it was detached from the main section of the School. Brown-outs and restricted transport

services caused a number of members to withdraw from participation. Countless hours were spent in making camouflage nets and supplying knitted goods for the Forces. Lectures were given in First Aid. The first servicemen whose hearing had been impaired by the War began to come to the League for assistance. Miss Cole, a School for the Deaf staff member, mainly undertook this.

It was gradually felt that the League should expand its activities to include lessons in lipreading (rather than rely on the School) and have better facilities to offer the many deafened servicemen who could be expected home after the conclusion of the War. Additionally, in order to appeal to the great number of hard of hearing who were not lipreaders or who wore good hearing aids, the name was changed to "N.S.W. Association for the Hard of Hearing".

So, in March of 1944 – notwithstanding the great debt the League owed to the School and its staff for the use of the hall and for the encouragement and practical help given over the years – the Lipreaders' League severed its close connection with the School for Deaf Children and moved to a room in the City –No. 3 Bond Street became the new home of the Association. Harold Earlam stepped down as President and the first Patrons were appointed.

Some members who did not agree with the change of name and location continued to meet at the School at Darlington as the N.S.W. Lipreaders' Practice and Social Club until 1962 when the School moved to North Rocks. However, the active involvement of the School staff ceased about 1948.

The Australian Association for Better Hearing was formed in 1946, with foundation branches being Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania.

A grant from the "Walter & Eliza Hall Trust" enabled a Relief Fund to be established in 1948. This made possible the purchase of hearing aids for those who could not afford the initial cost, with repayments spread over a number of months.

In 1949 with the assistance of the Lord Mayor of Newcastle and some other prominent citizens, representatives from Sydney attended the inaugural meeting out of which the Newcastle Branch grew.

A grant from the Carnegie Trust enabled the Association to send Dorothy Jackson to America and the United Kingdom to study methods in teaching lipreading and the training of teachers. Upon her return Mrs Jackson was successful in her efforts to have lipreading included in the curriculum of the NSW Education Department Evening College classes. These teachers were paid by the Education Department.

During 1954 another branch was established at North Sydney, but this did not enjoy a long life, closing in 1963.

The Marie Henderson National Lipreading Tournament commenced in 1956. Each year teams from all branches of Better Hearing Australia compete for the Marie Henderson Shield. Thus, while we are celebrating our 70th Anniversary and the National body its 60th, the Marie

Henderson Award is 50 years old. This Award has been won by Sydney Branch 5 times in the past 9 years. Surely, Edith Earlam, Dorothy Burns and other teachers from earlier times would be delighted to know that the foundations they laid so many years ago in the weekly practice of lipreading still continue strongly within the Branch which grew out of their efforts.

During 1960 the Branch constitution was revised and the name New South Wales was changed to Sydney, as there were then three branches in the State (Sydney, Newcastle and North Sydney).

The Clear Speech Award was instituted in 1966 – so another big Anniversary is acknowledged this year. This prestigious Award is designed to promote clear speech as an essential communication strategy for reducing the impact of hearing loss. Each year the hearing-impaired community turn down the volume, switch off the teletext captions and by watching the face and lips of the newsreader vote for the reader with the clearest pronunciation and non-verbal communication skills. Winners are listed separately.

With the changing face of Sydney it became necessary to find new premises from time to time. No. 3 Bond Street was vacated in 1964 in a move to Griff House, 374 Pitt Street, and then in 1971 to 43 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst. A move back into the City followed in 1975 when the Association re-located to Naval House, Grosvenor Street and this was followed in 1981 to 4 Goulburn Street.

To stop the periodic upheaval caused by moving to new premises, the decision was made to buy a building. With accumulated funds in the “building fund”, the generosity of Trevor and Fay Briggs and a \$40,000 mortgage (repaid in full by mid-1990), the decision was taken to purchase a “home” for the Association and so in 1985 Better Hearing Australia (Sydney) – the name having been changed in 1983 – moved into a disused fish and chip shop (then being used for student accommodation) at 288 Unwins Bridge Road, Sydenham. This building cost \$95,000 and was sold in 1991 for \$245,000 due to increasing aircraft noise and periodic flooding! Later that year the present office and club rooms at 29 Burwood Road, Concord (a building with existing commercial usage zoning) were purchased for \$250,000 with about \$26,000 being spent on modifications. These premises have proved to be an excellent choice over the past fourteen years, and the then President and members of the Board deserve credit for steering through these changes.

And what of the future?

The original aims and objectives of the NSW Lipreaders’ League formed in 1936 were:

- To improve the outlook of the partially deafened adult
- To foster a spirit of sociability among the Hard of Hearing
- To encourage the study of lipreading in small classes
- To provide some recreation for deafened adults

- To provide books on lipreading (Sydney has a small but valuable specialised library on hearing impairment and associated topics)
- To provide information about causes of deafness and provide reliable information about hearing impairment
- To publish a small magazine (the Branch Newsletter “Whispers” is produced quarterly, and an email bulletin “Wojjsay” eight times a year)

Over the past seventy years we have endeavoured to fulfil these objectives and have been successful, either in whole or in part. But much work still remains to be done!

New challenges arise. New possibilities become available. New strategies emerge.

Today, our vision is expressed in our Corporate Values Statement: “To help Australians with hearing impairment improve their quality of life by promoting good communication and life solutions through education, support and advocacy”.

Every opportunity needs to be seized to continue to make known the work of Better Hearing Australia to all Australians who are affected with loss of hearing.