The Story of NextSense

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# A note on language and its historical use

Language is ever-evolving and a living expression of ourselves and our times. It’s why we see languages change over time, as terms are created, and existing ones take on new meanings, as new idioms emerge, and as we become more aware of how language can impact people.

At NextSense, we believe each one of us has the right to choose the language or terminology that best describes who we are, what we stand for and believe in, and what best represents our communities.

That said, this book covers a legacy that spans over 160 years. In that time, the language used in our field and in society has changed gradually but significantly. So, when we look back, we run historically used words, names, and terms that are no longer deemed appropriate. To accurately document our journey, there are places in this book where such sensitive terminology will appear, but only because it was a product of its time. Please understand that those instances are simply about recording what was then and in no way represent our stance, nor does it condone the use of such terminology today.

# Dedication

People are at the centre of everything we do. This book is dedicated to the people who have helped write our history, who make today possible and continue to shape our future.

To the children and adults we help support, their families, and the communities who work with us to redefine what’s possible for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or have low vision.

And to the extraordinary, dedicated and talented people in our organisation who work tirelessly to ensure our clients have the support, tools, and skills they need to reach their personal potential.

To the incredible generosity of our donors and supporters, who help make what we do possible. And to the members of our board who share their wisdom and counsel to help lead the organisation.

We thank you. This is your story, your journey, from past to everything that comes next.

# Foreword David Dinte, President

As I reflect on the fascinating history of NextSense, formerly the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, and my 24 years of service on its board, I realised that—even after 163 years—this extraordinary organisation is more relevant than ever.

That is a remarkable achievement for one of Australia’s oldest charities. When the institution accepted its first few pupils back in 1860, I wonder if the founders and board members could have imagined all that it would go on to achieve. The profound impact it would have on people with hearing and vision loss, and the radical changes it would help make to education, culture, community, inclusivity, policies, research, and technology in Australia and beyond.

That is not to say that this organisation has ever lacked vision and ambition. In fact, we continue to be inspired by our past board and leaders’ relentless dedication to innovation and advancement over the years. We have always been an organisation of firsts and will continue that dedication for as long as people need us.

What started as a school in the colony of New South Wales for children who were deaf or hard of hearing, blind or had low vision has become an organisation for people of all ages that spans a multitude of services. An organisation at the forefront of the sector.

There has never been a better time to reflect on everything this organisation and its people have achieved. We entered this new decade at one of the most challenging times in recent memory and were able to remain as deeply committed as ever to our clients. We also emerged a step ahead.

Today, we start a new chapter in our story, including a move to our first new headquarters location in over 60 years. Our new NextSense centre, located on the Macquarie University campus, has been developed as a beacon for best practices in the field of hearing and vision loss.

This book is the story of an incredible journey and a celebration of every single person who has made it possible. It ensures we always remember who and what it took to get where we are today. It also serves as the foundation for what we want to achieve together in the future. My personal thanks go out to the people in our organisation all the dedicated individuals who choose to make a difference every day. And to the board of directors I am privileged to lead, my peers who so selflessly give of their time and counsel to ensure that we will continue to lead—and remain relevant—for the next 160 years.

# Preface Chris Rehn, Chief Executive

The Story of NextSense is one of purpose that has never wavered. Over the last 164 years, that purpose has been to support people with hearing and vision loss. It’s a story of passionate and extraordinary people who always believed in possibilities, who looked ahead for new ideas and advancements and made them real in people’s every day.

In that time, we have done more than deliver services to those who need them—we’ve been able to influence and help define the standard by which we and other organisations work.

Of course, as an organisation, we haven’t done this alone. It’s only been possible because we’ve had the support of many. The generous donors who believe that what we do is important. Communities that help support us and each other.

Advocates and influencers who stand up for what matters. Government bodies and policymakers who help back our efforts and seek to build a more inclusive Australia. Innovators who challenge us to look ahead, and the partners with whom we collaborate to shape tomorrow.

While looking to the future is what we will continue to do, it’s been a fascinating journey to look back on our history as we have put this book together. It’s both inspiring and humbling to reflect on what’s come before us—because the strength of that legacy is what makes today and tomorrow possible.

I feel privileged to be a part of this organisation—for everything we’ve achieved and what I believe we can do in the future. It’s why our purpose is about enhancing lives today, because of what people who have hearing and vision loss can go on to achieve in their futures. It’s also why we push ourselves to innovate and advance research, education, and technology.

From here, along with the wonderful people and families we work with and all those we collaborate with, we will continue to make a difference day in and day out, and we can play a bigger and more significant role in influencing and advancing the sector in Australia and globally. That’s why, together, we’ll keep striving to lift the limits of what’s possible.

# Part One: The early years 1860–1869

It was 1858, a time when the colony of New South Wales was still young, when a man by the name of Thomas Pattison emigrated from Scotland to Sydney, Australia, to join his brother. Thomas Pattison was 52 years old at the time.

He was also profoundly deaf. Within a mere two years following his landing, he would prove to be the catalyst for the founding and development of the very first school in Australia for children who were deaf.

