

Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Martin Atherton

October 2021

Caroline Lieffers: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. I'm Caroline Lieffers.

Kelsey Henry: And I'm Kelsey Henry.

Caroline Lieffers: And it's our pleasure today to be in conversation with Martin Atherton. Martin, thanks so much for joining us today.

Martin Atherton: Thank you very much for asking me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Caroline Lieffers: Martin, your LinkedIn profile, which I very much enjoyed reading, say that you are a "man of leisure." But we know that you've, of course, had a very long career. You've had many different kinds of jobs for academia, in academia, and now that you're retired, I know your work has also hardly ended. So can you tell us a little bit about your, sort of, career trajectory and what you're doing today?

Martin Atherton: Yeah, it's a little bit unusual, I suppose. I was thinking about the "man of leisure" bit this morning because I thought that because I'm retired now, I don't have to clock in or turn up to work, but actually a lot of my research has been about leisure as well. And I hadn't seen the synchronicity of that, "Oh how clever am I, I would have thought of that." But yeah, I retired in 2018. I was Course Leader for British Sign Language and Deaf Studies at the University of Central Lancashire, in Preston, which is in the northwest of England, after having previously been a student on the course. So that was a bit strange to go from being a student on the course to course leader. Which doesn't mean I was the boss, I just dealt with all the admin side of it. And my colleague Lynn was my boss, and still is. In fact, a call her boss, to this day. It's my term of affection for her.

Cause I went to university when I was 38. And as a mature student, a very mature student. Prior to that I'd been a lorry driver for 18 years. A "truck driver" in North American parlance. I messed up my, what we call in the UK, my "O-levels" – sort of my high school qualifications. I messed them up at 16, so when I was going to college I had to redo them in order to do the "A levels," which are the next level. And I sorted them out. But I got a job for the summer, with my auntie's then-husband. He got me a job, and he was a lorry driver, he got me a job with him. And that summer job lasted 12 years. So I never went back to college. So I was a lorry driver for 18 years. I was made redundant in 1985, I was out of work for a year. Then I got another job that lasted five years, then another job. But I had a series of back injuries, which were the result of knee injuries. Not being able to bend and lift properly, because my knees were gone, I was bending with a bent back, which meant that I damaged my back.

So in 1991 I gave up work and I became a house husband. I hated that phrase – I became a primary parent. My wife had been a civil servant and she went back to the civil service, she'd been bringing up the kids for ten years. And so I stayed at home, looked after the kids, and thought, I need to retrain. So when the youngest one got to school age, I was going to go to college. So the year before, I thought - what am I going to do? I need to do something and I need to break that surface tension of – what was I then? I was 37, 36, going back to college amongst all these 16, 17, 18 year olds. What's this old guy doing here? So I looked for a course in something I've never done before. So I saw a British Sign Language course, the basic introductory course, and thought, I've never done that before. So I went and did that. I found I had an aptitude for it, so the following year, when I went to college full time to do the equivalent of A-levels, I carried on my sign language.

At the very same time, I started in September and then in October, the university in the town where I live, Central Lancashire, which is a 20 minutes walk from my house, announced that they're starting a Deaf Studies course with sign language to hopefully train some more interpreters. So I thought, that sounds like something that I can do. It doesn't matter if my knees and my back are shot, I can do that. So I applied. It was a new course and I was a mature student, so I got on. I started when I was 38 and graduated three years later, and then spent a year working as a support worker with deaf students. Because one of my lecturers, talk about dominoes falling and being lucky, one of my lecturers wanted to set up a research project, which became the Deaf United Project, into deaf football. And he thought I'd be ideal for it, so he spent a year finding the funding and setting that up while I worked as a support worker at the university with deaf students, going into lectures and supporting them with written work and things like that. And then I became a member of staff and that lasted twenty years. So it's domino, domino, domino, domino. And I did my PhD in 2002 at De Montford in Leicester on deaf leisure and sport. And then I retired. So that's my career in a nutshell, a big nutshell but a nutshell.

Kelsey Henry: Martin, thank you so much for walking us through the many unexpected twists and turns of your careers. Really there have been multiple spaces in which you've worked and learned over the years and it's so exciting to hear from someone who has a more unconventional path into academia. I'm wondering if you can tell us a bit about what you've noticed through the years as you've taught British Sign Language and worked in Deaf Studies. What are the major changes or areas of growth that you've noticed in the field, since you got started?

Martin Atherton: Oh now that's a good question. So we're going back, right back to when I first started as a part time British Sign Language student, which was, good Lord, thirty years ago. Thank you for that reminder. Oh no, it wasn't, it wasn't. It was only 28! And I think one of the things is that sign language is much more obvious nowadays. You see it on television all the time. And in Preston, because it attracted so many deaf students, you see students wandering around all the time waving their hands, not all of them deaf. So it becomes an accepted part

of life, which is one of the very important first steps, I think, to change and acceptance. Attitudes towards deaf people are still quite negative. They challenge this all the time, which is good, but I think there's still this inbuilt resistance to the idea of deafness being anything other than a disability. That hasn't gone away. And the, sort of, all the equality legislation itself doesn't help with that. Because one of the specific things that's named in UK legislation about disability is deafness. So deafness is a disability. So the social model, shall we call it, of challenging perceptions, is still an ongoing thing. But I think that there's much more acceptance of deaf people around. You see, sometimes, at the beginning of an academic year, you'd suddenly get an influx of students, and you'd see young children looking and staring and maybe pointing. And the parents say no, no. But that's because of interest, not because of anything wrong or different. And they see, now they have sign language on children's television. Now there's somebody called Mr. Tumble, who speaks and signs all the time. So the kids get it from the early age that this is just a different way of being. And that is the biggest change, I think, that acceptance of this different way of being. We still have a long way to go, but we started the process.

Kelsey Henry: This is not a question that we sent to you, but it's a question that came up to me when you were talking about the ways that sign language has sort of traveled into the mainstream. It's become more visible, you mentioned children. I've worked with a lot of infants and young children in various capacities and I noticed something in the United States, I wonder if you've noticed it in the UK, of parents, regardless of if their child is deaf or not, will use sign language as a kind of a rudimentary language with their babies before they're able to talk. I've seen parents start doing that, like incorporating baby sign language and various kinds of signing into infant education, and I'm curious if you've seen that, too.

Martin Atherton: Oh yeah. It seems to have gone a bit quiet over here. It probably still happens. In fact, my second granddaughter just turned four and they use it at nursery. The interesting thing about that for me is that parents will use baby sign with hearing children, but not with their deaf children. That's the real - I can't understand why that happened. You know, but part of that is, of course, this still happens. "You must not teach your children sign language if they're deaf, they'll never learn to speak." I remember when my first granddaughter was born. She just turned 12 now. She was born in the local hospital in Preston and there were signs up everywhere in the maternity unit about having an audiology test. And they effectively wouldn't let you take Amy home, my daughter wanted to take her home, until she had her audiology test. Now what's that telling you? We need to check if there's something wrong, you know, yeah, "wrong" with your child. But then to use - seeing the benefits of using sign language with hearing kids, to help them develop language, but not with deaf kids, does not make any sense to me whatsoever. You know, it's almost banned and there's very little services for parents to deaf children to learn sign language and use sign language. "You've got baby sign, use that. There's a point to start from." So, yeah, that's a convoluted answer, but yeah, that's a weird situation, where it's fine for hearing kids but not deaf kids. It's very strange.

Kelsey Henry: It is really strange and I wonder if it has something to do with just the complexities of stigma.

Martin Atherton: Definitely. It's OK, to use sign language with hearing kids because they can still hear and they can still develop normally, you know. If you use it with your deaf children and all they can do is sign, how are they going to get on in the world? One of the things I used to do with my first years, I used to show them a series of films, feature films, just mainstream films with deaf characters. And the first one was from 1950, 1951. And you get right to the end and the attitudes in the 2000-and-somethings, the underlying attitudes were still the same all the way through. Poor deaf child, can't communicate. And the last one, a film called *Dear Frankie* - it's a wonderful film if you want to see it - it's a really nice film. But at the end, the deaf, the main deaf character, who is a young boy, younger than 10, but he's the one who has the advantage over everybody else. He's the only one what can see what's going on, to communicate what's going on with other people. You know, everybody else is so tied up with what they say and what they don't say. And he is just watching the world. But otherwise all the attitude is still there, still with them. And if you'd gone back, 20, 30, 40 years before that, you'd probably seen the same thing happen. Yeah, it is still very much stigma, yeah.

Kelsey Henry: I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more, you mentioned that when you got into British Sign Language, part of what drew you to it was that you found that you had quite an aptitude for it. But I'm wondering what were some of the other factors that drew you deeper into disability and deaf history after you started learning British Sign Language. What hooked you?

