

Deaf Londoners in the 1660s

Teachers' guide



This set of notes is to help you and your learners better understand what life was like for deaf Londoners in the 17th century. In addition to providing some extra information on the people and signs depicted in the comic, you'll also find out more about communication, terminology and the development of signs and sign languages.

What was life like?

17th-century records show deaf people active in many walks of life. In 1648, physician John Bulwer compiled a list of deaf English people he had heard about. This included a family of deaf farmers who managed their business by writing; a merchant who read lips; and deaf gentlemen and gentlewomen who used signs, writing, and/or lip-reading.

Despite this, deaf people faced a harsh world. There was limited medical and social understanding of deafness. For those who had lost their hearing through infection, trauma or age, there was little useful help available. Life was harder still for people who were prelingually deaf (those born deaf or who became deaf before they learned to speak). Hearing parents might remain unaware that their child was deaf, understanding only that they struggled to speak.

Terminology

It's important to understand the terms used to refer to deaf people in the 17th century and how this has changed over time.

In the 17th century, people who were prelingually deaf were usually referred to as 'dumb'. Though this word could simply mean 'mute', it could also mean 'stupid'. Today, 'dumb' and 'deaf and dumb' are offensive terms.

In modern times, 'deaf' (with a lowercase 'd') is used to describe hearing loss; 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' indicates a cultural identity and connection to a Deaf community. As such, we have used 'deaf' in these notes and the comic unless the topic is clearly Deaf culture.

Legal status

In the 17th century if you could not speak, your legal and mental competency were seen as suspect. Even if you could easily communicate through other means, you could be prevented from marrying or inheriting property, and from making other decisions. Deaf people who did not speak therefore faced particularly serious challenges in running their own lives.



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Technology

Beyond the cultural and medical differences, a lack of technology made things harder for deaf people. There were no hearing aids, and though hearing trumpets were being used by a few, they weren't widespread. Since ear trumpets did not actually amplify sound, but concentrated it, they were also not useful for all types of hearing loss.

Poor lighting would have made lip-reading even more of a skill than it is today. To light their homes, most people used rush lights (part of a plant dipped in tallow), tallow candles, or fires. Lighting and fires cost money, so people avoided using them unless they needed to.

Signing

17th-century Signs

British Sign Language (BSL) is a fully-fledged and legally recognised language. It has a vast lexicon of signs and its own syntax, which is different from spoken English. It can perform all the functions of a language, including everyday communication, storytelling and poetry. BSL was developed by deaf people over centuries. Although there was no BSL in the 17th century, the origins of the language can be traced back to this time.

Scientific interest

In the mid-17th century, there was a lot of interest in deaf communication within scientific circles. Natural philosophers (scientists) were working on the general principles of language and some, like John Bulwer, saw research on gestural communication as part of this. A few private tutors offered their services to wealthy families with deaf members. Tutors were competitive, each claiming to have the best method for teaching their deaf pupils to speak. There were books published on gesture, speech and ways of teaching deaf people. In the late 17th century, these spread knowledge about signing and lip-reading.

Developing BSL

Research shows that signing tends to become a fully-fledged language when deaf people get together and develop their home signs into more complex systems, and then pass this on to future generations. This can happen in schools where deaf children come together and share their signs, as in 1980s Nicaragua where this led to the creation of Nicaraguan Sign Language. It's believed that British schools for deaf children in the late 18th century are where BSL really began to develop.

There wasn't this kind of concentrated activity in 1660s London, but evidence shows deaf people signing fluently with family and friends. Some were living close to one another, especially



18th-century ear trumpets.
Frederick Dekkers, Public domain, via
Wikimedia Commons



John Bulwer. Line engraving by
W. Faithorne, 1653. © National Portrait
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in Westminster. There's also evidence of hearing tutors who spread information about deaf communication, particularly fingerspelling. It's very likely that some of the deaf people in London were exchanging signs and refining the methods of communication that were available in print.

Signing in practice

Without a formalised language like BSL, deaf people who used signs in the 17th century mostly used what is now called 'home sign' – these are gestures often developed by deaf children to communicate with their families. Though these aren't classed as full languages like BSL, they can be complex.

Very few people wrote about the content of signed conversations in any detail, let alone what the signs actually looked like. You can read one early account of a [marriage ceremony from 1576 using signs here](#).