New South Wales, at the time, was experiencing the effects of a gold rush, and a population explosion occurred in cities and rural areas, with an influx of free settlers arriving to make their fortunes. This increased New South Wales’ wealth and its importance in trade, leading to great progress. It became the wealthiest and most populated of the colonies and the first in Australia to achieve self-government in 1855, when it was granted its own constitution and parliament.

It was in this climate that Pattison settled in Sydney. There was expectation in the air, which no doubt helped spur his endeavours. He quickly recognised that there was no organisation dedicated to the education of children who were deaf or hard of hearing, and parents had very limited choices during these times. Those with sufficient funds could send their children to a school overseas, typically in England, or import a personal tutor. Others did their best at home, but their children faced many limitations as adults in society, meaning parents had to support them for the rest of their lives. Children deemed unable to learn sufficient social skills at home were often placed in an asylum.

## The founding of the institution

Shortly after landing, Thomas Pattison met George Lentz, who had three adult daughters who were deaf, including Anne Lentz, who would become one of the first students at the School. Through the Lentz family, he learned there had previously been an unsuccessful attempt to start classes by a private tutor named Sherrington Gilder, so an opportunity existed. Pattison had been both a pupil and a monitor at the Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb Institution. While his actual qualifications and role at the Institution have been disputed over time, his experience and drive were such that he began a small private organisation that offered classes. He did so with the help of George Lentz and, it is believed, the support of Rev. George King. Named the Deaf and Dumb Institution (DDI), the School opened in October 1860 at 152 Liverpool Street in Sydney. In its first year, the Institution was private and considered experimental.

Under the management of Thomas Pattison and George Lentz, the School began with eleven students. However, when surveying the immediate area, they discovered over 50 children they deemed would benefit from their services. Pattison also spent six months travelling north, through Tamworth and up to Queensland, locating children and obtaining subscriptions and funds. At the end of this first year, it was apparent that the Institution could serve many students and would need greater financial support.

Rev. George King stepped in, and a provisional committee was established to pursue public designation.

## Becoming a public institution

That first experimental year produced sufficient proof for the School to be granted the status of a Public Institution that required the transfer of its financial management to a Board of Directors. As of October 1861, it came under the administration of a body of philanthropic men. These “*thirteen gentlemen who now form the Committee resolved to bring the subject under the notice of the government and the public generally, for the purposes of* rendering the services of the teachers employed as extensively useful as possible.” The Ladies’ Visiting Committee supported this Gentlemen’s Committee, comprised largely of the wives of the gentlemen, who directed the Matron in her duties.

Referred to as a hybrid charity and private school, both the State and the Protestant Church were represented from the start, an approach that was typical for the time. The Committee (or Board) included the Governor of New South Wales, His Excellency Sir John Young as Patron, and along with four other members of the Legislative Assembly, they represented the State. The Rev. George King and two other reverends represented the church.

Reverend George King took on the role of President, which he held for 20 years, and the School recruited a member of the medical profession, Dr George Walker, to oversee the students’ general health. Pattison continued as the principal teacher, assisted by Charlotte Lentz, a hearing daughter of George Lentz and experienced in deaf communication, and Miss Mitchell as the Matron.

The School officially opened as a Public Institution at 368 Castlereagh Street, Sydney—the location the Institution had moved to shortly after opening. It began with seven students, but that number increased significantly during the first year. While some of the fee-paying students were funded by family or friends, others with no means were there at the expense of the School, which meant the Institution relied heavily on donations for its survival.

In coverage by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1863, the article praised the organisation and suggested it was less known simply because of its recent establishment. However, it predicted that as the School and its efforts became better known, it would become more appreciated and encouraged. It also noted the evident difference it made in the students’ lives. The article stated that no one who visited the School could “*watch the method of teaching pursued, without being convinced that it is well adapted to develop the intelligence of the children, and also to give them a growing delight in their studies, as well as to inspire respect and affection for their teachers*.”

By 1864, the School was no longer considered an experiment and instead ranked highly amongst other charitable institutions of the colony. As it grew, it began a series of moves to larger and more adequate premises. The first move, in 1863, was to a space at 461 Pitt Street, Sydney. However, with 22 students—half of whom were day pupils and half boarding—and enrolments coming from as far afield as Queensland, Tasmania, and New Zealand, by 1868 it moved again. It settled in spacious apartments at the airy residence of Ormond House in Paddington, which had ample grounds attached for various forms of exercise and amusements.

At this point, a mere eight years into its operation, the Board could confidently claim a favourable comparison of the Institution to similar organisations in England. It also discovered where its greatest limitations for progress lay—with parents. Many parents often removed children from the School after one to two years, the point at which they were only just getting to the right level of education. The School instead advocated for a minimum of three to four years of education, at which time older students could be apprenticed to a trade to which they were well suited. For students whose families could not support them in such a move, the Board took on management and expenses.

## Introducing education for the blind

Around 1868, the Institution acknowledged that an increasing number of parents approached them for children who were blind. Previously deeming themselves unable to provide for such children, the Board decided to expand its operations by offering education to children who were blind. It began preparing for their education, including turning to sources in England for funds and books, and asking their supporters to give for the ‘uncared-for blind’.

