

**A Service to  
Celebrate the Bicentenary  
of  
Louis Braille  
1809-1852**

**St Martin-in-the-Fields,  
Trafalgar Square, London**

**21<sup>st</sup> March 2009  
at noon**

## Programme

### **Welcome**

We warmly welcome you to this service – as far as we know, the first all-braille service – in which we celebrate the short life and amazing achievements of Louis Braille. Though born in obscurity and suffering all his life from chronic ill health, his legacy continues to have a dramatic, positive and unique influence on the quality of life enjoyed by blind people around the world.

### **The Braille Legacy**

For many blind people, braille is a vital lifeline to the big, wide world of knowledge and communication. Former British Home Secretary David Blunkett, speaking a few weeks ago, described the braille system as ‘a liberator for me and thousands of blind men and women like me.’ Blunkett said he was thankful to Louis Braille for ‘the ingenuity, the confidence and the determination that ensured that others like him sought and gained independence, equality and dignity.’ Constantly revitalised through technological innovation, braille continues to bring access to education, employment, religion and much else in our information age.

## **Louis Braille**

Two hundred years ago, on a January day in 1809, a weak and sickly fourth child was born to a poor harness maker and his wife in the town of Coupvray, 25 miles east of Paris. He was baptised at four days old for fear of an early death. He survived babyhood – but after a tragic accident in his father’s workshop at the age of three followed by an infection, the child was blind by the age of five. Not an auspicious start in life – yet Louis Braille lived to become known and thanked worldwide as the inventor of a practical and convenient system for reading and writing by blind people. His alphabet of embossed dots read by the fingertips has been adapted into almost every known language. After completing his reading and writing system, he went on to develop notation for mathematics and music. He was a fine pianist and accomplished organist, and played in many churches and cathedrals in and around Paris.

Sadly, his invention of the braille alphabet went largely unrecognised during his lifetime. He died of tuberculosis at the age of just 43. His system was not officially recognised in France until two years after his death. After a further four years, an American school began to use braille but it took another 30 years before it became widespread in schools for blind children in Europe. On the centenary of his death in 1952 his body was re-interred from the humble plot in Coupvray to the Panthéon in Paris, the famous burial place for French heroes.

Louis Braille’s character was apparently as remarkable as his achievements. It seems likely that he was a young man of deep Christian faith, perhaps dating from his early and significant relationship with his village priest. Jean Roblin wrote in his book *Louis Braille* (RNIB publication 1960): ‘He radiated happiness and joy ... Despite his blindness, despite continual ill health, despite the ill will of others which delayed the recognition of his work, in the face of adversity and of accumulated disappointment, he remained kindly, cheerful and faithful to his friends and to his ideal ... To those around him he brought material and spiritual aid with apostolic fervour and with a zeal that was saintly in its discretion.’

Today, visitors to the stone house in Coupvray where Louis Braille was born and grew up, now a museum, can read on the plaque outside:

*He opened the doors of knowledge to all those who cannot see.*

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*We respectfully request that you refrain from taking photographs or making any recording during this service of worship.*

## Order of Service

Before the service, the bells of St Martin-in-the-Fields will be rung in honour of Sir John Wall, former chairman of RNIB, who died on December 1, 2008. Sir John was blind from childhood. He became a distinguished lawyer and judge. He took an interest in the planning of this service and it was his wish that bells should be rung.

**From noon:**

**Welcome from St Martin-in-the-Fields:** Revd. Richard Carter

**Congregational hymn:** Now thank we all our God (Nun Danket)

**Reflection on the life of Louis Braille:** Dr Mike Townsend

**Prayers of thanksgiving:** led by David Tinkler and Norman Octon

**Organ music:** Roger Firman will play François Couperin (1668-1733) from Messe pour les Paroisses: Plein chant du premier Kyrie, en Taille; Fugue sur les jeux d'anches, 2.me Couplet.

**Braille – past, present and future:** Kate Osborne

**Reading from braille:** Selected verses from John chapter 9 (NRSV), read by Paul Questier and Rona Gibb

*The whole of John chapter 9 is devoted to the story of a blind man.*

**Choral music:** Cantique de Jean Racine – sung in French by a choir of blind and partially sighted singers convened specially to celebrate and give thanks for Louis Braille's unique contribution to blind musicians. This work was written by the 19-year-old composer Gabriel Fauré in 1864-5 in his final year at music college. The text, 'Verbe égal au Très-Haut', a paraphrase of a hymn for matins written by the seventeenth century dramatist and poet Jean Racine, is included here in French and then below in English. The accompanist is Peter Rossiter.

