

Review

Brighton centre 75th Anniversary supplement





Picture: Ray Hazan OBE, President of Blind Veterans UK, outside the Brighton centre.



Picture: Ray Hazan uses the Kurzweil talking computer in 1979. Members of Blind Veterans UK were leaders in the field of this technology, using the BBC Acorn Speech computer and the Kurzweil. Under the leadership of Sir Ian Fraser they were also early adopters of talking books.

If a building could talk! By Ray Hazan, OBE, President of Blind Veterans UK.

If a building could talk, what stories the Brighton centre would have to tell; stories of the whole range of human emotions, experiences, character and psyche. Stories that range from happiness to sadness, joy and sorrow, success and failure, apprehension and confidence, life and death, births and marriages. For 75 years, it has witnessed the start of a new life for countless veterans of all ages. In the post Second World War years, blind veterans pursued some 49 different jobs and professions, many of which were learnt at the centre. Sport and hobby activities continue to thrive.

Physically, since it first opened on 10th October 1938, it has undergone many changes, from 40 bed dormitories to married accommodation. The rooms of the nursing wings would have been unimaginable 75 years ago. Whilst the basic layout of the listed building has not changed, additions have been made to conform with modern standards, expectations and regulations. The swimming pool, gym and Arts and Crafts annexes have been added.

For so many, the Brighton centre is home from home as we navigate around its corridors as if we were permanent residents. To many, it is indeed their home. To those in poor health, it is where they receive understanding and sympathetic care second to none.

To hear the daily programme of events announced at breakfast time, is to place a stethoscope to the heart of the Brighton centre — active, vibrant and full of life. I have a feeling it will be the same in another 75 years' time! Happy birthday, Blind Veterans UK's Brighton centre.



Picture: The Brighton centre under construction in 1937.

An innovative design and a beating heart.

1935: Planning of the Brighton centre begins.

1937: September 1937 the Foundation Stone of the Brighton centre is put into place.

1938: The Brighton centre was opened on 10th October 1938 and by the end of the year, more than 300 members had taken a holiday or spent a period of convalescence in the centre. However it was only briefly in use before members and staff were evacuated to Church Stretton in Shropshire, our wartime home. During WWII the centre was taken over by the Admiralty.

Ian Fraser House at the Brighton centre was named after Lord Fraser of Lonsdale who was blinded on the Somme at the age of 19. He went on to become Chairman of Blind Veterans UK for 53 years. It remained as Ian Fraser House until 1995 when Pearson House in Brighton was sold. It is now referred to as the Brighton centre.

The building is shaped very loosely like an aeroplane pointing in a south-westerly direction, and it could quite possibly be the first building to have been designed specifically to meet the needs of its blind occupants.



Picture: Captain Sir Ian Fraser and Lady Fraser at the laying of the foundation stone on 6th September 1937.

The architect was Francis Lorne of Sir John Burnet Tait and Lorne. St Dunstan's Chapel to the front of the building has a 20 foot statue of the Winged Victory by Julian Phelps Allan, originally Eva Dorothy.

1939: The Corps of Good Companions was formed. This was an appeal to the citizens of Brighton and Hove to provide guides, philosophers and friends to the men of Blind Veterans UK. The response was wonderful and 75 years later volunteering at the Brighton centre remains popular with more than 100 dedicated volunteers.

1939: In the November edition of the Review Sir Ian Fraser wrote that the first patient from WWII had come into Blind Veterans UK. He wrote: 'He was not wounded, but one of his eyes had been very seriously damaged in an accident. This has been operated on and it is hoped that, in a few weeks time, he will be fit to leave without any serious impairment of his vision. I am afraid that the majority of cases that come to us will not be so fortunate, but it is at any rate a satisfaction to feel that we can do this splendid remedial and healing work. The young man concerned was a Telegraphist in the Navy.'



Picture: The Eye Hospital ward at the Brighton centre.

1948: On 26th February 1948, the late Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, paid her first visit. In his speech, Sir Ian Fraser said that the Queen's visit not only honoured those present but more than 5,000 of our members throughout the Empire.

1952: Men from WWI are still becoming members due to the delayed effects of mustard gas.



Picture: 1954 HM The Queen with Dickie Brett, who has his back to the camera, on a visit to the Brighton centre in 1954.