Moving very quickly, by 1869 they had already welcomed blind students to the Institution under the care of a new teacher, Mr Cashmore. He was a man who was blind and thoroughly familiar with the latest and best modes of teaching. The students themselves quickly showed remarkable progress, with the more advanced ones able to read with some accuracy.

As a result, the Institution officially changed its name to incorporate this new expansion, becoming the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind.

As the decade came to an end, the Institution had progressed to the point that in its annual examination, its audience expressed great admiration—and even surprise—over the children’s progress. They were examined in english grammar, geography, history, and arithmetic and were acquainted with many branches of literature. The New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind was ready for its next big step.

## Thomas Pattison 1805–1899

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland on January 5, 1805, the fourth child of Thomas Pattison and Elisabeth Lorn, Pattison was deaf either from birth, or from an early age. As such, he was educated at the Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb Institution.

Thomas Pattison received schooling likely using a combination of the manual method and English through reading and writing, under the instruction of headmaster Robert Kinniburgh. His classmates included Alexander Drysdale and Joseph Turner, who would later play significant roles in developing education for people who were deaf or hard of hearing in Scotland. After his studies, Pattison apprenticed as a coachbuilder in Edinburgh. When not at work, he was involved in mission work with the Deaf in Edinburgh, Dumfries, and Dundee. He worked as a coach painter before he emigrated to New South Wales to join his brother, Captain Robert Lorn Pattison, who arrived in Australia in 1837.

Aside from being a pupil, his role at the Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb Institution varies in account. Some say he was a pupil for five or seven years and a monitor after that, leaving in 1820 when he was around 15 years old and had finished his schooling. However, the first advertisement placed by the Deaf and Dumb Institution in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1860 notes him as “*late secretary and treasurer of the Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb Benevolent Society*” with no mention of him as a teacher. Then in 1862, in the Deaf and Dumb Institution’s first Annual Report, he is described as “*an experienced teacher, who passed twenty-three years of his life in the Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb School, as an assistant teacher*,” and referred to as ‘Professor Pattison’. Whether this last claim was factual, exaggerated by the Board to promote the Institution’s professional stature, or Pattison led them to believe it is now difficult to ascertain and lost to history.

Regardless, Pattison did tremendous work as a teacher and principal, and his influence and impact on teaching and educational excellence—which the organisation continues to this day—cannot be denied. Despite being the catalyst and driving force behind the founding of the Institution, Pattison’s departure from the organisation occurred in 1866. Charlotte Lentz was replaced by her sister Edith and she and Pattison experienced some tension between their role and authority, and that of the Matron. During an examination of a complaint against the Matron, the Board instructed the children questioned to obey her in everything. Pattison and Lentz saw this as a slight, and both threatened to resign. Edith Lentz eventually left the organisation for other reasons, including pay, and the Board chose to separate themselves from the entire Lentz family at this time. Pattison, however, chose to stay. Since he was soon to be married, he recommended the new Mrs Pattison replace the Matron.

The Board agreed and made Pattison the sole Master. However, it soon became clear that Mrs Pattison was not up to the task, and the Board finally chose to relieve the Pattisons of their positions as Master and Matron. Thomas Pattison was engaged solely as a teacher from 9am to 4pm. Things appeared to settle down in the following year until the Board received various complaints about Pattison himself, which led to his final dismissal. After this, Pattison and his wife briefly attempted to open a new school for students who were deaf in Sydney, but it proved unsuccessful. After a few months in New Zealand, Pattison settled in Melbourne and worked as a coach painter and builder until 1886.

In his eighties, he spent four years at the Benevolent Asylum, and for the remainder of his life was supported by the deaf community and his brother’s family. He lived in Melbourne with David Piper, a former student and the first pupil teacher of the Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution. He also maintained a close friendship with Frederick Rose, the founder of that Institution, who was also deaf. His wife appears to have lived separately in Grafton and was not with him in his later years. Pattison passed away on April 6, 1899. He lies buried at Melbourne General Cemetery.

Pattison’s undeniable impact and legacy live on. His early efforts would result in an organisation that, for over 160 years, has supported and empowered people with hearing and vision loss.

## George A.F. Lentz and the Lentz family 1797–1883

George Augustus Frederick Lentz was born in London and had a dubious reputation as a thief and conman. A gold watch he claimed was a gift from King George IV for a musical performance was more likely stolen. At 17, he was convicted at the Old Bailey and sentenced to transportation to the colony of NSW.

Arriving in 1815, he was sent to work as a builder in Parramatta and had the good fortune of training as a carpenter and joiner. Despite that, he still suffered financial difficulties and insolvency.

By 1837, he was cohabiting with a married woman, Mrs Mary Ann (Marion) Thompson, who had seven children. George and Marion were married after her husband died in 1854, and they had another three children together. His interest in the education of the deaf was because three daughters in the family were deaf and could not access adequate schooling.

After his marriage, Lentz gained some respectability and actively supported Rev. George King and his work at St. Andrew’s Cathedral. Despite his less-than-auspicious beginnings, he was of invaluable support to Thomas Pattison and the founding of the Institution.

