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Read our report on the first Field School in Deaf Geographies, and accompanying workshop, for new perspectives on Deaf history and its significance (see pp. 8-9).
Conference Report: ‘Deaf Geographies’

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This June and July, the Bader International Study Centre of Queen’s University (Canada) (BISC) hosted an innovative new Field School in Deaf Geographies at Herstmonceux Castle in Hailsham, England. The first of its kind, this exciting opportunity was an intensive five-week programme, allowing students to engage with analytical and theoretical frameworks within Human Geography, Social Science Research Methods, and European Deaf History. Grounded in experiential and transformative learning, students were introduced to ongoing research in the field of Deaf geography, were encouraged to generate and analyse their own research data, and attended field studies trips designed specifically to promote their learning.

Following the Field School, the BISC also hosted the first international Workshop in Deaf Geographies. The workshop brought together researchers from around the world whose work engages with the themes of Deaf Geographies. Structured around academic paper presentations, but also allowing extensive time for exploration and discussion of ideas, the workshop provided the students who participated in the Field School with the opportunity to present the findings from their research projects, and to engage with new and developing areas of Deaf geographical work.

**Deaf Geographies and their relationship with history**

Deaf Geographies have recently emerged as one of the most exciting, developing areas of Human Geography. Taking as their starting point the inherently visual nature of the Deaf community, researchers in Deaf Geography are beginning to open up and explore how Deaf people locate themselves within the (often hearing) world, and how they produce contexts of possibility for visual lives by producing Deaf spaces and places. Encompassing scales from the embodied spaces of a signing household to the negotiated international signing spaces of a global Deaf gathering, and examining evidence ranging from the physical structures of Deafspace architecture to the conceptual mobilization of Deaf spaces in signed poetry, Deaf Geographies ask how those who perform their cultural and social geographies in the visual ‘produce’ their world – and what that world might mean for wider humanity.

Although Deaf Geographies also study contemporary evidence, history has played an important role in the establishment of the field. In part, this is because of the depth of evidence that history offers: a centuries-long ‘Deafscape’ woven from the spaces of, and connections between long-term Deaf families, and schools and churches for deaf people. History too provides examples of how concepts familiar to geographers, such as nationhood, colonialism, and development, have emerged to be embraced by the Deaf community, and how the spatial ‘mechanisms’ that shape the world have been applied in control of the Deaf community.

But history also serves another purpose within Deaf Geography. By allowing researchers to retreat in time – to strip off layers of welfare, of medicine, of Oralism, of scientism – back to examples of when Deaf spaces were produced by the simple, accidental coming-together of deaf people, it offers a way to ‘see past’ over two centuries of oppression, and into the
potential of the Deaf community to shape its own destiny. By locating Deaf spaces and places, both improvised and established, and tracing them through Deaf community memory to the present, Deaf geography offers the Deaf community a very real opportunity to find, and celebrate its historically-rooted place in the world.

A place in the margins – the final column of the 1851 census in which deaf people in each household were recorded

Advancing Deaf Geographies
The Field School offered a chance to learn about both historical and contemporary Deaf Geographies, and combine this learning with an experience of contemporary Deaf Spaces (including visits to Brighton’s ‘Our Space’ event <www.sussexdeafhistory.org.uk>, and the London BSL-pride day). The Field School fed directly into the workshop, featuring three days of intense, vibrant, and critically challenging discussions with amateur and professional researchers; Deaf and hearing, presenting papers on a variety of historical, methodological, theoretical and contemporary subjects:
• Deaf people in the 19th century workhouse (Rivet-Crothers – Queen’s, Canada)
• Deaf spaces and the historical record (John – The Ohio State University, US)
• Deaf occupations in the 19th century (Ali – RIT, US)
• John Kitto’s personal and colonial geographies of deafness (Cleall – Sheffield, UK)
• Oral Deaf Historical Geographies (Walker – Brighton, UK)
• Deaf Geographies taxonomies (Kitzel – BISC, UK)
• Deaf space theory and practice (Gulliver – Bristol, UK)
• Urban Deaf Geographies (Harold – Cork, Ireland)
• Deaf ethnic enclaves (Atkin & Baldridge – RIT, US)

The combination of historical and contemporary, empirical and theoretical, professional and amateur, Deaf and hearing lent a unique energy to the workshop and generated exciting discussions about the potential of the field, and about how Deaf Geographies might advance in the future.

Those continuing to work in Deaf geographies would be delighted to hear from those interested. The Field School is supported by a Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/Deafgeographies

The Field School in Deaf Geographies and conference will be running again in the summer of 2014. For further information contact:

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Delegates from the first international Deaf Geographies Workshop