Martin Atherton: Well I've always been interested in history, ever since I was a young boy. So that was there. And then I got into this deaf studies world. The whole basis for my thesis, when I did my PhD in 2002 - 2005, the whole basis for that was, people keep telling me deaf clubs are important to the deaf community and that they are the hubs of deaf community. So what went on there? Oh well, they did storytelling and they went on outings. Nobody knew. These were really, really important centers of the Deaf community and nobody could tell you what went on there. So that was the basis of my PhD to be quite honest. I went, right, we're going to find out! So for a while I was probably the world's expert, because nobody else had bothered looking. I was the only person who's ever done anything about it. That was the motivation for it and it was about simply wanting to know more about deaf people and deaf life and to put some flesh on these bones that were being given. You know, because a lot of the literature that, you know, you might call it the classic stuff from the 80s and 90s, there's not a lot of new perspectives come out in recent years. So are there new perspectives, yes, there are. But there's all these other areas that already exist that we need to know a lot more about. So that's what I did with the Deaf United stuff, the first thing I did, and with *Deafness, Community, and Culture*, that was based on my thesis. Well it is my thesis, to be honest, because I didn't write my thesis as a thesis, I wrote this book. I didn't want to write a thesis with a findings chapter in it and a literature review chapter, I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. There were nine chapters in it and

I think seven of them were literature reviews, or five of them, because it was such a broad scope and multidisciplinary. And the one I just finished, that again, is about, okay, what can I find out about these people who are in plain sight, but they're hidden in plain sight. Everybody knows some of these deaf people, we can see deaf people on television, we know about famous deaf people. But what do we know about ordinary deaf people? What do we know about the nuts and bolts of deaf daily life? You know, I can probably find out more, I think I wrote it in one of the things that I did. We can find out more about an Indigenous tribe in Papua New Guinea than we can about the deaf club down the road or the deaf people who live in this town because anthropologists have gone out and researched them. I'm not saying that we should take the same approach with deaf people. But there's an interesting world out there that we don't know about and the people themselves don't know about it. That was the driving factor for me. You can go and ask deaf people about what was important about deaf clubs and they can't really tell you, without somebody pointing out, "you did this and this," "oh yeah, that and that and that." So it was a natural progression, I suppose. Being interested in history, and naturally curious or nosy, whichever term you want to use – I wanted to find out more about people's lives.

Caroline Lieffers: Well, I think that's how a lot of the best projects start, right, it's just with that natural curiosity. It sounds like there's a lot more work yet to be done in deaf history, but I'm curious about kind of the landscape of this field, if you will. Is it a growing field? Have you noticed that there's more sort of public or popular attention being paid to it? Are there now documentary films out about deaf history that wouldn't have been made 30 years ago? I'm curious about sort of your take on the development of this field and where it might be going.

Martin Atherton: There's a lot more than there was, but there's not a lot. I think is the best way to describe it. And part of that, of course, is because a lot of the history doesn't come from within the deaf community itself. So there's been some work in developing visual deaf history. Working on visual resources and stuff like that. And presenting in sign language, which is great. It's one of the tensions in the work I've done, is that it's not accessible to the vast majority of people that I'm writing about. And it's not, it's simply not practical to make it accessible, so that is, that is a real frustration. And there is a British Deaf History Society in this country. And I know many people involved in it I don't think would mind me saying that there's a certain demographic. And that demographic is getting older every year. There's not a lot of young people coming in. That's partly linked to the decline of the deaf club and the splintering of the deaf community, as I see it. And the multitude of deaf communities – there are now more than one. But there's more people getting interested and doing more work and every little bit of work that's done, or book that comes out, every chapter, is helping to build a bigger picture. It's like having a 10,000-piece jigsaw and we've got about 150 at the minute, but we're getting by, ya know.

But it's such a fascinating field. One of the other problems with it, though, is the lack of primary resources. Because deaf clubs haven't kept their records, by and large. Deaf schools haven't kept their records. There's a deaf school in Preston.

When I was a student – you know you asked me, Kelsey, about how I got into this – I actually made a video history of the local deaf school. And I wrote it and filmed it, but I got a local deaf man that I know, Len Hobson, and I got him to present it in sign language. Because it was about his school and he'd been there. But that school closed in the 90s and the building was left empty. And it's now been knocked down. Just before it was knocked down, somebody broke in just to have a look at it. Not to do any damage, they couldn't do any damage. And they found records just strewn all over the floor, sorted filing cabinets full of the history of the school. No one knew what they were, but it was about the school. And they're all on the floor and all of the roof was gone, so the rain had destroyed them all. I was talking to someone else and they said that when another deaf school had moved from the original site to a new site, they had just thrown all the paperwork in the bin, into a skip, and got rid of it. And you think, yeah.

So it's down to individual memories, which are unreliable. It's down to any mementos people might have. And it's down to luck, people having access to things and getting hold of them. So a lot of it is history by outsiders, history by people like me, looking in from the outside and interpreting what's there. Because another of the issues is that not many deaf people are trained as historians. They might be very enthusiastic amateurs, but they are amateurs. And some of the stuff I've used for the latest book, it's so annoying because you read things and it's not referenced, so you can't follow it up -- "Well, this happened!" – "Yes, but who told you that, where did you find it out?" So you can't follow it up. But it's really interesting and I want to know more about that. And also sometimes you read things, and you think, "No, actually that's not right. There's plenty of evidence to show that there's another reason for that." But you take it as it is, and you make the best you can with it.

Kelsey Henry: Thank you so much, Martin, I have so many questions for you about the fragility of memory. What you were describing, in terms of piecing together deaf history and the complexities of using oral histories, working alongside amateur deaf historians. There's just so much richness here. I'm so excited to hear more throughout the course of our conversation. But first, I wanted to get a little bit more background information just for our listeners. In the United States, oralist training, so educating deaf students through an oral language of lip reading, speech, mimicking mouth shapes, dominated in most deaf schools until well into the 20th century. And I want to know, is this the case in the UK as well or not?

Martin Atherton: Yes it is and no it isn't. Just to be awkward! Yes, it was throughout, particularly in the post-war period. Since 1945 there was a real push for oral education. The sign education was still provided but it was very much for oral failures. And those children who were so deaf that they couldn't make use of the available technology, in terms of hearing aids, to learn to speak adequately. They couldn't lip read particularly well. So it was it was the last best option. Anybody who was deaf who then became proficient and good at speaking, "passed as hearing," shall we say, they were the successes. And anybody who used sign language – sign language was almost, "Oh, bless, those poor deafies can't do

anything, they can't be normal." And there's a whole thrust of the education doing that.

But the reason why I say it's not that, is there's all this, and I'm going to use the word, because I do use it when I'm not in public. There's so much propaganda about the Milan Congress of 1880, that all sign language was banned in schools. Well, in the UK that wasn't the case. Milan was 1880. The Royal Cross School in Preston, or the Murray Cross School as it was at the time, opened in 1893 with a mixture of signing and hearing classes, the signing and oral classes. So it wasn't banned. And the work I've done on 1901 shows that deaf schools still had signing classes. It hadn't gone down the line of "oral-good, signing-bad." That's what happened later on. But the head teachers' reports from the Red Cross School in Preston and the Manchester School, the big school in Manchester. They clearly state that they don't differentiate. It's whichever method was best for the individual people was the one they got. But that all changed, particularly after the Second World War and the introduction of the welfare state in the UK. And the idea of doing the best for everybody, post war reconstruction. So what's the best thing you can do for these poor deaf kids? Teach them to speak. And there's the famous work of Reuben Conrad from '78, I think. I'm a historian; I don't do dates. But the work of Reuben Conrad into the literacy and speech of deaf children showed that basically the vast majority were unintelligible. They had at best the reading age, when they were leaving school, of a seven or eight year old. That's a failure of oral education.