His daughter Anne would become one of the Institution’s first students, and his daughters Charlotte and Edith would each consecutively take on the role of teacher’s assistant. After Edith’s problematic departure from the Institution in 1863, the relationship between the Lentz family and the Institution ceased completely. That same year, Charlotte married Board member E. S. Wilson and unsuccessfully attempted to open her own school in Sydney.

## Reverend George King 1813–1899

George King, a Church of England clergyman, was born in County Tyrone, Ireland. Educated at Trinity College in Dublin, he was ordained in June 1837. His wife’s asthma prompted their migration to Western Australia, where they settled in Fremantle and built a church in 1843. He also ran an institution for Indigenous Australian children and strongly criticised the government’s misguided policies towards Indigenous people. He was deemed enthusiastic and hard-working, but when his health began to deteriorate, he set his sights on New Zealand.

While transiting in Sydney, however, Bishop William Grant Broughton persuaded him to take temporary charge of the St. Andrew’s parish. This appointment was made permanent in June 1848. Here, he enthusiastically built a strong following and became involved in the development of St. Andrew’s Cathedral.

That said, some controversy arose between Rev. King and the Bishop of Sydney over his role at the Cathedral. King, the church incumbent for twelve years, claimed the role of minister and the right to officiate in the cathedral when finished. The Bishop, however, appointed Rev. W. M. Cowper as Dean of the Cathedral, a move King protested. What followed escalated to legal action and resulted in the Bishop revoking King’s licence, although it was later reissued, and King was appointed to St. Peter’s in Cook River. He passed away in 1899.

## The Institution’s locations in its early years

1860–1861  
The first School building was located at 152 Liverpool Street, Sydney.

1861–1863  
The School relocated to larger premises at 368 Castlereagh Street, Sydney.

1863–1868  
The School’s next location was at 461 Pitt Street, Sydney.

### Ormond House 1868–1872

In 1868, the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind moved to Ormond House in Paddington, the final rental location before purchasing a site.

Known today as Juniper Hall, this heritage-listed former residence was built by Robert Cooper, a gin distiller, in 1825. During its time, the house has been used as a private school for girls, as the home of the Society for the Relief of Destitute Children, and was leased to various charitable and educational organisations, including a ladies’ college and the Children’s Relief Board. Later, it became New South Wales’ first Children’s Court.

The National Trust of Australia undertook a restoration that was completed in 1988. Part of this restoration included demolishing commercial buildings that had blocked its view from Oxford Street. Now fully visible, it continues as Juniper Hall.

## The manual method of teaching

Thomas Pattison used the teaching methods he learned in Edinburgh, which included the manual method—sometimes referred to as fingerspelling or signing—as was used in Scotland and England at the time.

Signing as a form of communication has existed for centuries, both to communicate with people who are deaf and as multimodal communication within and across communities. One of the earliest recorded references to sign language dates back to Ancient Greece in the 5th century BCE. However, it is estimated that First Nations in Australia have used community-specific versions of ‘hand talk’ for some 65,000 years. Native American plains communities used signing as a lingua franca between tribes long before colonisation, with many of its signs now incorporated into American Sign Language (ASL). In the Middle Ages, sign gestures were used in European monastic orders, especially when observing silence.

Many modern sign languages can trace some influence back to a version codified in France by Charles-Michel de l’Épée, who established the first school for the deaf in Paris in the 18th century. This includes British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL), the languages initially used in Australia, which would eventually evolve into the current Australian Sign Language (Auslan).

## Journeying from Queensland

Children from Queensland attended the Institution at the expense of the Queensland Government until 1892. Travelling to Sydney would likely have been by ship, and anyone travelling by coach would have endured a great deal of discomfort due to the bad state of the roads. Any communication between children and their families depended on the mail service between Sydney and Brisbane. The telegraph line, set up in 1861, was likely only an option for dire emergencies.

## Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution

The Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution, opened by Frederick John Rose, who was profoundly deaf, is the second oldest organisation of its kind in Australia. That said, its opening was preceded by that of the Deaf and Dumb Institution in Sydney by a mere three weeks.

Today, it is known as the Victorian College for the Deaf. It proudly provides excellence in Deaf Education for students in Foundation through to Year 12.

Frederick Rose and Thomas Pattison maintained a life-long friendship.

## The role of collectors in fundraising

Fundraising has been an integral part of the Institution since its first day. Thomas Pattison himself spent several months travelling the colony for two reasons: To collect funds and identify families with children that could benefit from the School. Fund collection was needed to keep the School running, particularly for the operational costs of a residential school. That is where the role of a Collector came in.

Eventually, the Institution brought on a Collector by the name of A.B. Johnstone, a man who was deaf. The Institution would advertise for financial support by announcing the arrival of such Collectors in certain towns to motivate subscribers.

Through the ongoing generous support of the public, the Institution has been able to continue its efforts to this day.

# Part Two: Foundation for the future 1870–1879

The New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind entered its second decade as a Public Institution with expanded services, a new name, Board leadership, and new goals.

Australia at the time was in the middle of the Industrial Revolution and was becoming one of the most urbanised countries in the world as more people took up work in manufacturing. Around this time, some of the colonies in Australia, such as Victoria, started to focus on children’s education.

