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# A Brief History Of Disabled People's Self-Organisation

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Greater Manchester Coalition  
of Disabled People

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GMCDP

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## **About This Booklet**

Disabled people have been organising since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the British Deaf Association and National League of the Blind were the first two recorded organisations “of” disabled people to form.

“Of” means a group or organisation that is run and controlled by disabled people. This is different to organisations “for” disabled people, which are run by non-disabled people to “provide for” disabled people.

This booklet shows some of the highlights of the emergence of a Disabled People’s Movement in the UK. It can only give a flavour of how disabled people have come together, and what we have campaigned for. Much other work has been done by many disabled people and our allies. This has been “in the background” to prepare for the direct action shown here, and also through other ways of lobbying, for example, influencing government policy through attending consultation meetings or undertaking academic research.

## Acknowledgements

GMCDP would like to thank those people who donated photographs to the GMCDP Disabled people's Archive and History Project. Most of the photos used in this booklet have come from this Archive or from openly available internet sources.

We would also like to thank those people who gave permission for GMCDP to use photos in which they are clearly identifiable, and trust that those people we have not been able to identify and ask permission of, will contact us to give their agreement.

The images used which are specifically copyrighted are as follows:

Picture 1: "Justice Not Charity" march, 1920 © National League of the Blind and Disabled.

Picture 3: Invacar – thanks to:

<http://www.bubblecars.com/sales.htm>

We acknowledge the work of Linda Marsh in putting this booklet together, and Brian Hilton who identified photographs to use.

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# Early Days

Many people do not realise that disabled people have led the way for around 100 years in campaigning for rights.

Since the first recorded organisation of disabled people formed in 1890 (British Deaf Association), disabled people have grown into a strong campaigning force.

Alongside the “action” of campaigning on the streets and lobbying in Council Chambers or the Houses of Parliament, there have been the “thinkers” of the emerging Disabled People’s Movement. Sharing experiences and ideas to work out a way to satisfactorily explain disabled people’s exclusion and how it can be overcome.

As early as the 1920s, disabled people set the trend in styles of protest.

The picture below shows members of the National League of the Blind, (a union of blind workers), marching to a rally in London in 1920, to demand better working conditions and pay.

Marchers set off from several points in the UK to converge on London, some passing through Manchester and stopping for rest and food in Albert Square.

This set the stage for protest marches that many other people undertook in the 1920s and 1930s – the most famous of which was the Jarrow March.





After the 1920 march, it took some time for disabled people to take to the streets again.

The picture above shows members of the Disablement Income Group campaigning in the 1960s for an adequate income for those disabled people who were not able to work.

It was much harder then for disabled people to gain work because of discrimination by employers or lack of accessibility in society. E.g., buildings and public transport not being accessible (such as steps without ramps or lifts), and there being more widespread negative attitudes towards disabled people.

Money and better working conditions are not the only issues disabled people campaigned about in the early days.

Through the 1970s, members of the Disabled Drivers' Association campaigned for disabled people to have better support with mobility. The Association was formed in 1948 under a different name, and is still going strong today as Mobilise.

During the 1970s buses and trains were not at all accessible for many disabled people. Because of this there was one choice, to have an Invalid Tricycle car (picture right).



This picture shows a large banner displayed by disabled people at a rally in Trafalgar Square, London, in the early 1970s. People were campaigning for better mobility provision.







Although many rallies and demonstrations were held in London, disabled people from Greater Manchester often joined these to make sure their voices were heard.

The picture above is of a group of disabled people from Rochdale getting ready to set off to the rally in London to campaign for improved mobility for disabled people.

At that time people campaigned for more accessible cars, it wasn't till later that disabled people's right to be able to use public transport was demanded on a national level by disabled people. As will be seen later in this booklet.

Disabled people were not only taking to the streets. The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation was formed in 1973 following Paul Hunt's (picture right) letter to the Guardian newspaper in which he called for disabled people to form a "consumer group", to put forward the views of disabled people.



UPIAS ("Disability Challenge" magazine cover to the right) identified the barriers disabled people face in society ("disability") as the reason for us being disabled people, not the medical conditions ("impairments") we have.



This was a considerable breakthrough and is the foundation for the ethos of the Disabled People's Movement, campaigning for the removal of barriers to disabled people's inclusion in society.