Dickie who was a member of the blind and handless group was highly skilled in woodwork.

1962: Their Royal Highnesses Her Majesty The Queen and Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, visit the Brighton centre. They returned in 1985 to open the new South Wing.

1965: Members took part in an experimental long cane course at the Brighton centre. By 1967, instruction on the use of the long cane was available to all of our members. It is also the 50th Anniversary of Blind Veterans UK.

1973: Brighton writer Ann Quin, best known for her novel 'Berg' dies. Ann was a former member of Blind Veterans UK staff, working in the late 1950s at the centre.

1979: Blind Veterans UK and the RNIB evaluate the Kurzweil; the first reading machine to instantly convert print into speech.

1982: Terry Bullingham is the first member to join who was blinded in the Falklands War.

1991: Three members are admitted as a result of the Gulf War.

2005: Henry Allingham, a veteran of the First World War, becomes a member at the age of 108 years old.

2012: We become Blind Veterans UK with a special event at the Brighton centre when Royal Marines abseiled down the building to reveal our new name.

2013: The Brighton centre celebrates its 75th Anniversary with 75 themed events, the opening of the refurbished Art & Craft Workshop and the lighting up of the building.



Picture: We become Blind Veterans UK. At the 2012 launch event at the Brighton centre with Royal Marines, Paul 'Fin' Findlay, President Ray Hazan OBE, Chairman Major General Andrew Keeling CB, CBE, RM, Chief Executive Robert Leader DL and actor Lachlan Nieboer.

Our vision for the Brighton centre from Lesley Garven, centre manager.

Lesley Garven, manager of the Brighton centre, says why it's such a great place to work and speaks of future plans.

I joined the Brighton centre in October 2012 and it's been absolutely fantastic. The longer I'm here the more I really understand the essence of Blind Veterans UK. It's about the people. That's what's really motivating for me and for the 180 staff and 100 volunteers here: it's working with the members and their families and seeing the positive impact of everyone's work on their lives. We are always uplifted by the many letters of thanks we receive, as they mean so much to us as they show we're providing a good service. But we don't just want to hear the wonderful comments so many of you make. We're continually working to find ways to improve life for everyone who comes here and we welcome your comments to help us improve. Our motivation is to ensure that we get it right for everyone.

Since I've been here we've looked at where we are now and where we want to be in the future. Where we are now has been the culmination of the last 75 years of often groundbreaking work. We have always been progressive. The very building we are in is an inspired creation by the architect Francis Lorne. We continue to be innovative, today it's through the latest computer software and gadgets for your home and the rehabilitation and training we offer. In the past it was through our Research Dept, who made bespoke equipment and sensory aids for work and recreation for war blinded members. The UK's first white cane trial took place here in 1965 and in June 1968 members took part in the first International Sports meeting for blind veterans that was held at the centre. Today sport is important as members work with the staff in the Sports & Recreation department, using the gym and pool here or joining the activity weeks. I am continually uplifted by the beautiful work that is produced in the Art & Craft Workshop as I stop to look at the art that lines the corridors here.

To ensure everyone gets the most from their time here we have developed a vision that everyone should experience and enjoy:

- A sense of Well-being (being listened to, respected, having a voice).
- A sense of Purpose (learning new skills, re-learning old skills).
- A sense of Family (belonging, camaraderie).

The biggest difference for me working here is the realisation of the impact that this centre has on people's lives. For me that's something incredible, it's something that I'm really proud of and it's something that I want to make sure we continue to aspire to.

People often come here who may have been quite isolated over a long period of time. Maybe they've had a recent bereavement and when they come here they initially feel isolated and on their own. As you know the first time you visit here is usually during the Introductory Week when the most important thing is for us to find out about you and what you can do and what you want to achieve. It's not about what you can't do, or what you haven't been able to do, or what you think you can't do. It's about what you can do.

What's wonderful, and this links very much to our vision, is that everyone who comes to the centre has a different need. It's not just about being able to cook a meal. It's not just about going out on a trip. It's about the people that you're with and the camaraderie you get when you're here. It's about talking to your fellow members or other spouses or family members, it's about making new friends and being listened to and having a voice. We know that a lot of people haven't had a voice for a very long time. I think all of that is part of the ethos of Blind Veterans UK. It's important to us that when you leave here you have a sense of belonging and you actually feel that you've achieved something during your week.