Fingerspelling

An element of modern BSL, fingerspelling has roots in alphabets that were devised and printed in the 17th century. Though many of the signs have changed, some aspects of BSL, such as using the tips of the fingers to sign vowels, are found in several 17th-century alphabets.

Not all of the fingerspelling alphabets published in the 17th century were practical for everyday communication. Some were intended as secret ways for hearing people to talk to one another rather than a means of communication for deaf people.

In 1698, a pamphlet called *Digiti-Lingua* (finger-language) was published. This contained the first alphabets created by someone who used fingerspelling as their means of communication. The alphabet's anonymous author described themselves as 'a person who has conversed no other ways above nine years', so they were likely deaf or had lost the ability to speak. *Digiti-Lingua* has multiple signs in common with BSL fingerspelling.



The anonymously published *Digiti-Lingua*, 1698.
(c) British Library Board (1034.b.74, plate between pp. 18-99)

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Signs in the comic

As there's very little direct evidence of the signs deaf people were using in their daily life in the 1660s, the signs in the comic aren't intended as literal depictions of signs in use.

Jane Gentleman's admiration of Pepys's wig is based on John Bulwer's work *Chirologia* (1644), which showed 'natural' gestures. Bulwer's interest in gestures led to him researching and writing further on deaf communication.

The deaf boy is shown signing the words for 'fire' and 'king'. Both of these are BSL signs. 'Fire' dates back to at least 1895, appearing in a magazine, *Our Monthly Church Messenger to the Deaf*. In sign languages around the world today, the signs for 'fire' are often iconic signs, representing the movement of flames or smoke. It's therefore quite likely that when the deaf boy signed 'fire' in 1666, he used an iconic sign that either he or an acquaintance had invented.

'King' goes back to around 1888, where it appears in Henry Ash's *Guide to Chirology*.

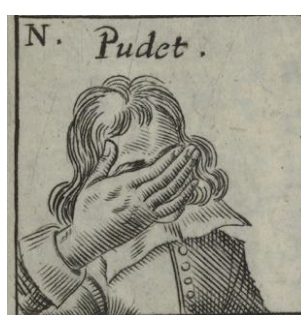
Fram Gawdy's sign to George Freeman that he is 'ashamed' of his clothes is also a gesture from Bulwer's *Chirologia* (1644). A modern BSL sign for 'ashamed' is similar.



'I admire', Bulwer, *Chirologia* (1644), p. 151, courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.



Queen/King, Ash, *Guide to Chirology* (c.1888), p.6.



'He is ashamed', Bulwer, *Chirologia* (1644), p. 155, courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

People in the comic

Jane Gentleman (b. 1642)

Jane worked as a chambermaid for Samuel Pepys's wife Elizabeth in 1663-1664. A chambermaid looked after her mistress, tended to her clothes and kept her company. This meant Jane was of a higher status than other maids in the house.

When he employed Jane, Pepys noted in his diary that she was 'thick of hearing' (hard of hearing) and worried that this 'may be a trouble' in her work (31 Aug. 1663). However, she stayed for a year, which was a long time for one of the family's servants! Pepys mentioned that Jane's hearing was worse at some times than at others. Jane communicated through speech.



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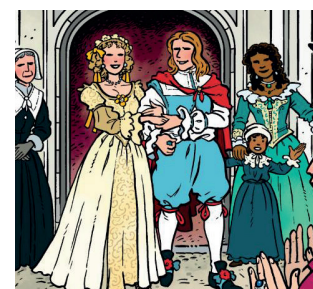
When Pepys tried a wig for the first time, he asked Jane and Bess the cookmaid for their opinion before he went out in it. Getting a wig had meant that Pepys had shaved off his hair. Pepys wrote 'they conclude it to become me, though Jane was mightily troubled for my parting with my own hair and so was Besse' (3 Nov. 1663). They told him that the wig suited him, but clearly had some reservations. Telling your employer that you didn't like his expensive new wig would have been a difficult conversation, especially when his newly shaven head meant he had no choice but to wear it!



Pepys also mentions a time when Jane and Bess went shopping in Fleet Street, coming home 'in a great fright' after narrowly avoiding being hit by a coach. Pepys wrote that Jane 'told the story like a fool and a dissembling fanatic' (29 Feb. 1664). This was likely a complaint about her dramatic and religious interpretation of the events rather than her ability to speak, as he didn't approve of puritan 'fanatics'.