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# 1980s

The United Nations International Year of Disabled People in 1981 gave the opportunity for disabled people to find the funding to set up groups and organisations of disabled people. The decade saw the rise of the campaign for Anti-Discrimination legislation, the call for buildings and the environment to be made more accessible to disabled people, and also disabled people supporting other campaigns against oppression.

The campaign which led to the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act was a long, hard road.

The picture below shows disabled people blocking the entrance to the Members' Car Park at Parliament in 1983, to support one of the earlier, unsuccessful Anti-Discrimination Bills.

Anti-Discrimination legislation was finally achieved when the Disability Discrimination Act was passed by Parliament in 1995, but not until after much more campaigning by disabled people in the 1990s.



London was not the only place where disabled people made their voices heard. In Manchester during the early 1980s, disabled people successfully campaigned for the Town Hall to be made wheelchair accessible.



The picture below shows the opening of the new wheelchair accessible Town Hall Extension.



During the 1980s, following on from the United Nations International Year of Disabled People in 1981, disabled people began to band together in groups and coalitions.

These groups not only campaigned on the streets for disabled people to have the rights all non-disabled people have (to housing, transport, education, work, and much more), but also provided advocacy, training and other support to disabled people, and a chance for disabled people to share experiences at conferences.

Funding cuts have seen the demise of many such organisations in the 2000s, but until then they provided a vital national network.





During the 1980s groups and organisations of disabled people also started pointing out that there should be “nothing about us without us”.

The picture above shows a group of disabled people at the Arts and Disabled People Conference in 1987 in Manchester.

This conference came about after pressure from disabled people led to the cancellation of the “Artability” conference the previous year. That conference had been organised without the involvement of disabled people, and was due to be held in a venue not accessible to disabled people, although it was a conference about disabled people and art.

Disabled people also campaigned in support of other oppressed groups of people.

Here are pictures showing disabled people campaigning against Apartheid.





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# 1990s

Activity by disabled people to campaign for our inclusion in society reached a high point in the 1990s. This was built on the foundation of disabled people in the 1970s establishing a focus on barriers in society (“disability”) rather than on a disabled person’s medical condition (“impairment”). The building-blocks on top of this were the formation of many groups of disabled people, both nationally and internationally, in the 1980s.

Following the start of the campaign in the 1980s, the 1990s saw increased activity by disabled people lobbying the government for a law that makes discrimination against disabled people illegal. So it would be against the law to refuse a service, or give a poorer service, to a disabled person. In 1995 the Disability Discrimination Act was passed by Parliament.

The picture below is of placards used in a protest in London during the mid 1990s as part of this campaign.





Campaigning for legislation was not only focussed on London.

The picture above shows the first DAN (Disabled People's Direct Action Network) lobby in Christchurch, promoting one of the earlier Anti-Discrimination legislation bills.

DAN formed from disabled people's frustration at the lack of success by other ways (such as discussion) to secure the means for disabled people to be included as equal members of society. DAN, alongside many other disabled people, have campaigned by protest and lobbying for more than just legislation.

It was not only by changing the law that disabled people fought to change our lives.

The 1990s saw the successful protest against “Telethon” – a television show that raised money for charity. Disabled people felt that the language used and images shown were demeaning, and portrayed disabled people as objects of pity.

The picture below shows disabled people picketing London Television headquarters in 1992 as part of this campaign.





Disabled people continued to campaign for buildings to be made accessible.

The 1990s also saw a growing trend for disabled people to join trade unions.

This sometimes led, as shown in the picture above, to disabled people campaigning for union facilities to be made accessible to disabled people.

The protest shown above, in the mid 1990s, is outside a NALGO social club which was down a flight of stairs. This meant many NALGO members could not make use of the club.

One of the longest and strongest campaigns by disabled people has been to gain accessible public transport. To do this, disabled people have chained themselves to buses and trains, blocked roads, held up traffic and tried to get the politicians and general public to understand that disabled people want the right to travel the same way as non-disabled people.

The picture below shows disabled people in London with a banner that sums up the feeling that disabled people should have the right to go where everyone else goes.





The picture above shows disabled people who were attending a national conference of disabled people in Manchester, holding a spontaneous piece of direct action. They are blocking the path of an inaccessible bus on Wilmslow Road as part of the long-running campaign to make public transport more accessible to disabled people.

Even now in 2010, much public transport is still not accessible, although it is gradually improving.

Following the passing through Parliament of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, it has taken time for transport providers to begin taking access for disabled people seriously.