Picture: Centre manager Lesley Garven congratulates Norman Perry during Archery Week at the Brighton centre. **Photo:** Natasha Cartwright.

A letter of thanks to the Brighton staff.

Dear Everyone ("Sirs" sounds so formal, when you are all so friendly!)

Following our recent visit to your magnificent centre we would just like to convey our sincere thanks for a most inspirational week.

My husband, Peter, has been traumatised by the gradual onset of his blindness due to glaucoma. Having been an electrical engineer until his retirement, in addition to being the most versatile 'do it yourself man' on the planet, he was very active as stage manager and lighting technician with our local theatre company. Founded in 1946, he is now the only surviving founder-member and we actually met there in 1949 (I was a dancer and later went on to choreograph all of the musicals and pantomimes for over 60 years). We married in 1953 and celebrated our Diamond wedding anniversary in August.

Peter has been so frustrated at not being able to do all that he used to and was becoming more morose and withdrawn, so when Sarah, his carer from Essex Care, suggested we made contact with you we were delighted to be able to take this wonderful opportunity.

Firstly, congratulations on the organisation (and timetable-ing, which must be an absolute nightmare). The staff were all so kind, friendly and helpful, nothing was too much trouble, we both felt very special throughout the week. The excellent transport, facilities, accommodation, activities and food were all first class.

We shall certainly look forward to future visits, and, in fact, would very much like to arrange a trip to the centre in Llandudno, especially as we spent our honeymoon in North Wales.

In addition to making new friends, the week proved to be a life-changing experience for both of us; in fact, Peter has been more like his old self again. So please convey our most grateful thanks to everyone concerned, their humility and ability are beyond compare. Thank you for sending the additional equipment, which is all being put to good use.

Yours sincerely, Joy and Peter Hayden.



Picture: 1938 a member feels a miniature of the Brighton centre.



Picture: 2013 ROVI Bryan Kilburn works with a new member.

Sports & Recreation at the Brighton centre.

In June 1968, the first International Sports meeting for blind veterans was held at the Brighton centre. Competing alongside our members were athletes from other war blinded organisations in Austria, France, West Germany and Poland. Over the years a number of clubs have been set up. These include the archery, skiing, walking, writing, golfing, computing and fishing clubs.

Norman Perry who is a resident at the Brighton centre and a highly skilled archer is one of the founding members of the archery club. Now aged 93 he is the world's oldest archer. Norman was blinded whilst Serving in North Africa in 1941. He spent time in Tembani in South Africa before he was repatriated to the UK. As a member of some 70 years Norman epitomises an extraordinary level of determination and courage exercised on a daily basis. Norman trained as a physiotherapist and latterly he managed a large hospital department.



Picture: Norman Perry during Archery Week at the Brighton centre in August 2013. **Photo:** Natasha Cartwright.

To mark the 75th anniversary of the Brighton centre the Sports & Recreation team organised a 75 mile walk along the South Downs from 6th to 10th September. Mark Threadgold said: "The walk was a great idea and we all enjoyed it. What I really value about the Brighton centre is that I can go to the gym there five days a week. I walk in from Saltdean, which being totally blind is entertaining, and once in the gym I use the cross trainer for 40 minutes, have a good chat with the guys there and then walk back home. It keeps me busy every day and it's always good to catch up with everyone."



Picture: From left to right: Claire Townsend, Sports & Rec Instructor, Peter Burbery, Mark Threadgold, Steve 'Sparky' Sparkes, Nicky May, Steve Mills, Sports & Rec Instructor, David Cranson and volunteer guide Johnny Davies.

David Cranson from County Durham said: "When I went to the Brighton centre for the first time in 2008 my life changed when I met Louise Timms and her staff in the Sports & Recreation dept. Working with them I used the tandem bike, gym and pool for the first time in years. I was at that time in my early 50s and I still lacked confidence, but they weren't fazed by my reticence and within a few months they had me cycling, swimming and running. Since then, with their support and instruction, I have competed in the London to Brighton bike ride, the London triathlon, the Great South Run, the Dorking Sportive cycle ride, the 60 mile Hove to Hove circular cycle ride and the Virgin London Marathon. I would like to thank Louise Timms, Steve Mills, Craig Brindley and Claire Townsend as I couldn't have done any of it without them."