When Jane left the household in 1664, she seems to have gone to live in Westminster, where she had relatives. Pepys later heard that she and Bess had been gossiping about him and Elizabeth, showing that she had stayed in touch with her friend. Jane survived both the plague and the Great Fire, and in 1669 she married a man named William Dolbey. Though we don't know what happened to her next, being married meant she'd be able to run her own household and, probably, employ a maid of her own.



The Deaf Boy (real name unknown)

Pepys's diary entry on 9 November 1666 provides the only direct information we have on this boy. The entry is given below, and you can see a photo of it in the image pack.

Piecing this together with other clues, we can deduce that the boy was working as a servant in Westminster or Covent Garden. Pepys refers to him as 'the Dumb boy', meaning 'mute'. Although Pepys calls him a 'boy', clues point to him being a teenager or even in his early twenties. He's depicted younger in the comic to suit younger readers.



The boy signed fluently and was understood by people outside of his family. The signs he used were a form of home sign. It is possible that it involved some fingerspelling but, if so, it is surprising that John Downing didn't explain that to Pepys.

Pepys met the boy at a party held at the home of Elizabeth and James Pearse, friends of his in Covent Garden. Pepys says that other people understood signing ('they understood but I could not') and that the boy was 'mightily acquainted' in the house. James Pearse was a surgeon and, like Pepys, a member of the Royal Society. Some members of the Royal Society had been working on signs and teaching deaf pupils to speak, so there was an "intellectual" incentive for people in these circles to be interested in signing, as well as a practical one.



At the party, the boy mostly signed with Captain John Downing (who is sometimes wrongly identified in modern sources as George Downing). John Downing was part of the King's Foot Guard, worked in Westminster and lived in Covent Garden. The boy probably worked for or with

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Downing. The boy arrived to report on a huge fire at Whitehall Palace. Meanwhile, there were troops in the streets, ready to fight the fire and deal with any troublemakers. This was only a few months after the Great Fire, and people panicked, fearing a repeat. Downing, a soldier, apparently decided to stay at the party anyway!

Pepys was fascinated by their signed conversation. He had hired a coach to get to the party and wanted it to stay and take him home. Pepys took this opportunity to test the boy's understanding and learn more about signing. He had Downing sign to the boy to steal a coach seat so the coach wouldn't leave. The boy passed the test with flying colours! Not only did he understand his task and the reason for it, he improvised, pretending to sleep in the coach and stopping it leaving until he was chased away. When the boy recounted all this, Pepys was impressed by his intelligence and resourcefulness, calling him a 'cunning rogue'.

Pepys wrote up events in his diary in shorthand (using symbols). A few words, often names, are written out in standard English and these are shown in bold in the text below. For Pepys, the fact the boy was 'Dumb' was his defining characteristic – no name was recorded.

Pepys's Diary, 9 November 1666:

'By and by comes news that the fire is **slackened**; so then we were a little cheered up again, and to supper and pretty merry. But above all, there comes in that **Dumb** boy that I knew in **Oliver's** [ie Oliver Cromwell's] time, who is mightily acquainted here and with **Downing**; and he made strange signs of the fire, and how the King was abroad [ie not at the palace], and many things they understood but I could not – which I wondering at, and discoursing with **D**[owning] about it, "Why," says [he], "it is only a little use, and you will understand him and make him understand you, with as much ease as may be." So I prayed him to tell him that I was afeared that my coach would be gone, and that he should go down and steal one of the seats out of the coach and keep it, and that would make the coach man to stay. He did this, so that the **Dumb** boy did go down, and like a cunning rogue went into the coach, pretending to sleep; and by and by fell to his work, but finds the seats nailed to the coach; so he did all he could, but could not do it; however, stayed there and stayed the coach, till the coachman's patience was quite spent, and beat the dumb boy by force, and so went away. So the **Dumb** boy came up and told him all the story, which they below [ie people downstairs] did see all that passed and knew it to be true.'



'replacing 'bid him by signs go down' – this tells us the boy was certainly deaf, as Downing needed to sign to be understood.

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Framlingham Gawdy (mid-1640s-1673) and John Gawdy (1639-1709)

Framlingham (known to his family as 'Fram') and John (called Jack) were deaf brothers, born into a wealthy family in West Harling, Norfolk. Both spent time in London training to be painters in the 1660s, living in and around Covent Garden.

John and Fram were probably taught as boys by John Cressener, the vicar of West Harling. Both of them learned to sign, and almost certainly to fingerspell, as both could write.