In 1996, disabled people were appalled that money had been spent on creating a garden outside Leeds train station when it could have been used to make the station more accessible to disabled people.

As the photo below shows, when the garden was opened by Jimmy Saville, disabled people made their views known by protesting at the opening event.







Disabled people's protest has usually been Civil Disobedience. This is non-violent action that, although not on purpose, may sometimes lead to breaking the law, or at least making the police unhappy and leading to a caution or arrest.

As the picture above shows, it is not always easy for the police to arrest disabled people!!

More police stations and courts are now accessible to disabled people, but in the early days of protest they were not, and so it was not easy for the police to charge disabled people with public order or other offences.



The 1990s and 2000s saw the flourishing of disability art. Both as a means of highlighting disabled people's exclusion from society and the discrimination we face, and to "celebrate the difference" of disabled people, and the richness this difference brings to the world.

These photos show one of the Independence Festivals organised by disabled people around the UK during the 1990s and early 2000s.



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# 2000s

The Millennium brought little change to the need for campaigning by disabled people. We still need to campaign for even the right to live, and to protect the financial support given to those disabled people not able to take paid work.

The Disability Discrimination Act does not change people's negative attitudes towards disabled people overnight, nor does it protect disabled people from the government's desire to reduce what it sees as costly benefits and service provision which enable disabled people to have more choice and control over their lives.

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Deaf people have fought for many years for BSL, (British Sign Language), to be recognised as an official language in its own right.

The campaign was successful on 17 March 2003 when it was agreed by Parliament that BSL could be recognised as an official language. Despite this there is still far to go, as BSL is still not taught in schools alongside other languages, and Deaf people still fight for adequate Interpreter services.

The picture below shows one of the protest marches in London, in the run-up to the legislation being agreed.





Disabled people are a diverse group, and we need to address many issues to make sure that no disabled people are excluded.

The picture above shows part of the 2003 Annual General Meeting and Disabled Refugees Conference held by the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People.

The right for disabled people to continue to live, and also to live in the community rather than institutions, has dominated campaigns since the turn of the new century.

Changes of priority and budget cuts in local authorities have meant a reduction in basic services provided to disabled people, such as money to employ someone to assist with daily tasks. Having to rely on the unpaid “help” of friends and family can deny a disabled person privacy, the chance to live their life as they choose, and the level of independence from their family that non-disabled people expect.





In addition, there has been much media focus on “the right to die” (through assisted suicide) in 2009 and 2010. The voice of disabled people calling to have the right to live has usually been drowned out.

These photos show disabled people demanding the right to live, for support to enable disabled people to live independently, and for basic human rights – such as the right to housing, a family life, and dignity.

Welfare Reform has been high on the Government's agenda in the "noughties". This Reform has included changes to the type of benefits for disabled people who are not able to work, and a change of eligibility criteria – who can receive which benefits.

This has led to much anxiety and distress for disabled people who are genuinely not able to work either because reasonable adjustments are not possible in the workplace to accommodate the impact of their impairments or because of continued prejudice by employers.







This photo shows disabled people lobbying the Labour Party Conference when held at G-Mex in Manchester during 2008.

Disabled people were unhappy at the then government's proposals to change the criteria for disabled people who are not able to work receiving benefits. These changes would put much pressure on disabled people to try unsuitable jobs, just to be able to earn a living in an inflexible labour market.

Disabled people also celebrate. We celebrate our lives, our difference and our work.

The Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People was formed in 1985 to promote the inclusion of disabled people in society.

GMCDP's work has included: campaigning, training, providing information and particularly working with young disabled people.

This picture is from GMCDP's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary Annual General Meeting and celebration, on 20th November 2010.



# Further Reading

A chapter for more academically minded students of disability history and disability studies:

Colin Barnes, “A legacy of oppression: A history of disability in Western culture”, chapter 1 in Len Barton and Mike Oliver “Disability Studies: Past, Present and Future”, Disability Press, Leeds, 1997

A useful book as an overview until the mid 1990s:

Jane Campbell and Mike Oliver, “Disability Politics: Understanding Our Past, Changing Our Future”, Routledge, 1996

Disability History Timeline produced by Peter Millington. A website based resource at:  
[www.cdp.org.uk/timeline.htm](http://www.cdp.org.uk/timeline.htm)

The Leeds University Disability Archive has many books and articles available, some relating to the history of disabled people, see:  
[www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies)  
and click on the link for the Archive.



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