RNIB celebrate the bicentenary of braille

It was teenager, Louis Braille, who developed the tactile code which was named after him which helps blind and partially sighted people to read and write.

Now Royal National Institute of Blind People(RNIB) plan to highlight the versatility of the tactile way of representing words and technical subjects, hoping to help new people to learn it and become empowered by it.

Now some two centuries on since Braille developed the reading system based on six dots, braille is as vital as ever to those in the blind and partially sighted community.

Sue Marshall (80) from Edinburgh, taught braille as a volunteer with national charity RNIB Scotland for many years. She has keratoconus, a condition which affects the corneas of the eye.

She said: “I was partially sighted until the age of 17 then I became totally blind.” Her husband, Alan Dudley, who was born blind, learned braille from the age of six. They both advocate for the practical uses of braille in everyday life.

Sue said: “When I learned braille in 1962, there wasn’t an alternative.

“Nowadays there’s technology, which is compatible with braille, but I find it easier and quicker to use as is.”

Alan said: “I’m more likely to read with the braille display on my phone or computer- it just pairs up and it means you can read emails, read a digital screen, and write in braille too. Of course there’s often audio for reading things aloud, but braille’s advantage is being able to write things down quickly.”

Sue explained that she first learned braille by writing backwards. “You had to write on the back of the paper – you were writing mirrored, so that when you flipped it over, it was raised up and you could feel and read it the correct way.” Alan added, “It wasn’t until the mechanical braillers, like the Perkins Brailler came in that you could write braille in the way you read it- that really changed things.”

Braille is a code based on ‘cells’ of six dots, which are arranged in two columns of three. Variations of the six dots represent the letters of the alphabet, words, numbers, and even music notation. Braille characters are designed to be read by touch rather than visually.

RNIB estimates that seven per cent of people who are registered blind or partially sighted use braille. While some will read braille books and magazines, many more will use braille in small daily doses- to identify medication, food labels, bank statements, and much more.

“I could get my phone out and use it to read the label on this bottle of oil,” Sue said. “But I’ve just put braille onto a sticky label and when I’m cooking, I can read it straight away. It’s really easy. Or when I need to find a stamp, I’ve organised them in this photo album where each pocket has a braille label to tell me if the stamps in it are first or second class.”

“I’ve got braille labels on my clothes,” adds Alan. “I can tell what they are by touch, but I’ve added braille on the labels to tell me what colour the item is.”

Sue and Alan also use braille in their celebrations. “M&S started doing their Christmas food catalogue in braille.” they say. “We always send out birthday cards and Christmas cards in braille, even to our sighted friends, because it’s that extra personal touch, and we love receiving them when they’re in braille too.”

For the couple, braille brings privacy and independence. “When they brought out braille on medications, it made a massive difference,” says Alan. “Even something as simple as paracetamol, when you can read the instructions yourself, the strength and the dose, it means you’re not relying on anyone else. Bank statements in braille too, that was another one that offered a lot of privacy when they started doing those.”

For those wanting to learn braille, Sue advised: “Use it or lose it. You’ve got to have that willingness to learn, and just keep using it in everyday life. You don’t have to be reading volumes of books, but just use it. It’s like learning a language, if you don’t keep it up, you’ll forget it.”

Since it published its first braille book in 1871, the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) now has more than 11,000 braille titles for adults and children, which it sends out to anyone with sight loss free of charge. The charity also has products available for using braille in everyday life from labels to tactile maps and Scrabble tiles.

And what would the French teenager who developed the code think now? “I would hope he would be very pleased!” laughs Sue. Alan adds, “You’d think he would be amazed at how it was produced- mechanical machines and how quickly you can get a braille book printed.

“You’d hope Braille would be proud of how much it’s contributed to so many people’s lives. He may not have realised the scale of what he’d done and how it would affect us 200 years later.”