Fram came to London in 1663, and lived there for much of the 1660s. Part of this time was spent in the household of artist Remigius Van Leemput. This was a few doors down from the Pearses' home, so there's a good chance he and the deaf boy may have known of each other or even met.

Fram's main tutor was George Freeman, who specialised in history painting and understood Fram's signs. Fram was also taught by Sir Peter Lely, a famous court painter with a large studio in Covent Garden. Both Fram and Freeman wrote to Fram's relatives about his activities in London.

Fram wanted to be seen as a fashionable gentleman. In February 1665, George Freeman wrote that Fram was 'discontented that had not black clothes for he mad[e] signs that the Court was in mo[u]rning and that he was ashamed to goe see his friends in his old ones'. This scene is illustrated in the comic.

Fram sent gifts like gloves and chocolate home to his brother John in Norfolk. Chocolate was an exciting new drink in 1660s England, usually imported from Central America or Spain. It came as a solid block and was mixed with water to make hot chocolate. In October 1667, Fram wrote to John to say he'd had trouble finding suitably fitting gloves for him (this may have been to make signing easier, rather than just for fashion's sake). Fram also promised to send chocolate when he could find 'any that was good' – evidently both were fussy about getting the best recipe. There's a photo of this letter in the image pack.

Fram was often ill. He wasn't living in London during the Great Fire, having gone to recover in the country. He became seriously ill in the early 1670s, and wrote his will in 1672. Historian Peter Jackson notes that this is the first will known to be written by someone born deaf and certified as such. As deaf people weren't often allowed to make legal decisions, Fram had the will specially witnessed to ensure it couldn't be contested. He left money to John and other relatives. Fram died in 1673, and none of his paintings are known to survive.

Fram's older brother John came to London around 1660 to study painting with Peter Lely. However, after his two hearing brothers died in 1661, John became the family's heir and he returned to Norfolk. He married a gentlewoman named Anne de Grey, and then took over the estate after his father's death in 1669. Two of his paintings – one of himself and one of his wife – are thought to survive. His self-portrait is now owned by the British Deaf History Society, you can find a copy in your image pack.



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Other people in the comic

Joan (or Joanna) Stewart (c. 1428-c. 1498) was a daughter of King James I of Scotland. She spent time at the French court and later married the Earl of Morton. She died before 1498, when a tomb was set up for her and her husband. Though it is badly damaged, this is a very early image of a deaf person in Scotland. A family document from 1562 refers to her as 'muta domina', 'the mute lady'.



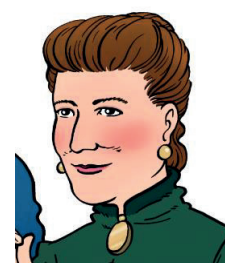
Kanthirava Narasaraja Wodeyar II (1672-1714) was the King of Mysore in India from 1704 until his death. He was prelingually deaf and succeeded his father as ruler when he was in his 30s. Mysore was prosperous during his reign.



John Goodricke (1764-1786) was a British astronomer. He was prelingually deaf and went to Thomas Braidwood's Academy for the Deaf and Dumb in Edinburgh. As a teenager in York, he started observing the stars. His discoveries earned him the Royal Society's highest award.



Laura Redden Searing (1839-1923) was an American journalist and poet. She became deaf when she was 12 and went to the Missouri School for the Deaf, where she learned sign language. She worked as a journalist supporting the Union cause during the American Civil War, and later campaigned for women's rights.



Samuel Pepys (pronounced 'Peeps'; 1633-1703) was a naval administrator who kept a detailed diary of life in London between 1660 and 1669. He wrote in shorthand to hide his diary from prying eyes. For more information visit fireoflondon.org.uk



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Further reading and watching

Deaf History, Europe – website with a timeline, biographies and images.

'Deaf History: John Goodricke', *BSL Zone* – a 5-minute video in BSL about Goodricke; other videos about historical deaf figures too.

History of British Sign Language, UCL – timelines, films and more, with BSL interpretation.

Oates, Rosamund, 'Sign of the Times', *History Today*, 72:11 (November 2022) – useful summary of the history of oralism, exclusion and sign language).

Oates, Rosamund, 'The "Silent Study of Art": The Deaf Artists of the Renaissance', *History Extra* - includes more on the Gawdy brothers.

Spreadingthesign.com – compare how words are signed in sign languages from around the world.

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