And what seems to happen to me all the time, educationalists in this country start from the wrong first principle. The first principle for all education should be what do these children need. In deaf education it's, how can we make the education fit for these kids. "Oh, bolt an interpreter on." - "Fine, thanks a lot." - "We'll shove a CSW in a class with them or give them a language tutor." No, start from, what do you want to these kids? "This" (gestures with hands). That's fair enough. "How are we going to teach them?" What do they need? Start from there and work backwards. Don't start with, "This is what we do, how can we make these round pegs fit into this square hole?" You know, this is something as a parent and a grandparent, that really annoys me. And my children aren't deaf. My grandchildren aren't deaf. But it doesn't matter. It's the same first principle, it should apply to all kids. You know, it doesn't matter. We do it with kids from other countries who maybe are not initially English speakers, over here. You know, you teach them English first. You don't teach them in English, you teach them English. And then as the proficiency develops... You don't teach deaf kids sign language, you teach them a language they cannot access. Or you give them access to that language through a third person. But if they haven't got that third person, how are they going to access it? I mean, I'm not an educationalist, but that seems to me like a faulty system, and I think the outcomes of deaf education show that. It's either the kids who can function in an oral environment, who do well, or the ones who are very lucky. In many ways. I mean, I remember I had a student a few years ago, a deaf student, and the first time I saw a piece of his written work I thought, there's no way he has written this. He can't have, his English is too good. It's almost better than mine, almost. I thought, he can't possibly have written this. So I went along

to my boss and said, I've got some concerns about this, boss. And she said, "Oh yeah, I know this is. He's fourth generation deaf." He'd been taught English via sign language and his English level was up there, and that was all the justification you need for sign language for deaf kids. There's your educational outcome. And he got a degree at the end of it and he's done really gone into education himself, and blah blah blah. But it was such a justification for what you should be doing, not what we do, you know. And he was, I was saying, "You've got to be lucky." He was lucky, in that he had four, or three, generations of deafness before him. He'd been through all the struggles and knows exactly what would work and they gave him that, and it did work. You know, he's a shining example, and I've seen other examples since, very very similar. You know, there are deaf, deaf, deaf, and deaf people who have been taught this foreign language of English, that you need for everyday success in this country, through their natural first language. We've got plenty of evidence it works, but apparently we don't know what we're talking about.

Caroline Lieffers: I can absolutely see what you're saying about how the education system's misplaced priorities have basically set many students up to fail, right? And I also want to yeah, again, just sort of underline that point that you've made that's really important about needing to research individual schools' individual practices to fully appreciate the complexities of the history of deaf education. So yeah that's a really important point.

We want to talk about your 2012 book *Deafness, Community and Culture in Britain: Leisure [or to use an American-slash-Canadian pronunciation, "lee-zure"] and Cohesion, 1945 to 1995*. We both loved this book and thought it was really fascinating. It covers a range of issues, so we'll be kind of unpacking that throughout our conversation. But one thing that I of course notice straightaway was your choice not to capitalize the word "deaf" in this book. And many of us, of course, struggle with this issue, right, especially when we're writing about communities that are heterogeneous, or they don't explicitly define as "capital D" deaf. What do we do with this history? And you talk a bit about your choice in the book, so obviously we refer people to that, they should read that. But can you talk us a little bit through your thought process there and how you came to that decision?

Martin Atherton: Yeah, I came across it, obviously, first when I was an undergraduate. I'd never come across it before. And I immediately thought I had issues with it. And first I thought - I just didn't agree with it. I've changed my position on this, obviously. I can see that it served a useful political purpose: these people are different and this is why. The reason I don't use it and have never used it is, unless it's in direct quotations, is you're relegating an identity to somebody without checking. "Oh, oh look him, he uses sign language all the time and he's active in politics and blah blah blah. He's "big D" deaf." And my response to that would be, "have you asked him"? And one of the defining moments for me was when I was doing my very first research project, big research project, which was the Deaf United Project, I went to interview a guy who was a deaf footballer, a deaf soccer player, to use a North American term. And we got on like a house on fire.

He was much older than me, we had a great time. And he was a pillar of the deaf community. He signed, but his wife was hearing and he spoke with her. But with all his deaf friends he signed. He taught all his children to sign and his grandchildren learned to sign to speak to granddad, even though he could speak, too. He a member of his local deaf club, is very active, is recognized as a deaf man. And well respected for that. So I said to him in the course of the conversation – well, his name is Ray – I said, “so are you “big D” deaf, Ray?” You know, I signed it out and asked him. And he said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, if you were writing about yourself as deaf, would you put a capital ‘D’ or a little ‘d’.” And his answer summed it all up for me. He said, “Well, it would depend on whether it was at the beginning of a sentence or not.” As a grassroots deaf person it meant absolutely nothing to him at all. So I think it's important in academia. And it's important in deaf politics. In deaf life, to most deaf people, it doesn't mean anything. Because I've asked other deaf people same thing, and they've never heard of it. You know, when I ask they say, “Oh, I might start doing that now.” Knowing full well, they probably won't, you know. But Ray's answer just summed up everything I'd been thinking and feeling. And so I just don't feel right saying, “Fine.” In some respects, it's like saying, “Okay, you're a successful woman, a successful independent woman. And you do this, you do that. You must be a feminist, I'll call you a feminist.” Or, “I'll call you a woman with a capital W,” or whatever. You know, and it's almost, it's more than that, for me. You know, that's a little bit flippant. But it's sort of - we do label people too easily, and I think for “big D” Deaf, it doesn't sum things up. Because nobody's “big D” Deaf all the time. And funnily, the guy I was talking about before, the guy with very good English, I've had this conversation with him once because I used to have this very same conversation with students all the time. And I said to him, “Are you “big D” Deaf, or not?” And he said, “Big D, big D, big D – proud.” And I said, “Have you always been big D?” And he went, “Mmm, maybe not, no. Not when I was younger.” And I said, “but you're big D now.” “Yeah.” And I said, “Is that ‘d’ ever going to get any bigger?” Because he was heavily involved in deaf politics. And he said, “Yeah, maybe one day, I might have to be Deaf,” he said, double D. He got me point. Which was great for me, he got me point. Whereas quite often students in the school will say, “You can't say that, you can't say someone isn't “big d” Deaf.” The hearing students particularly. But him being a deaf person himself, he got the point, and I thought, yeah, this is valid. I totally understand that people don't agree with it, think it's wrong. But it's a personal opinion, that's all it is. And it's not meant – if you use a lowercase “d” you are not being disrespectful to anybody. It's just, it's an audiological fact, that's not disputable. The identity thing - it's wrong of me to go, bang, this must be you. And that's why I do it. Quite a long answer, but I've had this debate so many times that I've got quite nuanced at it now!

Kelsey Henry: No, that was a really good answer. And I think that what struck me was that it boils down to, kind of, best practice in terms of historical conventions. What you said about not wanting to impose an identity on your social actors, your historical actors, taking the categories that they use to classify themselves seriously. You could make the argument that it's just best practice in history, for respecting your actors. And I hadn't heard – I've heard various historians and

academics work through their reasoning for why they capitalized the 'D' or not and I've never heard someone say exactly what you just said.

Martin Atherton: Well, I also had the advantage, when I was doing that, of being older. And, to be quite honest, not caring. Because, this is my opinion. Everybody else in the world can think it's wrong and I accept that. It's my opinion, and this is why. And that's - the fact that I can explain my opinion, even if people don't accept my reasoning. That's fine, but I've got a reason. It's not just because I can't be bothered. You know, I think that helps. But yeah, I think it's wrong to label people.

Kelsey Henry: I was also thinking, while you were talking, about how there's a conversation in disability studies and disability history about the difference between being politically or culturally disabled and descriptively disabled. And how whether or not you fall into either one of those categories, in terms of self-identifying as disabled, shouldn't determine whether or not your history and your story belongs in disability studies or disability history. So that's something that I was also hearing you working through in your response.

Martin Atherton: Well, I had a situation once. As I said earlier, I've got some trouble with my back and knees. Particularly for about three years, I was having some real problems, being in pain every day. And I was in some work. I can't remember what the context was. It was at work, when I was in university. It was some sort of training thing. And one of these things where you're all in a circle and you have to say one thing about yourself. And I was having a particularly bad day. I was in lot of pain and I didn't want to be at this thing. And it came around to me and I said, "I am Martin Atherton and I'm a cripple." Oh, my lord. The pin pulled out of the hand grenade and the whole room exploded with, "You can't possibly say that, blah blah blah... what about this...what about that." I said, "What, you mean like me mother who's in a wheelchair?" I said, "I can call myself what I want. And I use the term crippled because that's how I feel. I feel crippled - crippled with pain, I can't walk properly. Blah blah. Do not tell me I can't call myself that." This was not the best way to start the training day. It really wasn't. But that was how I self-identified. And someone said, "Well, what if somebody else called you that?" I said, "Well if they knew my circumstances, it wouldn't bother me in the least." But the whole day - I was ostracized for the rest of the day. And it had something to do with equality. I was being disrespectful, blah blah blah. And it came to the end of the day and we're in this horseshoe again. Everybody was to go around and say, "Tell me what you're doing for the weekend and one thing you've learned today." So all these people are high up and they're all going, "We're going pony trekking in the Lake District or we're going canoeing in the dales." And blah, blah, blah. And it was on a Friday. And the following day was an open day at the university. So I'm ticked off, and I said, "Well, I'll be working tomorrow to earn money, to bring money in to pay for all of your wages, while you're off galivanting." Because I was really annoyed with them. And I said, "And I've also learned not to describe myself as a cripple." And in front of people who are not prepared to accept anybody calling themselves what they want. Funnily enough nobody said goodbye to me at the end of that day. But it taps into this sort of self-identification. And throwing labels at people. You know, I would never ever call anybody else a cripple. But I reserve the

right to call myself it, if I want to, or anything I want, you know, within reason. As long as you're not offensive to other people – I would never use an offensive term. But this automatic resistance to it - "you can't call yourself that." I do remember questioning the person who ran it. He was very nice guy and he said to me, "Why did you do that?" And I said, "Well, how else should I describe myself? Mobility challenged? Pain free challenged?" Or whatever ridiculous things I said. But I think you've got the right to call yourself what you want. But you don't got the right to call anybody else that. And that was, again, fundamental to everything I've done since, that you don't just lump something on to somebody. But you also accept the right for anybody to call themselves what they want at all. Anyway, I should get off my high horse now, get off my soapbox.

