

Audio – Edinburgh International Book Festival – RNIB launch book today



It numbered Sir Winston Churchill, the Beatles, Laurel and Hardy, Mae West, Alice Cooper, Roy Rogers and his horse Trigger among its guests. It turned away Hollywood mega-star Charlton Heston and members of the Led Zeppelin rock band from its restaurant because they weren't properly dressed. And it received the first long-distance television pictures ever transmitted.

Glasgow's Grand Central Hotel, the iconic five-story hotel built adjacent to Central Station, has been part of the city's history since opening in 1883.

Now a 160-page history has been transcribed into audio and braille for blind and partially sighted readers and will be launched at the Edinburgh International Book Festival this afternoon.

The book's launch is part of an ongoing campaign to make more literature accessible to people with sight loss. "Only seven per cent of books published in the UK ever make it into alternative formats," points out John Legg, director of the Royal National Institute of Blind People Scotland. "We'd like many more made available in formats such as audio or braille.

At today's event, the book's authors Jill Scott and Bill Hicks, both former journalists, will recount to guests some of the anecdotes and stories they picked up while researching the book.

Jill's own first memory of the hotel was when sent as a young

reporter to interview Jimmy Saville. "He greeted me with the words, 'I was told this was how I had to dress when I came to Glasgow, is it ok?' He was wearing a top he'd had specially made with Celtic stripes on one side and Rangers colours on the other!"

Other guests over the years have included King George V, Gracie Fields, Danny Kaye, Nat King Cole, Sir Harry Lauder, Abbott and Costello, Sammy Davis Jr, Jock Stein, Ella Fitzgerald, Rod Stewart and Darius Campbell. In 1954, cowboy star Roy Rogers was even photographed leading his horse Trigger up the hotel's magnificent marble staircase. "In a great promotional stunt, it was reported that Trigger had his own suite," says Bill. "In fact, he was housed in stables nearby."

In May 1927, the hotel was host to a ground-breaking technological achievement. Scots inventor John Logie Baird transmitted moving television pictures long-distance from London to a semi-darkened room in the hotel (chosen simply because it was so near Central station, where the receiving apparatus was delivered to). A suite is now named in his honour.

At its height, the Grand Central Hotel could accommodate 420 guests. It boasted 390 bedrooms, 13 public rooms, 10 private sitting rooms, 40 lavatories and 34 bathrooms. Every floor had its own GPO letterbox. There were 250 staff, most of whom lived in on the top two floors. The sixth floor was for female staff and everyone had to be on their own floor by 10pm.

The book doesn't shy from highlighting the class-bound 'Upstairs, Downstairs' ethos that prevailed in the hotel's heyday. A chambermaid had to clean and make beds in 28 rooms a day. The doorman wasn't allowed to leave the entrance – he had to ring a bell for help with luggage. If there was fire-drill, the kitchen staff had to first change into white jackets before evacuating the building. "During the First

World War, hotel staff attended to officers' every whim as their men slept on the concrete concourse of Central Station, kitbags under their heads waiting for their trains," says Bill.

Today, the hotel has undergone a £20m refurbishment and was officially re-opened in January 2011 with First Minister Alex Salmond.

"It's an amazing story that ties in with so much of what has shaped Scottish history," says John Legg. "That's why we're very pleased to be able to make it available to people with sight loss. But it takes five days on average to record a RNIB 'talking book' and costs between £1,000 and £2,500. So we do need the support of the public to help us make more books available."

How did RNIB Scotland transcribe 'a pictorial history'? "We asked ourselves was the photo relevant to the text or did it tell a story that wasn't covered in the text?" Legg explains. "We ruled out the photos that didn't. Some photographs already had excellent descriptions within the book and just a simple re-wording was required to make it relate to the text."

We spoke to Ian Brown of RNIB to tell us more about the book:-

[listen to 'RNIB spokesman Ian Brown about the new book being launched today' on Audioboo](#)