Art & Craft at the Brighton centre.

Everyone who has been to the Brighton centre knows that the Art & Craft Workshop is a place where magic is made. We caught up with Esther Freeman, the R&T Manager (Art & Craft), to find out about life in the workshop. Esther said: "Day to day the workshop is a bustling room for any member who comes through the main door. It's used by holiday makers, dailies, trainees and residents and it's a chance for them to catch up with everything that's happening in the centre and with each other. It's as much about being a social environment as it is about being a creative one. We're equally proud of the work that's produced in the workshop as we are of the atmosphere. The work is of a high standard, but really it's not about doing the best work, it's about having a goal and a focus and a purpose. It's about a sense of achievement in the finished article, whether it's to be taken home to the family or shown in an exhibition. It's a physical representation of members' achievements. As part of the 75th anniversary we were fortunate to receive a donation from the Charles Skey Fund for the refurbishment of the workshop and there will be a big opening in October to link with the opening of the building 75 years ago. We're really excited about the refurbished workshop as it will change the way we work and it means that we will be able to accommodate more people who want to come in.

"We've enjoyed some wonderful 75th Anniversary celebrations. There was an exhibition in the Chapel in May of photos from our Archives and commissioned photos by Darren Baldwin. As the exhibition was part of Artists' Open House it was open to the public each weekend and it was really well attended. Following on from that we took part in the Heritage Open Day in September when the building was toured by over 80 people. These are fantastic opportunities to interact and integrate with the local community and break down barriers as we showcase our achievements and the great work that's been done over the last 75 years. As some people still think of us as that strange building on the hill this has given us the ideal opportunity to open our doors and show them what we're about. On 25th and 26th October we will light up the building when there will be a switch on event, and we're sure it will be a draw for people who pass by to come in and find out more about us. This year there were a number of 75 Challenge Events that included 75 games of pool and another to move 75 maltesers one at a time from the box to a plate while using just a straw and suction. There was also a Pamper Week when Holistic Therapist, Iain Milliard and other qualified members gave massages and therapeutic treatments."



Picture: Nancy Bowstead and Dan Skinner, Security, with the 75th Anniversary flag Nancy knitted.

Frank Tinsley has lived at the Brighton centre for 19 years and has become very well known for the rocking horses he makes in the Art & Craft Workshop. Frank said: "It's a pleasure and a joy that I can go down into the workshop and work on the rocking horses I enjoy making. The atmosphere is great and it stops me getting fed up with myself. I want to thank Esther Freeman, Phil Rawson, Kath Jones-Romaine, Dave Bryant, Leigh Lawson and Adrian Tilford."



Picture: Frank Tinsley in the Art & Craft Workshop. **Photo:** Darren Baldwin.

The Pace of Change, by David Dent, IT Instructor.

Over the course of the last 75 years, Blind Veterans UK has been at the forefront of the development of accessible technology, much of it tried and tested at our Brighton centre. From the swinging gates that mark the top of our staircases to workplace adaptations such as Braille typewriters and accessible industrial tools, Blind Veterans UK has pioneered the technologies that have enabled our members to continue to live and work independently. The wrist-watch is typical of a simple tool that continues to improve: the tactile timepiece of the past has become a device that speaks, never needs winding, and which uses a radio signal to keep perfect time.

Early talking books and talking book machines were evaluated by our charity, in conjunction with the RNIB, and have gone on to bring pleasure and education to thousands of people with sight loss. This is one technology that has seen quite remarkable change over the last 75 years. The original talking books were 78 rpm records, which eventually gave way to vinyl long-playing records, then tapes. The compact cassette tape has just celebrated its 50th anniversary but, despite its simplicity and flexibility, it is a largely obsolete technology now: tapes gave way to lighter and more durable compact discs, which themselves have been succeeded by MP3 files on memory sticks.

The most notable characteristic of the technology we use is that it tends to become smaller, lighter and more capable as time goes on. The white cane that is often viewed as the symbol for people with sight loss is a 20th century development that went from being a walking stick that was painted white to the reflective, lightweight accessibility aid that many members use today. Indeed, the Brighton centre was a leader in the adoption of the new 'Hoover' long cane technique that was introduced from the United States.