Unfortunately, the colony of New South Wales lagged in this area. Education, especially that for children with disabilities, continued to be provided by organisations such as the Institution. Understanding this responsibility, the Institution turned its attention to two fundamental areas: Its ‘long-cherished wish’ for a new and permanent home and finding a teacher and leader to continue advancing education.

## Building Darlington

The Board’s unwavering mission to enable as many students as possible to study and learn—so they could eventually earn their own living and become useful members of society—demanded sufficient accommodation so that no child would be without means of education. As early as 1869, the Board acknowledged the need for a dedicated and fit-for-purpose facility that would accommodate the evolving needs of their pupils. They began to lobby the government for assistance.

When support was finally granted in 1870, the Institution received 2,000 pounds and a *‘beautiful and healthy site of five acres’* in Darlington, on City Road (sometimes referred to as Newtown). The foundation stone was laid on April 3, 1871, by His Excellency the Earl of Belmore, the Governor of New South Wales at the time, and publicly opened on January 15, 1872. It provided the Institution with far more room, especially for those children who boarded, and had a bed capacity for 80 to 112 students. The building would remain the home of the Institution for the next 90 years, becoming the largest school of its kind in Australia.

## Recruiting Samuel Watson

While planning and building Darlington, the Board turned its sights to a critical concern: Finding a suitable replacement to serve as Superintendent.

As a colony, New South Wales was squarely under the influence of Great Britain and often looked there and to Europe for best practices. This included educational, social, and charitable institutions, with some in Australia modelled almost exactly as those in Britain. So, when seeking a new school Master, the Institution sought to procure candidates from England. They availed themselves of the visit of “*one of the most energetic members of the Ladies’ Visiting Committee*” to Great Britain to help obtain the services of an experienced teacher and master: Ann Goodlet.

Ann, and her husband John Goodlet, were travelling in the United Kingdom at the time of recruiting and proved to be instrumental in securing the services of Samuel Watson. While there were many submissions for the opening, it was difficult to find someone with experience in the education of both the deaf and blind. It was also a position with limited resources at its disposal, including teaching support. In Samuel Watson, they found the ideal candidate, and based on the ardent recommendation from Ann Goodlet—and some salary negotiations—Watson was finally secured.

Ann Goodlet reassured Watson that “*any teacher would be treated with all the consideration and sympathy which his position demanded*” while pragmatically managing his expectations of what he would find on his arrival. She also hastened his move, understanding the urgency of the role, given that the interim master, Sherrington Gilder, was not considered fully up to the task.

Watson was a highly regarded professional with ten years of experience. First, as an assistant teacher at the Ulster Institution for the Deaf, the Dumb and Blind, and based on his success there, as a Teacher and Manager of the Church of Ireland Derry and Raphoe Deaf and Dumb Institution. Once he accepted the opportunity in New South Wales, he proactively took it upon himself to tour similar institutions across England, Scotland, and Ireland to gather further information and knowledge. After a three-month journey, he arrived in Sydney on November 7, 1870, and took up his appointment just three days later.

## Advancing education

As Watson set about his new role—one he would hold for nearly 40 years—he focused on the education of his students. He also prioritised educating the general public about people who were deaf and their specific educational needs.

Watson’s impact was felt almost immediately, with the Board seeing marked improvement in the students within the first year. He clearly understood the unique needs and challenges that children who were deaf or blind faced when it came to education, the discipline, and educational advantages they could obtain through the Institution.

Most importantly, he recognised the inherent intellect that was unique to every child.

He also extended evening classes to adults who were deaf, understanding the value and need required for ongoing support for people dealing with new experiences as they go out into the community as adults. Particularly if, as children, they grew up segregated from society.

His instruction relied on the manual method of teaching, and he exhibited great patience with his students. He continually stressed the value of education and remained open to new ideas. During his tenure, Watson kept up with the latest practices, travelling internationally on many occasions to investigate the latest developments and explore how to apply the advanced thinking of the time.

In 1878, during a seven-month sabbatical needed to recuperate from ill health, he travelled through England, Europe, and America to pick up the latest education techniques. On his return, he brought news of the oral method of teaching that prevailed in Europe, which focused on the use of speech and lipreading rather than sign language or the manual alphabet. Watson became the first person to introduce it into education in Australia. However, he took a very pragmatic approach to doing so. He believed it had potential, but his observations during his travels also confirmed that combined teaching systems did the greatest good for the greatest number of pupils—a prescient stance given the controversy that later surrounded organisations that advocated for the sole use of the oral method.

Over time, Samuel Watson’s reputation in the field grew, both locally and internationally, and in 1893, a paper he authored on Australian Institutions and deaf education was read at the Congress of Charitable Institutions as part of the World’s Fair in Chicago.

During this critical decade, the foundation for the future of the Institution was set. It created a new code of rules for the management of the Institution, focused on the hiring and training of new teachers and the placement of pupil teachers. It attempted to codify the age requirements for students based on what they needed to graduate successfully.

Now with a permanent home and a dedicated superintendent and staff, the Institution was able to focus on improving on its successes and reaching more children than ever before.