Kelsey Henry: We love the insights from your soapbox. I've been going off-script a bit, and I do want to hear more about *Deafness, Community, and Culture*. Specifically, I want to hear more about the deaf clubs, because they've come up a couple of times so far in our conversation, and I want you to tell us more about them. There were numerous deaf clubs across the country. What are they and what did people actually do at a deaf club? What happened at them?

Martin Atherton: They were basically social clubs. And they grew out of the Voluntary Welfare Association that sprang up in Great Britain from the early 19th century. So you get a lot of philanthropy, setting up these organizations to assist deaf people and to support them in finding work and dealing with everyday life. So what happens is you've got a place, suddenly, and they were by and large run by religious groups, particularly the Church of England, the Anglicans in Britain. Because one of the things they did was provide church services, on the weekend, quite often in sign language. They knew their audience. They knew how to save these souls. You can't save somebody's soul by getting them to pray, so you get them to sign instead. But what happened was you suddenly got a place where, as a deaf person, you go along for assistance. A system that eventually developed called the missioner, because those were the missions to deaf people. These associations are all over the country, in every town and city. And you go along there for somebody who can communicate with and they can help you with all sorts of problems in life. And while you're there, there's another deaf person there. Or there's two other deaf people there. So you've certainly got a place where you know you can go along and meet people and deal with some of the day to day isolation from people who you can communicate with. As a result of that formal, first informal then formal social arms or branches of these associations sprang up. And so as an extension of philanthropy it developed into a deaf club, where you can go and meet other deaf people and go along once, twice a week. And just, I've argued somewhere, possibly, I think it was in that book. I can't remember what I've written, I just write stuff – yeah I think it was in that book. That actually life in a deaf club was normal life for deaf people. Because all of us, we live our daily lives, and then we do something that's abnormal, whether it's abseiling down a rock face or going to a night club, whatever it is. We escape from daily life by doing something different. For deaf people, their daily life was abnormal. They didn't have all the social interactions, the stuff that we're doing now, with the hearing majority. You know, there might not be another deaf person in their

family, in their neighborhood, even in a big part of the town. So they've not got all this, this tacit communication going on - the watercooler moments, as we call them, all the stuff that oils daily life.

When they went to a deaf club, the sort of thing that is abnormal for us became normal. Because they can live a normal life, they can chat with people, they can relax, they can talk about subjects that they share and common interests. And then on the back of that then they start going on outings, they do all sorts of things. They have sporting events, they have social events, they do all sorts of things that you see in the hearing world, like Easter bonnet competitions, you know, or fundraising events for all sorts things in the 70s, when sponsored events were huge in this country. You know I found an example of them, one deaf club doing a sponsored piano smash. That was a big thing here for a few years, smashing up an old piano with a sledgehammer and getting sponsored for doing it. But the deaf club did it and they did they didn't do anything differently than hearing people did, but they did it as a group, deaf people

I found an example of Preston deaf club organizing a cruise around the Mediterranean. And what I argued was, 160 people from Preston deaf club went on a cruise ship. That cruise ship became the deaf club. Because a deaf club isn't a place, it's the people, it's the things you do. It's the SS Deaf Club, going around the Mediterranean, you know. There was nothing different. It was the purpose it served. It gave deaf people a normal life, a chance of a normal life - a little window as opposed to the sort of thing that we would think of as an abnormal life. So, yeah, they're all over the country, everywhere. They've gone into serious decline since the 1970s because the missioner was often the person who ran the deaf club as well. And lots of deaf clubs were effectively British Deaf Association branches. They were the same place - the branch within the club, the club was branch. Same people run the club who are the media representatives. They used that book, *British Deaf News*, because a lot the clubs would send reports in every month to British Deaf News about what they've been up to, all the activities, things about the members. And there were no boundaries. Some of them, you know, [would write], "Oh, one of our members, Caroline, broke her leg last week. She fell down the stairs and dropped all the shopping, but she's getting better now." Or, "congratulations to Kelsey who just had triplets." You know, there's no boundaries at all and it's quite personal information. "One of our members just bought a new car and crashed it on the first day he got it," you know. But it shows, for me, it showed the importance of club life. But also, the idea that you've got this network of deaf clubs, they're actually one big deaf club. Because you're feeding the news in and people on the other end of the country have never met you. But you're able to engage in that life sort of vicariously, but you can engage in that life simply by reading about all the deaf clubs.

Deaf clubs might go on a trip somewhere, to an outing, to a zoo or something. You know nowadays it might be Disney world or something like that. But as part of the trip, they might visit the local club, or visit another deaf club on the way back. So, the clubs themselves used it as an opportunity to meet other deaf people. And there's all sorts of interesting things - something just popped into my head. But,

they do all that and quite often somebody would film the outing with a 16 millimeter camera. You know, they be filming away with it. And so they all do that. And then the next week they'd show the film in the club so that the people who couldn't go on the trip could take part in it. Or the people who had been in it could remember it and laugh and joke with each other, as they watched the film. But one of the things I did find out when I was doing the sport, and it comes up in *Community and Culture* as well, was two very old ladies who were best friends and they were lovely, and it was when I was doing the deaf football, the deaf soccer one, and I said to them: "Did you go on these trips? Were you into them?" And they went, "Oh yeah, we all used to go on these trips, we were always on these trips." Because one deaf club would play another club in football. And it might mean going to the other end of the country, it was a major adventure. [And I would ask,] "Oh, so you must be really interested in football." [And they would say,] "Oh, no, not interested at all!" I said, "So why did you go on these trips." And they said, "Well all the good fellas in our club were taken." To use a British expression, they were on the pull. They were looking for some decent fellas. And you get stories about people meeting on these trips and marrying and it just shows the sort of insular nature of the community, the wonderful connectedness of it, that they do things like that. You know, they travel six, seven hours on a coach, one way, on the off chance to meet in a nice bloke, then six or seven hours back.

They were the heart of the deaf community. But then, in the late 1970s, the whole social welfare agenda changed here and they brought in social workers, social workers for deaf people. When you've got a social worker, the social worker then has caseloads. Social worker has to keep records. The social worker cannot be - I mean the mission is very paternalistic, but the deaf people didn't care because they made life easy. [For example]: "I've got this bill and it's in red, what do I do with it?" [Social worker]: "I'll sort it out for you." Social workers could do that and they became much more distant. A lot of the missionaries became social workers, but they couldn't work in the same way. Part of that was the missionaries were no longer involved in the deaf clubs to the same extent. Deaf people had to take over running them themselves. And many of them had no experience and couldn't do it, and membership declined. Membership was getting older and younger deaf people were coming in and becoming politicized. You don't want to go and sit with the older people in the deaf clubs. They want to do their own stuff. You start going to pubs with deaf people who have not done that a huge amount. And the period of decline. The deaf clubs, there are still a fair few around, but nothing like they used to be. And it would be interesting to see if they survive, because there are very much...I think the ones that have survived are the ones who've engaged with younger people more. But if the younger people don't stay engaged, then you're just going to disappear, as so many things. You know, one of the things I found very interesting was Putnam, his *Bowling Alone*, when he looks at the decline of ten-pin bowling in America, when everyone used to go along and do it socially, instead of just one person bowling. You know all the social networks are broken. And people stopped going in and then gradually they decline, bowling became something different. And that's very similar to what happened with the deaf clubs. Robert Putnam, I remembered it [author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*]. His work on that was very interesting to read in

the context of deaf clubs, it's exactly the same. You know when you haven't got the social benefits of going anymore, you stop going. And if you stop going then they'll decline and they'll close, most of them anyway.

Caroline Lieffers: That's really interesting, the sort of downward spiral effect. Right, maybe if they bring back piano smashes that'll help restore some of the membership [laughs], I don't know. Sounds like fun. You talk a lot in your book about sport, or I guess as Americans or Canadians would say it, "sports" with an 's,' right? Can you talk a little bit more about some of the examples of deaf sport? You've already brought up football, but I mean were there whole leagues for deaf communities? I mean, just say more about this, it's fascinating!