**Prayers:** led by Margaret Wilson-Hinds and Ife Akintunde

**God has a plan for you:** sung by Marilyn Baker

**Congregational hymn:** Brother, sister, let me serve you (accompanied on the piano by Marilyn Baker)

**Message:** The Revd. Helen Patten

**Congregational hymn:** Be thou my vision

**Closing prayer:** Father Cyril Axelrod

**Blessing:** Revd. Richard Carter

**Organ Music:** David Aprahamian Liddle will play Louis Vierne (1870-1937) Final from Organ Symphony No.6 Op. 59. Vierne, a renowned French organist and composer, was born almost completely blind due to congenital cataracts. He became principal organist at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris from 1900 until his death in 1937 – his death actually taking place at the console of that organ as he was giving his 1750<sup>th</sup> recital.

*A collection will be taken up during this music for distribution by Torch Trust to three charities, all of which have involvement with braille:*

- **Compass Braille** – transcription and production of braille Bibles in many languages  
[www.compassbraille.org](http://www.compassbraille.org)
- **La Cause** – Paris-based Christian organisation with a French language braille lending library  
[www.lacause.org](http://www.lacause.org)
- **ClearVision** – UK postal lending library of children's books including those with braille on transparent interleaving sheets.  
[www.clearvisionproject.org](http://www.clearvisionproject.org)

*If you would like to donate by cheque, please make it payable to Torch Trust; Gift Aid envelopes are available in the pews.*

## After the service

Following the service, refreshments will be available in St Martin's Hall below the church. Music on the viola will be provided by blind soloist Takashi Kikuchi. You are invited to browse at the displays of the work of a number of organisations serving blind people, especially in the provision of braille.

### For guide dogs

A guide dog spending run is provided outside the rear of the church, courtesy of The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

## Notes on participants

### Dr Mike Townsend

Dr Mike Townsend is a consultant in access technology involved in a number of organisations serving blind people. He is technical director and trustee of Torch Trust; a trustee of The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and the RNIB; and president of the British Computer Association of the Blind – roles which not only keep him busy but keep him travelling extensively in the UK and overseas. He is also a preacher, Bible teacher and deacon in his local Baptist church.

### David Tinkler

David Tinkler became totally blind at the age of 10 and began to learn braille early in 1949. After education and training at the Royal Normal College for the Blind in Shrewsbury (now RNC in

Hereford), he followed a secretarial career until early retirement in 1999. David is currently chairman of the Association of Blind Catholics. He has worked for many years for understanding and unity among Christians. He is a lay member of the Dominican Order. David lives in Kettering with his guide dog Ivan.

### **Norman Octon**

Blind from birth, Norman received progressive introduction to Braille at school. Later, with the invention of soft braille displays, he learned computing and became a programmer for several years. Currently, he works for RNIB in the Innovation Unit, dealing with the creation of new products and services, making sure that they are usable and accessible to blind people.

### **Roger Firman**

Roger Firman is an organist and chief executive of *Golden Chord*, a business dedicated to providing transcription services for music and music-related materials in braille. As well as playing the work by François Couperin, Roger will share in the accompaniment for the hymns.

### **Kate Osborne**

Kate Osborne is a music graduate who teaches and performs as a flautist. She was a recent runner-up in the British Flute Society adult competition. Braille is the medium she uses to memorise and subsequently teach music at all levels. Kate is married to Peter, RNIB's Chief Braille Officer.

### **Paul Questier**

Blind from the age of three, Paul was educated at New College Worcester. After university, he practised as a solicitor for 40 years. Paul is married, with two adult children. He is a founder member of the Association of Blind Catholics and has been its honorary secretary since 1975. Paul has been awarded a papal knighthood for services to the Catholic Church.

### **Rona Gibb**

Rona worked as a teacher of infants and then on the staff of Torch Trust. After marrying Tony, the couple spent time in India from 1978 to 1986 as Christian workers, where they saw how little access there was to Christian literature for blind people. They founded Compass Braille in 1990, which now produces braille Bibles and Christian literature in over 40 languages for other countries. Although officially retired, Rona maintains links with India and Compass Braille and was recently appointed a trustee of Torch Trust.

### **Margaret Wilson-Hinds**

Both blind since birth, Margaret and her husband Roger ran a disability training company, and won a government contract to teach blind people to use computers. Finding that typical software packages were beyond the reach financially of most of the blind community, they became determined to find an alternative. Their free 'Thunder' talking software ([www.screenreader.net](http://www.screenreader.net)) is now available in English, French, Italian, German, Slovak and Estonian.