Since the introduction of the long cane there have been major advances in electronic navigation aids with GPS positioning; yet the long cane and guide cane have never been supplanted as the most reliable aids to personal mobility. They are a wonderful example of the right kind of technology: simple, sure and trustworthy; devices that have had tremendous longevity and which have improved the lives of thousands of people.

It is the development of micro-electronics that has produced some of the most exciting developments in the equipment used at our centres. The CCTV that magnifies documents on a screen was a bulky and heavy device in the days of vacuum tubes but the advent of digital image sensors, led lights and flat screen LCD displays has transformed it into a far more compact unit. There is even a model now where the display and camera is duplicated on a handheld tablet device that can be removed from the CCTV for use when travelling. Handheld digital magnifiers have helped overcome many of the limitations of conventional optics, with their heavyweight lenses and short focal lengths, when higher magnification is required.

Computers that magnify the screen and which speak back text have become a mainstay of our communications training with members — many of whom use them almost every day to keep in touch with family and friends, to take part in clubs and societies, to keep up-to-date with world events, or to write their life stories. It is not an understatement to say that computers can be a transformative technology that allows people to do even more than they did before losing sight.

The amazing thing is that the computers we were using when I joined Blind Veterans UK in 2005 were less powerful than many people's mobile phones are today. Indeed mobile computer technology is an area in which we are gaining more and more expertise: a modern smart-phone can read out what is on the screen, or what it sees with its camera, it can send and receive emails, keep an address book and a diary, it can magnify menus, timetables and labels — even make phone calls!

All technology — from smart-phones to white canes — must be used appropriately and what works for one person will not work for everyone. Complex technology brings with it complex problems that a device like a talking tin lid or liquid level indicator will never inflict on their users. Clever technology is only one part of an equation that includes training, and ingenuity and perseverance on the part of those using the devices.

Falklands veteran Terry Bullingham talks of the importance of the Brighton centre.

Terry Bullingham, a Chief Petty Officer in the Royal Navy, who was blinded in the Falklands War in 1982, talks about his memories of the Brighton centre.

"I went from camp at Daedalus to the Brighton centre in August 1982, just as the Goodwood week had finished. I was the only person there to have been injured in the Falklands War. Once there I was taken under the wing of the WWI and WWII people and they became my role models. I'm a firm advocate of centre based rehab as you meet the people who become your role models as well as learning the skills you need. From them I learnt the Blind Veterans UK way, that blindness wasn't something to be pitied, it was something to overcome, which is what Blind Veterans UK is and always has been about. You learn to turn a negative into a positive. Had I gone into Social Services I could still be struggling now.

"I would spend time with WWII veterans Dickie Brett, Bob Young, Wally Thomas and Blodwyn Simon and Thelma Meredith who were both injured in munitions factories. I thought myself lucky that I was just blind, as many were blind and deaf, or blind and handless. I admired the way they just got on with it and had great lives.