Martin Atherton: Well let's start with football, because there was a deaf football league for quite a while. But, but the problem is you've not got a steady stream of players, because you're not guaranteed that deaf people in your area are going to be for it. Or that they're going to be male and interested in football or female and interested in football. So it's very much hit and miss. It's like that all the time. There were leagues. There was and still was a British Deaf Sports Council. They organize all sorts of things, so there were athletic meetings, a bit of cricket in summer, not a huge amount. A little bit of rugby in Wales. The problem with rugby is you need lots of people, 15 or so, and it's very technically complicated. Every deaf club, every deaf club, had a snooker table. Every one. Now I don't know why, but I think I know why. I've got no evidence, but I think there's two reasons. One was snooker is a very visual game. You've got all the colors and it's very easy to learn, you can learn it by watching. You pot a red, you pot another color, you pot a red, and when that color is gone, you put it back on. It is very easy to learn just by watching. The other thing was, snooker in this country used to have a very bad reputation. If you were good at snooker, it was a sign of a misspent youth. Because snooker halls were smoky, dark places where disreputable people hung out. People who didn't have anything better to do with our lives, so they used to hang about there. And I think part of it was the missionaries made sure there was a snooker table, so the deaf people weren't going to a snooker hall. They're in the deaf club and they could be socially monitored. Their morals would be monitored. Now I've got no evidence for that at all, but just simply the fact that everybody had one. Everywhere had one and it seems to me, given the reputation for snooker halls, that this was part of their paternalistic protection of deaf people. But there were - there were all sorts of gymnastic events, there were swimming events. And there's actually a British Deaf Golf Association.

But one of the things I have argued, is that deaf clubs and deaf life was essentially working class. The things they did were working class. Because you don't find very many people from the higher social classes, shall we say, who are sign language users. Because they pay for private education or they pay for tutors or whatever. They will send their children, they will mask the deafness. And that's come up again in the 1901 work that I've done, that you don't find people outside working class communities who are, in that class's terminology, "deaf and dumb." You just don't find them. So they're very much working class. And golf, in England, it's not a working class game. In Scotland, it's more of a working class game. So I don't

know whether, who these deaf golfers were, but I suspect it was maybe not, it was deaf without being hugely signing, I don't know. But I couldn't find enough information to say one way or another. But most of the sports are what you think of as working class sports. And a lot of involvement, a lot of involvement, but again, in all of them very patchy around when they continued and when they didn't. Up here in the north, where we...you've heard of bowling? Not ten-pin bowling, but they bowl in Canada, I don't know about America, on a flat green. Lawn bowls, I think you call them? Around here in the northwest of England and Yorkshire it's crown green, it's different. There's a hump in the middle of the green and there's a lot of deaf people because it was local and hearing family members would bowl, deaf people went along. And it's again, it's easy to learn, very easy to learn by watching bowls. So there's a lot of that. It was all down to local accessibility, as much as anything else. So I think deaf kids being taken along by hearing parents or siblings to certain events and certain kinds of sport, they get involved in that. Very hit or miss. Again, long answer.

Kelsey Henry: Everything that you just said, Martin, about kind of the highly localized, class-based specificity of the social activities that went on in these deaf clubs made me wonder about the regional character of the deaf clubs that you've researched. In the book you give quite a lot of attention to the northwest part of England. And I'm wondering, why did you choose this region, in particular, and did you find anything unique about the deaf leisure culture in this part of the country that really attracted you?

Martin Atherton: Reasons for picking the Northwest. [**Kelsey:** Yeah] I'm from the Northwest. I live in the Northwest. I know the Northwest. But also, the Northwest. - there were points around Lancashire and Manchester and the western parts of Yorkshire that's either very rural, agricultural mostly, or highly industrialized. In the highly industrialized, lots of deaf clubs close together, lots of networks. Other parts of the country were a bit more dissipated. Around here, lots and lots going on. Around here, there was probably more going on in the Northwest in terms of deaf social activity than there was in London. Because there were more deaf clubs in the Northwest. You'd have one - there's one here in Preston. There's one at Lancaster, 15 miles north. There's one at Blackburn, 15 miles east, or less than 15 miles east. One at Chorley, seven or eight miles south. Then you've got Wiggin, Leeds, Bolton, all these places. Rochdale, Manchester, there are loads of them, Liverpool, Birkenhead - so it's very easy to have this network and going and visiting other deaf clubs without having to travel hours and hours. People still did, but you've got such a lot of interaction. And you find out every week that there's something going on. Every week they're having - and it was international as well. Particularly around here. So you'd get deaf people coming over from Germany, so they're not doing anything differently. They're coming over, visiting tourists, and they go visit a local deaf club wherever they are, or they travel around. I found an instance of two deaf guys from Germany who came over every year and visited deaf clubs in the Northwest, including some right up in Cumbria. Which is, you know, at the end of the world's longest cul-de-sac. You know, they're up there and up round Whitehaven and around that way. Very socially isolated and really hard to get to in the 50s and 60s. But they're going there and so there's so - I think that

the main cultural identifier over the Northwest was there was so much going on. It wasn't hugely different than what was going on in other parts of the country, there was just more of it and it's so much easier to do. And even more so than in the big cities, Birmingham and London and places like that, over in Yorkshire, Leeds, or Bradford. Much more going on here because it was just so easy, so easy to do. Cheap as well, which was another factor, the financing.

Caroline Lieffers: Yeah, I mean that makes perfect sense. You've already alluded to this a little bit, but we're interested in just like even more detail about some of what was happening in the sports world and the deaf community. Were there, for example, a lot of women who were participating? A lot of veterans? I'm interested in some of the backgrounds of specific people who might have been participating and if the demographics were sort of shifting over time?

Martin Atherton: Very little female involvement in sport. Some in football, some in gymnastics, table tennis, but nothing like as much. It was more male dominated in sport. Yes, there were deaf women involved in sport, but nothing like the same extent. And I think part of that was maybe to do with social situation, you know. Certain things are acceptable in certain worlds and in those worlds, maybe, but then you've got to have access. You know you've got to have the opportunity to try a sport and then be interested in it and then have some degree of proficiency. I mean not to be any good at it, but to take part in it. But I think that seemed to be a bit more of a barrier for women than for men. Simply, I say that simply based on the participation rates. You know. and when you say veterans, what do you mean by veterans?

Caroline Lieffers: I was just wondering if, for example, after World War II perhaps there were a lot of like deafened soldiers or something like that, who would have joined these clubs? I'm just sort of trying to think about those changes that might have happened.

Martin Atherton: Yeah, I thought because of this sort of North American understanding of veterans you were referring to servicemen. Not really, because people who were deafened particularly by, you know, by war, by trauma and sort, weren't the sort of constituency in deaf clubs because they weren't sign language users. You know, they were hearing people who couldn't hear anymore, rather than deaf people. There were deaf people who used sign language. And so there's not a lot of evidence of that at all, and I certainly didn't see any explicit references to it. But I think also as we said earlier about the education, I think there was a lot of emphasis on "fixing" these damaged servicemen, getting them back to as much normality as possible. I think, going along to a deaf club would, would have gone completely against that. That would be almost an acceptance of their deafness and their, what's the phrase, their "otherness" beyond the physical. And I don't know whether they'd have found any or be prepared to find any benefit of going. I think they'd have been accepted, but I don't know whether they have the mental preparation to be ready for that sort of environment, because they would have been very much outsiders, and would have been welcomed in and would have

learned sign language much quicker than many other people simply by using it all the time. But no, not a lot of evidence of that at all came up.

Caroline Lieffers: That's really interesting. I mean, the questions of identity and stigma that we've already been talking about a bit are very much front and center here, so what you're saying makes a lot of sense.

Kelsey Henry: So I'm wondering if we took these deaf clubs as sort of a window or an entry point into a larger narrative about deaf history, what might they tell us about identity formation, autonomy, as spaces for destigmatizing deafness? Did they function in that way? And, particularly when you were saying that they were primarily spaces for working-class people, I'm wondering did they double as sites for activism? Were any kinds of activism that came out of these clubs grounded in a sort of class consciousness? Yeah, I think those are some questions that are coming up for me.