## Samuel Watson 1842–1911

Samuel Watson was born in Glenhugh, Northern Ireland, on December 22, 1842. At 18, with both his parents passed on, Watson was employed by the Ulster Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind. Here, he learned to teach children who were deaf, and he also acquired his dedication to doing good. His temperament and accomplishment had him recommended for the role of Teacher and Manager of the Church of Ireland Derry and Raphoe School for the Deaf and Dumb. Highly regarded in this role, it was mostly the prospect of greater opportunities and financial security that drew him to leave after 18 months to take up the opportunity in New South Wales.

In 1887, Watson married Mary Jane Jones, a woman whose family he had known and visited for ten years, which surprised many who thought Watson was solely married to his work. The couple had four children together. Correspondence shows that Watson was a warm and affectionate father, which also showed in his attention to the children at the Institution—a big-hearted soul adored by the boys and girls in his care. It is said that the boarding school had a homelike atmosphere, which added to its success. His philosophy of “*patience, patience…infinite patience*,” which he embodied, was often practised by his staff.

By 1910, when Watson was in his late sixties, the Board agreed to his retirement, set for June 1911, so they could find a replacement. However, he became very ill before that time came. Watson passed on April 27, 1911, at the Glenhugh residence adjacent to the Institution (nicknamed after his place of birth) built specifically for him and his wife in 1887.

On his passing, he was described as “*a wise Counsellor, a faithful friend, and beloved by all the Deaf and Dumb of N.S.W*.”

## The Darlington building 1868–1962

The Darlington building today is considered a fine example of charitable institutions of that time—its very construction displays the philosophy, planning, and growth of educational and residential facilities.

Designed by architect Benjamin Backhouse, the Darlington building was constructed in three main stages, starting in 1871 through to 1884. It features an eclectic mix of Victorian architectural styles featuring polychromatic brickwork, flanking towers, and French (Burgundian) style pyramidal roofs, including dormers and decorative metal finials.

The site would be expanded over time, through to 1929, with more acres of land acquired. A hospital was built in 1880, spurred by the outbreak of a measles epidemic amongst children in 1875. The superintendent’s residence, built in the late 1880s for Samuel Watson, is a Victorian Italianate two-storey bay-fronted villa, typical of a suburban villa of the time, with popular decorative motifs in cast iron and render.

The site was used as an emergency hospital during the influenza epidemic following World War I. Then, during World War II, the building was requisitioned by the military (RAAF), and children were sent home for lessons by correspondence or to the Child Welfare Department. This prompted the Institution to purchase another building in Wahroonga to serve as a day school.

In 1962, the Institution moved to a new location in North Rocks and the buildings were acquired by the University of Sydney—as part of the expansion of its original site and into the then-residential suburb of Darlington. The residence was occupied by Sydney University Press from 1964 and refurbished in 1990. Today, the main building holds lecture theatres and university services, and the stunning original boardroom showcases artworks from the University of Sydney’s exclusive art collection. The former residence is now a beautifully designed venue for events such as conferences and parties.

## John Goodlet (1835–1914) and Ann Goodlet (1824–1903)

John and Ann Goodlet were renowned philanthropists in the colony. They were both originally from Scotland but arrived separately in New South Wales in 1855. They married in May 1860. John Goodlet was a timber merchant and owned several different businesses. Alongside his successful entrepreneurial activities, which helped advance the colony’s economic development, he served twice as chairman of the Australian Mutual Provident Society, was a railway commissioner from 1890 to 1891, and was a lieutenant colonel in the militia.

The Goodlets would go on to use their wealth and time to support a wide range of charitable organisations, including Sydney Hospital, the Benevolent Society, the Presbyterian Church, the Royal Hospital for Women at Paddington, Sydney City Mission and, of course, the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, among others.

John and Ann were instrumental at the Institution, and aside from their financial contributions, they dedicated their time to roles on the governing committees. Both, but particularly Ann, who was likely the driving force behind their philanthropy, were instrumental in hiring Samuel Watson as Superintendent. In his later role as President of the Board, John would be behind the hire of Harold Earlam as Watson’s successor.

Ann Goodlet was the Secretary of the Ladies’ Visiting Committee at the Institution. She served as President of the first Australian branch of the Young Women’s Christian Association and was on the State Children’s Relief Board. Ann Goodlet died in 1903, and John Goodlet in 1914, after leaving most of his estate to the Presbyterian Church.

## The oral method of teaching

Oralism (also Articulation or the German Method, as described by Samuel Watson when he learned of this mode of teaching in Europe) was defined at the time as the education of people who are deaf through lipreading and mimicking the mouth shapes and breathing patterns of speech to produce oral language. In Watson’s time, supporters of this method believed that it was important for the deaf community to assimilate into the ‘hearing world’ and that this method would allow them to do so.

Oralism, as the systematic education of deaf people, began in Spain in the mid-1500s. However, it was Samuel Heinicke, who set up a school for children who were deaf in Leipzig, Germany in 1778, who would be one of the most influential early proponents of this method—thus the term ‘German method’. His followers took this method to Holland, and a Dutchman by the name of William Van Praagh would then successfully introduce it in England in the early 1870s, eventually leading to the founding of The Association for the Oral Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb in 1871, and an associated training college the following year. Alexander Graham Bell would go on to become one of the most vocal supporters of the oral method in the United States and beyond. This would lead to a long-term and controversial debate on the efficacy of the oral method over the manual method, and this would have a significant impact on education and the deaf community.