### **Ife Akintunde**

Ife Akintunde was born in Nigeria and studied at the Pacelli School for Blind Children in Lagos. After completing a law degree, he came to England where he completed a master's degree and doctorate in international relations. Since then he has worked with a number of charities, including Torch Trust, the XN Foundation, the Sunbeams Music Trust, Diversity FM, Whirlwind Theatre and the National Association of the Blind in Nigeria.

### **Marilyn Baker**

Marilyn Baker's ministry of singing and songwriting includes teaching and prayer, often in the context of concerts. She travels extensively throughout the world. She is a popular figure at Spring Harvest and other Christian conference events. Marilyn often leads church weekends or workshops and also ministers in care homes and prisons. Marilyn has been involved in the work of Torch Trust for many years and is currently chair of trustees as well as being the presenter of Torch Trust's radio programme which is broadcast at 4pm on Sundays on Premier Christian Radio.

### **Revd Helen Patten**

After teaching in mainstream schools for 11 years, Helen was ordained as a minister in the Church of England. She has served in parishes in Kent, Derbyshire and Sussex. The last five and a half years of her full-time ministry was spent as chaplain of the hospice in Hastings, Kent. Helen serves on the committee of the Guild of Church Brailleists.

### **Father Cyril Axelrod**

Father Cyril Axelrod, born in South Africa, is a deafblind priest who has inspired many thousands of people to overcome their disabilities. He achieved a degree in philosophy and history at the only Catholic university for deaf people in America and later began to go blind as a result of eye disease. In 1988 he moved to China to set up schools for deaf people but by 1999 his sight had deteriorated and he went to the Deafblind Centre in Peterborough for help. Now involved in the charity Deafblind UK, Father Axelrod receives letters and emails from disabled people around the world.

### **David Aprahamian Liddle**

David Liddle is organist of St Barnabas, Pimlico. He was educated at New College Worcester and St John's College, Cambridge, before embarking on an international career as a concert organist and composer. A distinguished and popular guest artist, David has performed at most of the major venues in the UK and overseas including the Royal Albert Hall, Royal Festival Hall, York Minster, Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral and Notre-Dame de Paris. He has made many tours of America as a recitalist and lecturer. As well as playing the work by Louis Vierne, David will share in the accompaniment for the hymns.

## Participating organisations

### **Association of Blind Catholics**

The ABC was founded in 1961 to give blind and partially-sighted Catholics and other interested Christians a closer link with the Church and with each other.

Web: [www.blindcatholics.org.uk](http://www.blindcatholics.org.uk)

Email: [contact@blindcatholics.org.uk](mailto:contact@blindcatholics.org.uk)

### **Churches Together in England**

Churches Together in England is a national body set up in 1990 to promote cooperation, common witness and service.

Web: [www.churches-together.net](http://www.churches-together.net)

Telephone: 020 7529 8131

### **Guild of Church Brailleists**

The Guild of Church Braillists aims to advance the Christian religion by transcribing Christian literature into braille. Members work closely with the RNIB National Library Service and also supply material at the request of individuals or groups.

Web: [www.gocb.org](http://www.gocb.org)

Email: [info@gocb.org](mailto:info@gocb.org)

### **Royal National Institute of Blind People**

The RNIB is the UK's leading charity offering information, support and advice to over two million people with sight loss. The organisation provides braille and Talking Books, runs a number of practical support projects, campaigns to eliminate avoidable sight loss and supports research into eye disease.

Web: [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

Telephone: 020 7388 1266

### **St Martin-in-the Fields**

St Martin-in-the-Fields is an historic landmark of central London with a reputation for innovation in community involvement and practical Christian caring. It's known for its welcoming atmosphere, an award-winning café and popular classical and jazz concerts. It holds regular services in English, Cantonese and Mandarin. It's also known for the charitable giving of the Vicar's Relief Fund, funded solely by donations made in response to the BBC Radio 4 Appeal. The St Martin's Christmas Appeal has been broadcast by the BBC every year since 1927.

Web: [www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org](http://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org)

Telephone: 020 7766 1100

### **Torch Trust**

Torch Trust is a Christian organisation serving blind and partially sighted people through the production of braille, large print and audio materials. It also supports 130 Fellowship Groups across the UK and provides holidays for people with sight loss. Torch Trust also runs literature and support work for blind people in other countries, notably Malawi.

Web: [www.torchtrust.org](http://www.torchtrust.org)

Telephone: 01858 438260

### **Does your church have foursight?**

Have you thought about what your church is doing to ensure full inclusion of blind and partially sighted people? ***Foursight for the church*** is the name of Torch Trust's initiative to create awareness of those with sight loss in the church context and facilitate inclusivity. Go to [www.foursight.org.uk](http://www.foursight.org.uk)

## **Acknowledgements**

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