Martin Atherton: Yeah I think on the class consciousness, I think class in itself wasn't an overt element of deaf activism. Class, in terms of lower class, upper class, was replaced by deaf. You know, are you working class? No, I'm deaf class, almost. Very unconsciously, not conscious at all. Yeah, absolutely central to the whole idea of deaf community and deaf identity, deaf activity, because otherwise where else is this going to happen? It's not. You get your introduction to deaf identity in the deaf schools, where everybody's the same, and despite all the attempts to ban sign language outside the classroom everybody signs. And everybody lives as a deaf person. Then you finish school and what happens, you go you go home, which vast majority did, they went back home, quite often not fitting in at home because they've been away for years. Some maybe very briefly spent some holidays at home, some hardly any, but they go back home. So where's your real family? The missioner, when they were missioners, they took responsibility for you, they're going to find you a job. And they're going to introduce you to the deaf club and you meet other deaf people, and they become your surrogate family. Particularly if you can't communicate at home with your hearing family and you've got no real bonds with them because you've hardly seen them for years, you've suddenly got a different family. So that family is the community, the community is the family, the community does things together so that's their identity. It's all circular, you know, self-perpetuating. And then, as a result of that, you get together. And what do people do when they get together? They complain. They get together and they complain and people, some people, say "something must be done" and somebody else will say "yes, it must, get on with it," because that's also something we're very good at doing isn't it, saying something must be done and having someone else do it. But people will rise up and become activists and they take other people with them, not all of them, but some of them, and so younger people or other people become activated through these people that want to make change. So it's absolutely central to it, the whole idea of identity and about deaf pride, and about deaf politics and social justice, it's all embedded in clubs. The clubs have gone away, but that hasn't, because that is now inculcated in deaf life. That, you know, young deaf people don't take any – I won't say it, but they don't take any. You know, they're not as compliant as older generations, but the older

generations went and did all that, they built that up particularly through the 70s and the 80s. As deaf clubs, quite ironically, went into decline, because deaf people were running themselves, the deaf people running them were politically active simply by running a deaf club by doing something that was outside the matrix. I used to say to my students in the course, simply by signing up for a deaf studies course you have become politically involved in the deaf community. You are politically active because you're on this course, your name is on, you know it's going to be on your degree. That means you're involved in the activity of the deaf world and the activism of deaf world. And the deaf clubs are absolutely central to that. Absolutely. The situation we're in now, the much better situation in this country, would not have come about without the deaf clubs. Without the deaf schools initially, and then the deaf clubs, absolutely, categorically, 100% double underline, for me, yeah absolutely. And it's interesting that that has survived as the deaf clubs have gone, but it shows that the foundations are there, and, in that respect the clubs aren't needed anymore. You know, for activism, because people are actively activists anyway, yeah.

Caroline Lieffers: That's really interesting, right, that the clubs declined, but the community, the activism, to large extent really has survived. That's really fascinating.

Martin Atherton: The other thing that's come from that, I should say, as well, as the clubs declined, the deaf community splintered. It splintered largely on age grounds—young people weren't interested in deaf clubs. They started going to pubs, they started going to clubs, they started doing hearing things. You know, I remember when some of the students, oh, what's it called, "it's just like flying," *Titanic*! When *Titanic* came out a group of students and went to the local cinema and asked if they put on a subtitled showing of *Titanic*. And a lot of students went and they loved it—many had never been to the cinema before and they loved it. The local cinema: oh, there's a market here. So one day a week when there were big films on they'd put the subtitles, and the whole deaf culture in Preston changed. And because it was making money in Preston, they started doing it in other places and now they do it all over. And that was from younger deaf people in conjunction with hearing people who just wanted to take part in a different... So the clubs have gone—they'd never done that in the club, they never showed a film in a club—but the activism, in a very minor way, took off. And that was again with the support and encouragement of people who knew how to do these things, the hearing students, because that was one of the things, "yeah, we need to do this, but how do we do it, we don't know." You know, we'd had this missioner or whoever do it and they've gone. So it's very, very much central to the whole way that life's changed, even as the clubs have gone. The roots are planted deep and they're beginning to flourish, extending that metaphor.

Caroline Lieffers: It's a lovely metaphor, well done. We found a fascinating article that you co-authored about oral history methodologies. You've already alluded to some of the challenges with sources in this field, right, you know, a building where records are basically being destroyed, alongside the building, that sort of thing. Do

you think that interviews are really going to need to be a key tool for disability and deaf historians going forward? What are your thoughts on that?

Martin Atherton: I think they have to be. Because you're not going to get very many written records even as literacy rates might go up. I've always said that most people aren't interested in history until they've got one. So if you don't get anybody young enough then you're then you're not, you're possibly not going to get them. But yeah there's all sorts of challenges, but there's also the benefits because you can then present some of these issues back to them. As I said earlier, it's a real tension that you can't do that. But I argued in the article that deaf history is oral history. Because it's not written down. If you just say oral is spoken history, no, no it's not. If you take it as anything that is not written down, oral tradition, shall we say, then that's what deaf history is because how else are you going to get it. You're only going to get it by going and asking somebody. By sitting down and putting a camera in the corners many times.

And one of the interesting things that came out of that—on all the projects that I have done, that I've interviewed people, and show them a video of them, I've always at the end of it offered them a copy of the video because it used to be taped when I started, a copy of the video and a transcript. Only one person ever took a transcript. No interest in it. If it's written I'm not interested. Well I said you can see what I said and what you said – no. Well I can show other people – well what can I do with a transcript. There's only one person ever who asked, and that was a salutary experience, because she pointed out a mistake I made. I'd missed a very slight – when I transcribed it, I'd missed a very slight negater, in that she's just done that, just a little tiny shake of the head, not even as big as that. And I'd gone, "Oh, when I used to go here I used to do that," and what it she actually signed was "When I used to go here, I never did that." That was a real "whoops," missed that one. Yeah I think that the whole idea of taking the video, show them that this is the appropriate medium, and they aren't interested this paper, it means nothing to me. It might as well be in Chinese or whatever, I'm not going to read it, but I am going to watch that. So it was a justification for producing stuff in video if you can. But, unfortunately, because of the costs involved, and everything else you know, you can't just put it out in video, because then it has to be subtitled and you have to have a voiceover. I said earlier, I did a history of the school. Well, when I did the history of the deaf school I put subtitles, then I put a voiceover on it. I didn't put subtitles on it because it wasn't technically possible. So I'm voicing over it, and I've got other people voicing over—I've got female voices for female people, and I remember sitting in my house are home with two female students watching a video. They didn't sign but they have a script in front of them, so I'm tapping one of them on the shoulder when she had to speak and tapping the other when she had to speak. Just to make it accessible. I mean, very amateurish, but you know variously the same process will be involved nowadays. That was thirty years ago.

It's such a challenge. That's the only problem. Great as a resource, but then you've got all the time of transcribing it making sure it's exactly correct—I haven't missed a little shake of the head—you've got everything exactly right—what the hell is that sign? I knew that sign in context and I've not a clue now. What's this sign here? I

got ripped to pieces once when I was talking about this at a conference. And I said I watched this thing out, I couldn't work out this sign, so I brought a deaf colleague in and asked him. And he couldn't work it out, so another deaf colleague came. It was seven of us in end sat around, watching this little clip going further forward and further back to get context. We finally worked out what it was, and it was absolutely no importance at all. But until we'd worked out what it was we didn't know it was important. I got ripped to pieces, for breaking confidentiality by bringing other people in to watch this thing. And I'm thinking, I can understand your point, but how do I ensure accuracy of what that person's told me. All the other people come in don't know that person. You know, they're never going to meet him, there's nothing there's nothing controversial he'd said, at all. It's just one sign that turned out to be one word that didn't mean anything in the context of things, but we had to identify it. And I was adamant that I'd done the right thing and I still am, I still will to this day, because all the responsibility for putting words in that person's mouth lies with me. So if I have to get other people involved to make sure it's accurate, I will do. Because they are all bound by confidentiality anyway, they aren't going talk about it - "oh yeah, I saw this video today this person said this" "And? Oh really?" That would really will be the answer I think. I keep going on my soapbox don't I? I'm on and off this soapbox today.

Kelsey Henry: No, your answers are so thorough, so thorough and fascinating. It's really fun listening to work through everything that we're asking.

Martin Atherton: Well I've been through it a few times. **[Kelsey laughs]** These things keep coming round and round. Joys of researcher, eh? Oh, I've slept till three o'clock this morning till that question comes to mind.

Kelsey Henry: On this topic of some of the really formidable challenges methodologically or ethically when it comes to doing deaf history, you've mentioned a couple of times the inaccessibility of deaf histories that are produced and conveyed in written English. Because this isn't an accessible language for all deaf people. So the question that I have that sort of jumps off of that, what do you think historians should be doing to make sure that their work is more accessible to deaf audiences and to a deaf public?

Martin Atherton: The bottom line is money. If you're writing a research project and costing out the budget, it costs a lot of money to produce—you know, producing something on video is fairly straightforward—but it's all the other stuff isn't it? It's the subtitling. Who do you get to do the voiceover? Surely you have to get a highly trained and qualified interpreter to do it unless you're doing it on your own because it's a little thing for university. But as a commercially available history. And then that costs a lot of money, and that would be a huge budget line, at a time when everybody's, you know, struggling for money, for research money. You need a very wide open-minded funder to look at that, because what they're going to say at the bottom line is well how many people benefit from this? You know, it's not going to be hundreds of thousands. I think it's a real, real challenge, to which there's no easy answer to be honest. I think the way forward is to do it on small scale projects, short things, and build from that, then you can show well this

is how this works, this is how we do it, we can learn from that process as well. For this amount of money we've produced this. We now want to produce something five times longer, but it will cost ten times the money, but here are the benefits and you've got to persuade people in little steps. You funded that and it was worth it, now please fund this. It's going to cost you twice as much because it's worth it. And next time it's twice as much so they won't realize next time it's four times as much as it was the first time, because it's two and two.

