

UKAAF webinar, 4 October 2022

James Bowden in conversation Transcript

Roger Firman

Welcome to this series of UKAAF 2022 webinars. My name is Roger Firman, I'm glad you have been able to join us today.

We are really pleased to introduce our guest, James Bowden, who is Braille Technical Officer at RNIB. Welcome James, very glad you could join us.

James Bowden

Thank you Roger, good to be here.

Roger

Before we come to the area of the International Council on English Braille, can you recall your introduction to braille and how significant was this for you at that time?

James

Well, it is a very interesting story. I started my education in a mainstream school and was introduced to braille at the age of six or seven, and although it was called inclusive education, I was given individual

lessons, now this is a situation which some people will be familiar with. The teacher who was teaching me braille – it was new to her as well – I think we used the Braille Primer as it was called then. I'm pleased to say that afterwards she became a Qualified Teacher of the Visually Impaired (QTVI) and worked in the next county for a number of years so I couldn't have put her off too much!

I then went to a special school at the age of seven already knowing Grade 2 braille and all its contractions, which was a great help. From that time onwards, I did all my education in braille.

One thing which I noted, is that as you progress in education, you are introduced to more subjects and more advanced topics in subjects, you learn more symbols and signs. I also learned the braille music code, maths, and various foreign languages. Unlike ordinary English where you have to learn all the signs in order to be able to read anything, with these technical codes you learned them a bit at a time as needed. I think that is quite a big difference between ordinary English and technical subjects. For example, you don't have to learn some complex mathematical symbols if you are not studying advanced mathematics.

I guess I have always been fascinated by codes, and I remember an occasion when an older student in my secondary school took me into his classroom, which was a great honour to be invited, and he dictated to me a list of curious mathematical abbreviations which were in use at that time, they're no longer in use, they went out sometime in the '80s, but there were things like "e-d" sign "d" for a triangle, "e-d" sign "q" for a square, these were fascinating to me.

You can imagine my reaction when I heard there was a Grade 3 braille code. It took me a long time to find out about it but someone from RNIB recorded, dictated onto an old cassette tape all the extra contractions involved in Grade 3. It came into its own, believe it or not, when I went to Australia for the first time to visit relatives. I thought this is not a holiday I'll be able to repeat every other week so it is quite important that I keep a record. I didn't have a machine costing thousands of pounds, I didn't

even have an audio recording machine, all I had was a handframe, eighteen-cells to a line, eight lines to a page. I didn't mind taking that because if it got lost, it wasn't hugely expensive to replace. I used it writing one page per day and it was brilliant.

The other thing to say is that I've always been interested in computing certainly in my Secondary School. Back at the time, there was an official braille translation program but I have no idea what it was called, but it was only limited access by staff who needed it, with one braille embosser. I decided to try and write a braille translation program using a word processor, I used the search and replace to convert print to braille. It took about fifteen minutes to process around twenty braille pages. It wasn't the fastest, and some of the results were, shall we say, interesting.

Roger

Clearly braille has, and does play a significant part in your life. I wonder if we could jump forward – and I know it is a considerable jump - could you tell us about your role at RNIB?

James

I joined RNIB in late 2014 and it was during the change-over to Unified English Braille in the UK. My role included some of the updates to the braille learning courses and answering questions of which there were many.

There was also the introduction of the Orbit Reader, the little lower-cost braille display and testing it. When we launched it, I thought it was not a good idea to send out a lovely little braille reading machine with nothing to read. We prepared an SD card with about twenty books to read. Leaping forward to 2020 when the world changed owing to the pandemic and RNIB's physical braille library was closed, I was engaged on making many more books available and we launched a card with 700 books, in 2021 we did one with 2,000 books, and this year there will be a bigger one, hopefully.

I am also involved in testing various tactile and braille products and there are software projects. I have been involved in writing braille translation programs, improving the Liblouis braille translation system with its Unified English Braille output, and testing braille music translation programs.