## The Royal Commission of 1874

In 1874, a Royal Commission was launched to report on the ‘Working and Management of the Public Charities of the Colony’. The inspection visit was exhaustive and yielded positive results for the Institution. The report from the Inspector of Public Charities, given to Parliament stated:

This statement, remarking on the ‘truly charitable character’ of the Institution, was replayed in the following years, with the report of 1880 stating:

“*I have always pleasure in laying the condition of this Charity before the government. Not only because of its admirable management and truly benevolent character, but because it has acquired a vigour of growth and self-dependence not equalled by any of our other regularly subsided Public Charities*.”

“*The Institution is conducted on unsectarian principles, and from its truly charitable character, is in every way deserving of public support*.” **THE ROYAL COMMISSION OF 1874**

## Deaf Education and the Roman Catholic Church

By 1871, around 27 per cent of Australia’s population were Roman Catholic, which raised the demand for appropriate religious education for their children. That extended to the parents of children who were deaf who wanted their children to be instructed in the Catholic faith—something they did not receive at the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, which was under Protestant patronage.

The Catholic Church recognised the need, and its first school for the deaf commenced in Newcastle, NSW. The School for Deaf Girls was founded in 1886 located in the Rosary Convent on Alfred Street, Waratah, by the Dominican Sisters. Founded by Sister Hogan, it was a residential school for girls who were deaf, and one of the first institutions of its kind.

In 1980, the School moved locations and became the St Dominic’s Centre for Hearing Impaired Children, Mayfield, and became co-ed. Since then, it has expanded its services to children with a range of moderate cognitive disabilities. St Dom’s, as it is affectionately known, celebrated 145 years of continuous Catholic education in 2020.

# Part Three: The evolution of education 1880–1899

By 1880, the Institution was firmly settled in its new home, and Samuel Watson successfully led the School as Superintendent.

This new decade was one of prosperity for many in Australia, and the stories of its wealth travelled to distant lands. Migrants were attracted to the country due to some intriguing stories circulating abroad, such as its people being so wealthy that they could afford to consume meat regularly.

Economic prosperity also prompted hopes of organising its society in new ways. Women began to campaign for their right to vote, and the education of children in New South Wales would undergo a fundamental change.

## Structuring education and broadening awareness

Despite its success and progress, the Institution was not content to just reach children in immediate areas—it set about bringing all children who were deaf and blind across the colony within its scope of the Institution. Of course, this would take some years to achieve.

The continuing challenge was persuading some parents to send their children away—a reluctance that the Institution viewed as either mistaken kindness or selfishness and carelessness on behalf of the parents. Their frustration also stemmed from the Public Instruction Act of 1880, which denied them the ability to compel deaf and blind children to attend the School. So, it was left to the Committee to create greater awareness of the Institution, its benefits, and funding.

The Institution ran a 3-month series of advertisements in leading newspapers in 1889. These advertisements announced the availability of accommodation and invited anyone in the public who might be acquainted with families with children who were deaf or blind to inform the School. Circulars were sent to most of the public schools in the colony. While the expense of these activities was significant, they did yield a welcome increase in admissions.

The School continued to examine new ways to ensure graduating students could care for themselves and become contributing members of society. One way was by testing vocational training. With teachers at a local technical college, they introduced instruction in handicrafts. The School did, however, take care to avoid disrupting the children’s studies and duties at the School. Vocational training was not about replacing education but about making them aware of useful trades. Later, select students were trained on a new machine—the typewriter—and a second machine was purchased once they saw how proficient many students became. It featured keys fitted with braille embossed characters.

In 1889, 20 years into the School’s founding, its instruction success became evident when a former Tasmanian-born pupil of the Institution, who was blind, became a teacher of children who were blind in Tasmania.

While the Institution had set the ideal educational starting age at seven years, it began a kindergarten class trial in April 1893, run under the tuition of Miss Schleicher, who had trained for such work in Germany.

The most notable change in education in this period, however, was the increasing global attention on the oral method of teaching.

## The 1880 International Congress on Education of the Deaf

One of the most significant events in deaf education occurred in 1880 at the Second International Congress of Education of the Deaf in Milan, Italy. It brought together educators from eight countries and some 164 delegates—only one of which, James Denison, was deaf. The Congress was convened by Abbé Giulio Tarra, a strong supporter of the oral teaching method, and organised by a committee created by the Pereire Society, an organisation deeply opposed to sign language. The congress aimed to create a standardised, universal method of teaching.

Notably, of the 164 delegates in attendance, many were not only from Italy but predominantly from two exclusively oral schools for the deaf in Milan. The majority of other delegates invited were known oralists. Edward Miner Gallaudet was one of the attendees. Alexander Graham Bell was also in attendance and he became one of the most prominent supporters of the oral method globally. As such, it created a significant bias in the outcome of the eight resolutions the Congress passed. The methods proposed had limited evidence of results, and they were in no way representative of the international zeitgeist in the education of children who were deaf or hard of hearing at the time.