But I think it's not going to happen soon, not gonna happen soon at all. And not if you're going to do it properly. There's been the odd - there was a series in 2000 called "Deaf Century" in this country, which was three programs on Channel 4, and I was involved on the periphery of that. And that must have cost a lot of money to produce and that was just three programs for television, it must have cost a huge amount of money. Making stuff available that doesn't have any commercial profit, you know, I think that's a real problem or huge public interest. And you must change attitudes first, change attitudes to get the money, to do the work, which will help change attitudes, you know, it's chicken and egg, almost, isn't it? To some extent. And there's no there's no easy answer to it and no easy solution either. Working alongside deaf people will be useful for that to get them involved, but again you've still got the issue of money at the bottom. You've got to work with deaf people anyway, but you've still got to be in charge, as the person who knows how everything works, and that creates a different tension, then: "I'm going to be in charge of you telling you history." "Well why?" "Because it's how it has to be. Do you know how to do this?" "Well, no." "Well OK." You know, that's why I've worked so successfully with Len. Len was the figurehead for the school video and we used a lot of his research, because he'd done a lot of research. We worked together and it worked really well. But ultimately it was my project because it was my university work and it just worked really well, it was really nice small-scale template, but it wouldn't work for really any big thing.

Caroline Lieffers: Yeah that's really interesting, with money essentially being the bottom line, right? We do what we can, but it will, it will be a difficult battle. I was wondering if we could pivot a little bit because, as we were doing a little bit of background research on you, FBI style [laughs]

Martin: Ooh, smoke and mirrors [both laugh]

Caroline: We noticed that not all your work been focused on the deaf community, of course. You've also, it seems, written a little bit about sports history, that is not necessarily related directly to deaf history. And we're wondering, you know, like tell us more about this? You must be a sports fan of some kind, I would imagine? Is this a research interest for you in general?

Martin Atherton: Yes, funny enough, just yesterday I literally just finished another one, another book, a sport book, which will be coming out very soon. But yeah, I'm interested in lots of sports. Primarily football I have been a supporter of Preston Northend football club for the last 53 years and - I'm older than I look, believe it or not, yes - I've been involved with that and I've worked for the last 25

now 26 years, I've been the club's official statistician. So I keep all the statistics for the club, so I've worked with them for the last 26 years and I write for the program and I work with the local media, you know, I provide them with information before and after games, or I go on particularly local radio and talk about players or games or events that are coming up. Last season, the club became the first team in the football league to play 5000 league games. So I did lots of background information on that for the club and media outlets. So yes, I've got that interest, which is why Graham who was my lecturer way back, and he thought it'd be ideal to do the deaf united football project, deaf football project. So I was involved in that then, yeah, and so yes I've been involved that and I'm interested in cricket and something you may have heard of called rugby league. It's just a different version of rugby, not the not the ones you know, like Canada have got Rugby Union team and America have got the eagles Rugby Union team, but there's a rugby league team which has 13 a side, which is slightly different and not quite as similar as American football and Canadian football. Basically it started off the same and split, I'm interested in that, and other sports. I am also quite interested in sitting down and watching sports or walking past a field and people are playing some game or another and I usually stop and watch for a few minutes and see what they are doing. Yeah, so I've got a big background in that as a project. Helps maintain the enthusiasm I suppose, sometimes, for the research. Yeah, it's all part of the same, back to the jigsaw analogy again. They're all little bits of the same picture, when you put them all together.

Caroline Lieffers: We also found through our Internet sleuthing that you are involved in this initiative called Sporting Memories. And as someone who used to work in a long-term care facility for elderly people I found this project utterly fascinating. So can you tell us a little bit more about what Sporting Memories is and why this is meaningful for you?

Martin Atherton: Sporting Memories is a network of what is really about 300-350 groups, clubs—call it what you will—around the UK, that are involved in sporting memory. I became involved in it about two and a half years ago because someone I knew got involved in one in Leyland, which is six miles west. And I went along to that and, after a couple of meetings I thought we need one of these at Preston North End, we need one at my club. So I contacted the club and they already knew about and were working towards it so I've ended up being the leader of that, I lead the sessions. And Sporting Memories is about reconnecting, reengaging with people who are living with dementia, depression and all things. Either as directly affecting themselves, or family members, carers, whatever else, and it's using the power of sports to generate memories. Funnily enough, it was our second anniversary of the Preston North End group two days ago, on Tuesday, so it's very apposite that we are talking about that now. So we started in October 2019 and met in a local care home at first, but we outgrew that so we moved to the Football Club football ground. We were there for three months, and then COVID struck, so we finished in March last year, and there was a bit of an interregnum—we tried doing things on Twitter and things like that but it didn't work. And Leyland group that I started out, they started on Zoom and we'd never heard of Zoom. Who'd heard of Zoom two years ago? So they went online on Zoom and sat in on a couple

of them. I thought, right, this is us. So we've now been on Zoom since June of last year.

And that has certain benefits, to the extent that we're going to go back to the football club and have face to face meetings very soon, but we're going to continue the Zoom meetings. Because the Zoom meetings allow people who can't physically get to the Football Club to take part. So we have a member who lives down in Surrey near London at 250 miles away, we have another guy who lives in the northeast about 100 miles away, people over in Yorkshire, people from all different places who can then come and be part of this. It's fantastic. We get about 20 people a week, 20-25 people a week on screen. I've had to teach them how to show more than three people or four people at once. But it's brilliant and it's developed a life of its own, and I'm really, really good friend now with people I've never met. I've only ever seen them on screen. But the benefits people get from it, because, if it's dementia it might trigger a memory. Or it might just be time off for somebody who's caring. You know, they can come along to the face to face event, not have to worry for an hour and a half because somebody else is going to be looking after their partner, their husband, or wife, or whoever it is, and they can take part in that. If it's somebody who's suffering from depression, it lifts them up, it can lift them out of that for a moment and shows them that they aren't alone, that there are other people out there, and people become lonely without realizing it. Being alone can quite often lead to loneliness, not necessarily, but it can do, so it gets away from all that, it helps to counteract some of that. So we have a laugh online, a big laugh.

We have a rough rolling program. So we'll have a guest one week, we'll have a reminiscence session another week where we just pick a topic and talk about things, and we have a quiz. And the quiz, I do the quizzes. The quiz is not aimed at testing knowledge, it's about promoting members, about getting people to say "ah yeah I remember that, blah blah blah blah blah blah," and we take the mickey out of each other. We have a laugh at each other, there's running jokes that come in with people and it's just a lovely environment. It's supposedly for anybody over 50, we never ask anybody's age. But I'm one of the younger ones at 65, so I feel quite good about that, I'm one of the kids. Because we couldn't get back into—there isn't a suitable room available on the football grounds at the moment because funny enough they're using the lounges in the football ground as courts, as temporary courts, believe it or not. This is the mess we're in in this country. So what we've done, we've set up a walking group on Thursday morning. We meet at the football ground, and the football ground is right across from the park, so we walk around the park. It's just to get people there who want a bit of physical company as well from the people in on screen, so I've met some people that I've never met in person, but now know them, and they bring other people along. Every week other people who were on the zoom call say "Oh, my friend's coming on today his name is Jim, say hello to him," and it develops a life of its own so it's really, really good. Really good. We've got a national conferences online next Thursday and that will be with guests from the world of sport, but also people talking about practical issues about supporting the depression, dementia, and whatever. Tactics to use in the clubs and whatever, so it's useful as well as informative, you know, interesting

discussion. So yeah, I'm really, really glad and I got involved, it's been wonderful to be involved in and yeah, long may it continue.

Kelsey Henry: I just I loved hearing about this work Martin. I loved reading about sporting memories and I loved hearing you speak about it. I didn't realize that you had worked in a long-term care facility, Caroline. I also, I volunteered in a long-term care facility a couple of years ago, on a memory care unit, and it's really fascinating to hear about what parts of people's lives unlock the strongest memories, focusing on pleasurable pastimes that might unlock pleasurable memories, like sports is a great example of that. So it's just really exciting to hear about.