That leads me onto standards organisations such as UKAAF and ICEB.

Roger

How did you get involved with UKAAF?

James

I had obviously heard of the Braille Authority of the United Kingdom (BAUK). My previous job before RNIB was involved in programming speech synthesisers and I had copies of the old rule books. The firm I worked for was involved with DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System). In 2010, the International Council on English Braille held their mid-term meeting in Birmingham and the firm I worked for heard of this, they asked me if I would like to go? I live in Worcester and Birmingham is not far from Worcester so I went. That was my first introduction to the international world of braille and it was a really interesting day meeting other people who were passionate about braille. It was during the switch-over in lots of countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa, USA, UK, and Nigeria, all thinking about switching over to using UEB. It was very interesting how different countries were looking at this and how they were handling it. Some had big formal complicated five-year implementation plans. Some of the teachers said when they go to this class I have to teach the old code, when I go to this class I have to teach the new code, why don't we just all switch, so they did. Back in that time there were other countries who were still unsure.

The person who impressed me the most was the lady from Nigeria. She said that in my country we are just happy to have braille. We get it from all sorts of places, the USA, the UK, and Australia. The children cope

well with whatever we throw at them. She then described a class in Nigeria and they are sharing – I was expecting her to complete the sentence by saying they are sharing a Perkins – she said they share a handframe. That brings it down to earth.

By the end of that day, they invited me to the meal afterwards and it was great to meet some of the international people and I was asked if I would consider being part of one of the UK Association for Accessible Formats Braille Groups? UKAAF had taken over from BAUK in I think 2009 and that request became, would I like to lead one of the Braille Groups, and that as they say, the rest is history, and I had a lot to learn.

Roger

Sometimes life is a bit like that isn't it. Moving forward you became more involved with the International Council on English Braille; can you give a brief history of the organisation?

James

It is an interesting history beginning quite a long time ago in the '80s and '90s. Apparently, Dr Abraham Nemeth, and Tim Cranmer of fame of the US Nemeth code, and the Cranmer tactile abacus wrote a memo to the Braille Authority of North America (BANA) saying we really need to do something about our braille code because there are so many ways of writing the same thing. At the time, there were four ways of writing the dollar sign. And that sparked interest in revising the braille code bringing it into a unified standard form. In 1993, the International Council on English Braille was formed and there were a number of committees trying to sort out the braille code with representatives from the countries mentioned earlier.

I understand that in 1982 there was a conference discussing the differences between the US and UK braille codes. The goal was to get the British to look at using capitals, not used at that time, and to try to get the Americans to use a few more contractions. In 2004 in Canada,

the new Unified English Braille Code was declared “fit for use, sufficiently complete.”

In 2005, South Africa, Australia, Nigeria, and New Zealand, adopted it. Canada adopted it in 2009 and the UK in 2011, and the USA where it all started, in 2012. I think you can say that 2016 was the year when UEB was fully implemented.

Every four years ICEB meets in person to talk about all things braille. 2004 Canada, 2008 Melbourne, 2012, South Africa, 2016 USA, and 2020 should have been London, except we were all online.

The main purpose of ICEB is to make and maintain the code. There are all sorts of sub-committees research, music, technology, technical codes, code maintenance is the main thing ICEB does.

Roger

Going forward, what do you see as future challenges?

James

It is a really good question and a very interesting one. We are going to have a focus on the technical aspects of braille and would like to have more research-based decisions rather than I think it should be done like that, or I like it that way. Braille develops and so does print. The key question is does braille keep up with print? There are new print signs and symbols, even new ways of using these symbols. I'll give two examples, the hashtag, and the imoji, those little pretty icons that people who write text messages might well put on to show they're angry, or to show they're not angry, or to try and make you understand the meaning of their text. How do you represent these things in braille? There currently isn't a way, but there's definitely a discussion to be had in the future about that.

