



Bill Fawkes outside
the lovely
old manor house
that is now the school
for the deaf.

Their New

Music is the source of great pleasure to many people — whether it's for listening to or playing. But, as Syd Gillingham explains, it has opened the doors to a whole new way of life for the pupils of the Mary Hare Grammar School for Deaf Children.

THE school's music room was not very large, but it accommodated with apparent ease a baby grand piano in one corner, a drum kit, some 17 or 18 guitars propped up against one wall, shelf upon shelf of books and musical scores, several recorders and a dummy keyboard.

All of which left room for the eight girls — the school's recorder double quartet — to position themselves behind a clutter of rickety, spindly music stands so they could start their usual, weekly rehearsal.

A small slice of school life, perhaps familiar in most schools, in all aspects, that is, except one. For the quite unique exception at this school was that all eight girls were deaf. Two of them had only partial hearing, five were severely deaf and one, almost incredibly, was totally deaf.

I was at the Mary Hare Grammar

School for Deaf Children, near Newbury, in Berkshire.

It was Mary Hare, a teacher of the deaf, who led the way in establishing that the deaf are capable of higher education and, against all odds, she founded her school at Burgess Hill, in Sussex, in 1946.

It moved to Berkshire in 1950 when its 50 pupils took up residence in an old manor house which stands in beautiful and extensive parkland. Today the school has 190 pupils ranging in age from 11 to 18.

Over recent months there has also been a steady stream of visitors, from national and international organisations concerned with the welfare and education of the deaf, anxious to learn at first hand about the hitherto undreamed of achievement of deaf people being able to make, and appreciate, music.

The man responsible for all this



Pleased To Meet You ...

By SYD GILLINGHAM

Concentration from everyone during a practice.



Fawkes's work came from Susan Williams, 18 years old and now reading biology at Durham University.

She had played the recorder for six years, and the treble recorder in the double quartet.

"I can't hear the music at all," she told me, "but I think the rhythm has helped my speech. It also makes me feel I can do something. It gives me a sense of triumph over my deafness."

"What is nice about it is that we have proved the experts wrong. They thought that profoundly deaf people should be taught sign language rather than to speak."

"Now I can say to them, 'Well, look, I can play a musical instrument and I can speak as well!'"

About 70 per cent. of the children at the school have an average hearing loss of 80 decibels or more.

"That's a pretty severe handicap," Bill explained. He has been teaching deaf children for 20 years and has been at Mary Hare for 18 of them. "But when you get to a one hundred decibel loss then you are in a profoundly deaf situation."

"We don't use sign language here, but believe in normal communication. The children all wear hearing aids, they learn to lip read, and there is intensive speech training."

"The aim is for normality in the classroom and not a great deal of concession is made to deafness. Music has often been used before as an aid to improving speech, through its rhythms, but trying to get deaf children to make, and

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World Of Sound

is Bill Fawkes, assistant headmaster and history teacher, who is 50 years old and has five children of his own.

It was when his children grew into their teens and took an ever-increasing interest in pop music that he first became aware that the deaf children he was teaching could possibly have the opportunity to do the same.

"I got the idea," he told me, during a break in rehearsal, "that they might learn to play an instrument."

For Bill Fawkes, like Mary Hare before him, it was something of an uphill struggle and very much a case of treading new ground.

While the eight senior girls of the double quartet had been Mary Hare's undisputed "stars" — they played at London's Royal Festival Hall and met Prince Charles, and appeared on TV's "Nationwide" and "Pebble Mill" — upwards of 40 other pupils were learning to play musical instruments.



Bill with a group of his young "stars."

PERHAPS the most telling testimony of all to Bill

PLEASED TO MEET YOU . . .

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appreciate, music for its own sake was something quite new.

"When we first started here the noises they made were absolutely appalling! They all wanted to learn electric guitar, and get as much volume out of it as they could.

"I went along with this at first and let them get it out of their systems. Then, after they had learned six or seven chords, they wanted to refine the music so it sounded better.

"From that point, the quality improved, so we moved on to the recorders. I then began to get even wilder ideas and thought perhaps we could go further by getting children who had played the recorder before to actually play in a group together.

"Bit by bit I realised it was just possible. And it grew from there."

The double quartet's visit to the Royal Festival Hall was, as Bill Fawkes described it himself, "a bolt out of the blue."

It came about when Ann Rachlin, who founded the Beethoven Fund for deaf children to raise money for equipment needed to assist them in their education, heard of the Mary Hare music-makers.

She visited the school and was both surprised and delighted by what she saw and heard. So much so that she determined that the Beethoven Fund should also be used to buy musical instruments for deaf children.

It so happened that Ann Rachlin had arranged a special concert in aid of the fund, at the Royal Festival Hall with the Philharmonic Orchestra playing Beethoven.

The eight girls of the double quartet were invited to attend rehearsals the week before where they met members of the orchestra and played for conductor Lorin Maazel.

They attended the concert, too, and at the champagne reception afterwards played a four-part rendition of "Happy Birthday" for Lorin Maazel, whose birthday it was that day. It was here they met Prince Charles.

I FOUND it difficult to understand, I told Bill Fawkes, how severely deaf children could play and, more importantly perhaps, appreciate music.

"I don't fully understand myself what it is these children get from the music. A partially-hearing person can hear something, of course.

"As far as I can tell, those who have some residual hearing — and that means some eighty or ninety per cent. of deaf children — are hearing a distortion which they find sufficiently pleasing to want to go on performing or listening to.

If they hear a distortion of their distortion, they know they are playing a

wrong note. They're taught to use whatever hearing they have.

"This comes out particularly when they're playing music together. If someone isn't playing the right note, or isn't on the right rhythm, then you get the same sort of reaction you'd expect from hearing people.

"There are frustrations, of course there are. But one or two of the children have told me that if they feel sad they go into a corner and play.

"This is, I believe, a tremendous step forward. It's a release, another form of expression, which they need."

When did he realise that his experiment was beginning to work?

"About three years ago," he replied, "some two years after we'd started. We gave our first little public concert attended by a few local friends and parents who happened to be around.

"The local newspaper came along, and this was the first time we'd found ourselves in the public eye. This was when I began to dream that we could go on without setting any limit or target. The gates were open . . .

"They are still open. I haven't found that limit, although quite obviously we shall never have any professional musicians.

AFTER the first children left school, I did get curious as to whether or not they'd continue playing, and so I sent out a circular letter asking.

"I had the most interesting replies. One partially-hearing boy who learned the guitar here was singing and playing guitar in his local church. Another was teaching his flat-mate, a hearing boy, the guitar!

"Now we have pupils learning the drums, fourteen learning the piano, and others learning the guitar and recorder, and so on.

"Because of the success we've had, I'm trying to see what can be done with a group of profoundly deaf children.

"The biggest problem in teaching deaf children to play, say, a recorder, is breath control, but these six can now play a reasonably accurate scale."

I wondered if any of the severely deaf children ever showed a certain amount of despair in that they could play music yet hear little or none of it.

"They've never shown anything like despair," Bill told me. "What they have shown is delight in actually playing, and giving enjoyment to others."

Hilary Green, 16, from Littlehampton, in Sussex, who plays the guitar, the bass, treble and descant recorders and the flute, confirmed that viewpoint.

"I get a lot of pleasure out of playing," she said, "and I do so enjoy seeing other people getting pleasure out of it, too — and seeing people surprised that the deaf can make music!"

And what did Bill think the future held?

"Well, believe it or not, I'm reaching the point now where I'm impatiently saying to myself, 'Now, what can we do next?'

Obviously many challenges still lie ahead . . . □

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