Martin Atherton: On Tuesday's meeting last week we had a former player for Preston Northend on who's now a radio host of sports programs, and he was a brilliant, fantastic speaker. And while we're going through that and next week's reminiscence session and I hadn't come up with a topic, and because I had not been thinking about it very much. And then just the course of it, he mentioned some away game. I thought, that's do. So at the end of his speech, I said right, next week it's reminiscence session and we're going to be talking about away trips to sporting events, you know, just going to one. And immediately somebody said "ask Malcolm about the donuts." Ping! So straight up, Malcolm is another of the members, immediately I said "right, hold that story for next week." Because the first part, we do every week, we have a look back over what's happened in sport for the previous week, and that again is "did anyone see this story about this?" And that will lead on to memories that come out. It's not really about the story, it's about getting people talking. And then we have whatever the guest, the quiz, is the reminiscence session. So next week, then, ok right, "Malcolm, what's this about donuts?" And that will start the conversation, which will then snowball and it's quite interesting. I have not a script or an agenda, I have a list every week of things we might want to talk about and most the time this goes out the window. Because people take ownership of it and just run with it. A memory will go there and then another one will go there, and it's just brilliant, absolutely brilliant, and everybody says how much they enjoyed it and how much they benefit from it. So it's great, so, anything at all.

It doesn't have to be sports, it can be anything, just things people get involved in. It can be cinema, theatre, music, anything that triggers a memory and gets people going and brings things out. The things that will come out for me just sitting there listening to the people talk. "Oh, I haven't thought about that for 20 years!" And I'm frantically trying to write them down. And then that leads to another memory and another memory. It's really, really, really rewarding. Really enjoy it. I gain so much from it. I get more from it than I put into it, definitely. I really do, it's brilliant. So, look forward to a Sporting Memories Canada and Sporting Memories USA.

Kelsey Henry: I mean it sounds like such a phenomenal space and in person I'm sure it was very helpful for combating social isolation for people with dementia and depression. During the pandemic I'm so glad that you all were able to make the

transition or conversion on to Zoom and still combat social isolation that was probably compounded by the pandemic itself. Really phenomenal.

Martin Atherton: It also gives structure to people's week as well, something for them to look forward to. We have one person who comes along to the face to face meetings, and his wife used to say "guess what time, guess what time" and I knew what she meant. So we started at 11 o'clock, he'd be ready at nine o'clock that morning. When the following week, quarter past eight, ready: "when are we going, when are we going, when are we going?" A guy living with dementia, they just so look forward to it, it gave that structure. So yeah, definitely worth doing.

Kelsey Henry: Well, I have one final pivot. We understand that you have a new book about deaf history and the 1901 Census. I'm wondering if you can give us just a little bit of a taste of what this new book is about.

Martin Atherton: This is where the Catholic guilt kicks in now, promoting yourself, oh dear. Yeah, essentially this is—I've called it a vanity project, but it's not really. This is just something that came into my head about four years ago, and it was an itch I had to scratch. So I did all the research while I was still at work and I got to the point where the research was pretty complete and I thought, I'm not going to write that now, I'm retiring next year, I'll leave that. And then it took me two years of retirement to find the time to write it. It was only because of the pandemic that I've had time to write.

But it's going back to what I was saying about deaf clubs and why they're important. People couldn't tell me. And I've used the census a lot in recent years, I've done my family tree, I've traced my family tree back to 15-something, traced certain branches. So I like using the census and I can interpret the census. And I thought, the 1901 census was the first one that—the term "deaf and dumb" was used in the census from 1841—it's a contentious term, but it serves its purpose. In terms of 1901, it was clearly defined as deaf people without speech, very clearly defined. So who were deaf people without speech? They are most likely the ones who are going to use their hands. That's my rationale. I mean, not all of them we don't know, we're back to the big D little d again, we can't say they're all sign language users, but they were most likely to be the ones. So that gives you the opportunity then to make, to reach some tentative conclusions about what life was like for deaf sign language users in 1901 from the Census.

And one of the things I found is you can find out a damn sight more about deaf people 120 years ago than you can now in this country, because deafness is not a notifiable condition. You don't have to tell anybody. We cannot tell you in this country how many deaf people there are. Never mind how many sign language users there are because it's self-identification issue again, isn't it? You know, "Are you deaf or not? No, just a bit hard of hearing." You know, where do you put that? In that box? So what I did, I reconstructed—we're back to Northwest again, this is where I live—I reconstructed the deaf population in general terms of the whole country. By deaf I mean, deaf and dumb, we'll use that term. So I know how many people are around the country. And then I focused on Lancashire, and I've looked

at three things. The book is called *Living, Learning, and Looking*. So it's population figures, marriage rates, family structures, then the education, because the county had three deaf schools, more than anywhere else other than London. And working, what these deaf people did for jobs because they're all listed. What sort of jobs they worked and what sort of social status they had. So I've done that for the whole of Lancashire, the Northwest county I live in, and then focused down on Preston, where I live, as a case study. And I can tell you who the 33 deaf and dumb people were, who lived in Preston. I can tell you exactly where they lived, in fact for 27 of them I can take you to the house because they still exist. I can tell you what they did for a living. I can tell you who they lived with, what the family structure was, whether they were married or not. I could tell lots about them.

And the whole reason for doing that was to put again flesh on the bones, who are these people. And you can do that. And then there's other things that come up—I found, so I focused on 1901, the census, and I found at Manchester deaf school the head teacher started his job in November 1900 and he kept a journal for a year of everything that went on in the deaf school, so it covers it. And I found it in Manchester central library. Don't know if anybody's ever looked at it. And the detail it gives you about life in the deaf school is incredible. So it's not my words, it's his. So the things they did. And education at that time in Britain was compulsory up to the age of 14. You could leave earlier, it was difficult. If you were deaf you had to go until 16—you needed longer. But it was interpreted as your 16th birthday was day you left school, no matter what time of the year it was, that's when you left. So I find instances of the school being asked by local education authorities to keep a certain pupil back, to keep hold of him when he got to 16. They didn't want him going back to his family, because they didn't think they could look after him. To stop him from going to the bad, was the phrase that was used. In another instance the school asked the local education authority if they could keep the child at school. And what they did, they found them jobs. They found them jobs as stonemasons, these are trades. They didn't ask them, they just told them they would be stonemasons. Found them jobs with stonemasons as apprentices, they found them accommodation, lodging with the same woman so they're not going on their own. Now is that paternalism? Is it philanthropy? Is it control? The thing is those kids ended up with a better life because of the interference of the school, than they would have had. Balance of probabilities.

Tiny little things like that, you know. So I found out all about the family structures, the fact that deaf people were much less likely to be married. But then you look, why is that? Well where's your deaf partners, where's your potential life partners? I looked at a little town called Chorley, just south of Preston. There were five deaf and dumb men, five deaf and dumb women, potentially five partnerships, five marriages. One of them was older, one of them was quite young. Then you look at the ages, and at the most there's three potential marriages, but then you've got to meet and you've got to get on. So it's not surprising that the marriage rates are so much lower, it's simple opportunity where you, there's no deaf club in the town, so you're not going to meet anywhere like that, you know. There's no going off to football matches to find a good fella, yeah, there's none of that. So there's all sorts

of things like that, and you look at the family structure and the fact that they were the only deaf person.

But then, you find an example in Burnley, where there's three deaf and dumb men living in very close proximity to each other, quite by accident, but they form a little community. They've got social interaction from that, just by accident, living one round the corner and then another in the next street and so on. You find out about the jobs, and actually quite a few were in higher status jobs. The predominant industry around here in 1901 was cotton textile. Cotton textile manufacturers. Less than half of them worked in textile. Less than half. They were doing other things. And some of them had actually quite high status jobs. And you've looked at the education, so you can challenge things, as you said earlier about Milan Congress. No, they were still using sign language in Manchester in 1901, 21 years after Milan, they were still using sign language in Preston in 1901, 21 years after Milan, and it wasn't a hierarchical system, it was a what fits best system. You know that did change later, but there's all sorts of things you can find out and I really enjoyed doing it. I'm glad I did.

I've got that itch out now and I've self published it because I've really can't be doing with publishers charging a fortune for books. But also just to get it out and if anybody bought it then that was interesting. I did have a few people who have bought it so it's nice. Mostly former students but other people as well, and if it gets out and people find interesting, that's good. But I now know I can answer that question if anybody asked me: so what was deaf life really like 1901? Well, in this instance, in Lancashire and Northwest England particularly Preston, this is what it was like. And I found all sorts of issues with methodology issues with using the census, as a consequence, which be useful for other people as well, so. I just enjoyed doing it. I understand the pressures that you might feel to publish but I saw it as time off, not yet another job I have to do, but I can say that now retired, can't I.

Caroline Liefers: I mean it sounds like a brilliant book and maybe you'll get a few more book sales. Ah, brilliant, brilliant. Well you've certainly convinced me of the value of sort of drilling down deeply into a community and getting a sense of how deaf life was lived, so that's really exciting. Martin, I have to say, it has been an absolute pleasure to get to know you today through this podcast, so thank you very much for your time.

Martin Atherton: Thank you very much for having me. I really enjoyed myself. It's been a pleasure to talk about my work but also hopefully to encourage other people to do similar things because there's lots of work out there that needs doing. Thank you very much, I've really enjoyed myself.

Kelsey Henry: Thank you so much, Martin.

Martin Atherton: You're welcome.