Roger

as obviously also the development of technology to reproduce these aspects on braille displays.

James

Now braille displays, that's another really interesting area. So, braille displays have been around for a number of years now. But with the introduction of the Orbit Reader and the Canute, there's a new generation, if I might say, of lower-cost braille displays. They're not 50P, nor anything like that still, but they are cheaper than the traditional ones which cost £3,000 or £4,000 at the time. Braille technology is still developing, and the Canute was the first multiline display. Orbit Research are hoping to launch a multiline braille display. So I believe is HumanWare and so there is a whole new raft of braille technology on the horizon and it's great to see, but it presents its own interesting challenges. How can you best use all these wonderful new lines of braille that you've got?

Can we develop a new braille file format that will give you the things we're used to in screen readers, like jumping to the next heading or clicking a link in a web document? Can we do that on a braille display?

There's all sorts of exciting projects in that area too.

Roger

How do you see all this activity fitting into the broader world scene of braille, not just in the ICEB countries, but more globally?

Absolutely. So ICEB is very much conscious that we are English braille, and we represent countries whose main language is English. But there are very many other countries in the world, and there is an organisation called the World Blind Union, which is a global organisation. I believe it's attached to the United Nations, which is good.

There is the European Blind Union, which is great, and there's also, hopefully going to get back on its feet soon, The World Braille Council, which has now got a Chair and it's polling for people who might be

interested in joining their work. And ICEB will be represented on the World Braille Council, along with organisations such as ICEVI, which is the International Council for the Education of Visually Impaired. So we keep our ears to the ground and look forward to working collaboratively with these international organisations.

Now we do at ICEB get enquiries from all over the world and we do pass them on to the organisations who would be best to deal with them. So, for example, if we had an enquiry from Spain we would pass it on to ONCE.

We had one recently from Thailand and Laos. Really interesting. They want help with Liblouis to make a braille table for their languages. Really interesting enquiry. But ICEB is not the country to deal with that request, but we can point people in the right direction to help.

Roger

Indeed. And the more that the world scene can be brought together, it's going to benefit people who use braille in different ways on many different devices.

James

Absolutely. I think this is a really exciting time for braille. I've said it before, we've got new braille codes, we've got new braille devices and the third one is new ways of delivering braille. I'm thinking, for example of being able to download your braille book as well as just ordering it in the post and so on. Yes, just download it. You can stick it on your braille display.

The one that impressed me a few years ago, I was told about a service that converts into braille music. And I thought, I'm going to try this. And I did, and ten minutes later I was actually sitting at the piano, starting to learn the piece, I was well impressed.

Roger

Sue, do we have any questions please?

Sue Day

We have one.

Is it easier or more difficult for children to receive braille tuition these days than, say, twenty or thirty years ago?

James

That's a really interesting question, and I have to say I don't actually know a definitive answer. So a lot of children these days - and I think it's actually about the same as twenty years ago - would receive their braille tuition in a mainstream school. The braille tuition is delivered by Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired, and they're given teaching assistants to help with that as well.

There are teaching resources available, such as some of the braille courses I mentioned earlier. There are also new devices and courses coming on the market all the time. For example, I saw a device a few years ago called Annie, made by Thinkerbell Labs, based in India, and they made a really interesting device where it had a couple of giant braille cells and a couple of ordinary sized braille cells. It had a braille keyboard on it and you could actually play braille learning games on it. Type letter "o", it's dots 1-3-5. Now spot the "o" in this word and etcetera, etcetera. It's really, interesting innovative stuff.

Roger

James, I'd like to thank you very much for spending your time with us and I'm sure that people will have found your responses extremely interesting, informative and fascinating.

I'd also like to thank Sue for helping behind-the-scenes with this webinar.

On the first of November we will be joined by Victoria Ward from New College, Worcester. The theme is going to be: Teaching and preparing for exams.

I'd like to thank you all for attending and until next time, goodbye from us all, goodbye.