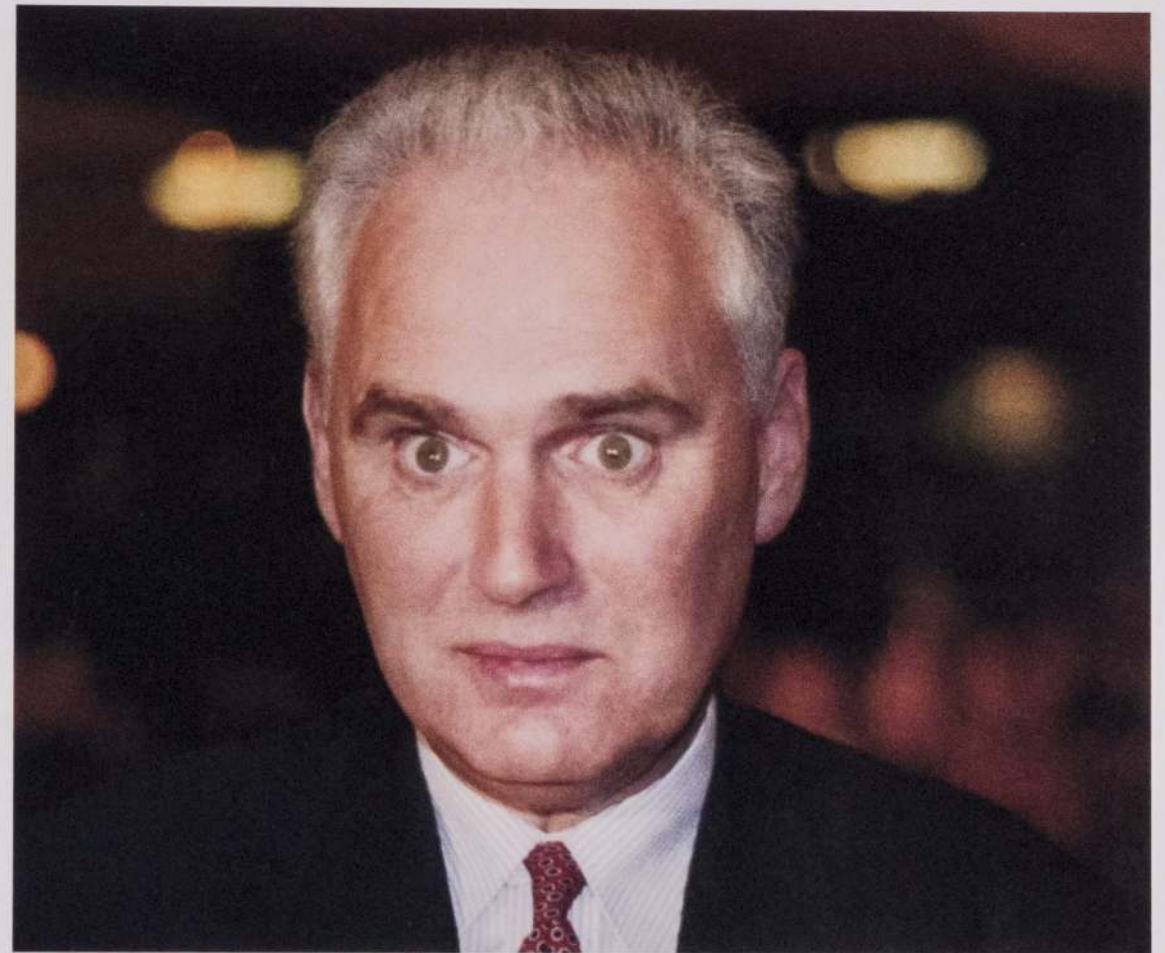
"I enjoyed the social side of life at the centre and had the privilege to take some of my fellow members to Port Slade when we went to HMS Sussex. We'd also mix with the local community in Rottingdean as Bob Young and I and others would go to the four pubs there. I was privileged to be invited by Thelma and Blodwyn into the lounge of the ladies wing on the fourth floor. It was very different then as there was no married accommodation and wives would leave for their bed and breakfast accommodation each evening.

"Jock Carnochan was the mobility instructor and he was fantastic, he was ex Navy. I knew that I didn't want a guide dog and as soon as he put a cane in my hand and I walked along the corridor with it I knew it was for me. Phil Duffee taught me Braille and I was taught typing by Carol Locke, which I really enjoyed. Those were my three principal subjects which I learnt over a period of three to four months.

"I was totally confused at the beginning and learning Braille and mobility training was exhausting, but they must have done a good job as I left the centre in February 1983 and with the skills I had learnt I was able to go back to the Navy and run a desk. That was very important for me as I just wanted to get back to work and working at the Fleet Air Arm Museum meant that I had my independence.

"I use the skills learnt there daily and I love Braille and really enjoy reading in bed at night. When I worked as a Social Worker in Aberdeen I had a 30 minute bus journey and I'd ask someone to tell me when it was my stop so that I could read. But for me Braille is so much more than just sitting down to read, it's extremely useful at home as I use Braille labels for ease of identification.

"I did once see the Brighton centre before I was blinded. I was on the holograph unit in the 1970s and as we patrolled the Dover Straits I remember someone said 'that's St Dunstan's there' and I remember the building standing out on the cliffs. I never thought I'd end up at Blind Veterans UK, but you just don't know what's around the corner."



Picture: Terry Bullingham.

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glorious years**