The consensus was that the “superiority of speech over signs would aid in restoring deaf-mutes [sic] to social life” and provide a ‘greater facility of language’. The vote for the ‘pure oral’ teaching method to become the officially acknowledged method for instructing the deaf was unanimous and even went as far as banning the use of sign language in classrooms.

The Congress failed to acknowledge the need for educators to be responsive to the needs of individual children—to match programs to children and not children to programs. Twenty years later, the Congress held in Paris passed the acceptance of a combined method, but the oral method remained prevalent until the 1960s.

No other event in history has impacted the education and lives of people who are deaf as much as this one. In many countries, it resulted in teachers who were deaf and teachers of sign language losing their jobs, and a decline of deaf artists and professionals, not to mention the impact on deaf or hard-of-hearing people’s quality of life. Thankfully, sign languages are fully embraced today, and each is a rich and unique language and form of communication.

In 2010, the Organising Committee of the 21st International Congress, held in Vancouver, Canada, issued a formal apology on behalf of the Congress, noting that the Milan Resolutions were an act of discrimination and a violation of human rights.

## The oral method in Australia

While in some places, like the United States and Europe, the outcome of this Congress was a more definitive move to the oral method, the two original schools in Australia—namely The New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, and The Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution—continued to utilise a combined method.

While Samuel Watson did not attend the Congress in Milan, he introduced the oral method in Australia, which was taught at the Institution. He was committed to giving students all the advantages possible in education. He saw the oral method as a benefit for those children who had acquired deafness and therefore had some understanding of language and sound. This method, however, proved to be a long and tedious process, with limited results for many children, especially those who were congenitally deaf. The manual method, or using sign language, was within reach of all.

To facilitate this new teaching approach, he secured the services of Elizabeth Kernohan in late 1880, a teacher undergoing specific training in the oral method at the Society for Training Teachers of the Deaf and the Diffusion of the ‘German’ System at Ealing, London.

Elizabeth was Watson’s niece, who likely took his advice and encouragement to undergo such training with the promise of a job in Sydney. She was a well-liked and regarded teacher at the Institution for many years.

## The Public Instruction Act

A Public Instruction Act was passed in 1880, making general education for children free, secular, and compulsory under centralised State control. However, it made no provisions for children who were deaf or blind. Despite the Institution’s ongoing campaign to the government to add such compulsory education, their many appeals were repeatedly denied.

One likely reason the NSW Government took such a stance was that education for children who were deaf and blind meant housing and additional maintenance. It was against taking on such a cost—especially given organisations like the Institution partially provided it through private funding. In fact, the lack of government support, educational segregation, and failure to provide specialist teachers and facilities in government schools resulted in children being institutionalised. It was an effective way to reach as many children as possible from a single location.

Another more concerning reason was that children who were deaf or blind were categorised as infirm and were outside the norm. As such, many believed that they would not benefit from education in the same way or be able to achieve the same outcomes as their mainstream counterparts, so the same laws could not apply. This thinking directly contrasted the number of children thriving at the Institution, who numbered 144 by 1898. The Government’s only contribution was free rail passes for children to travel and see their families at Christmas.

As the century came to a close, the sentiment in Australia was optimistic—particularly what a Federation might mean to the new generations of people born and raised in Australia with no firsthand experience of mother England. It would give rise to a new and unique national identity.

## Sir Arthur Renwick 1837–1908

Sir Arthur Renwick was appointed President of the Board in 1881, following the retirement of Reverend George King after 20 years in the role. Renwick remains the longest-serving President, presiding over the Board for 27 years until his death in 1908.

Renwick’s initial work with the Institution began in 1869 as a prominent Director on the Institution’s Board and as Honorary Medical Officer. He was responsible for the general health of the enrolled students and ensured prospective students were sufficiently healthy to attend.

Renwick was incredibly prolific, with roles outside his medical career spanning from parliamentarian to philanthropist. However, ten years into his role, time pressures from his other endeavours made him question his ability to give the children the attention they deserved, and he decided to retire from his duties as Medical Officer. The Board appointed a successor, and Renwick accepted the position of Board Vice President and Honorary Consulting Medical Officer until he stepped into the role of President.

In his 27 years as President, one of his most significant contributions, working alongside Samuel Watson and Harold Earlam, was to focus on the excellence and autonomy of the organisation—looking to itself rather than the mother country to advance. While the Institution continued to survey what was happening in Europe and America, it was only to audit and learn their methods and then model its own best practices to stay ahead.

Renwick was also extremely connected, given his many roles in education, medicine, and government. As such, his influence in the colony was substantial—and he could both advocate for and help guide the outcomes that would positively impact the Institution.

One area he influenced significantly was teacher training. Not willing to constantly rely on overseas hires, nor content with the quality or access to good training locally, he and the superintendents decided to bring that within the Institute’s purview. Earlam made a significant start in 1935. In 1991, when a teacher training college was established at the Institution, it was named after him. The Renwick Centre (known today as NextSense Institute) was the fulfilment of a 90-year-old promise laid out in a 1905 Act of Incorporation that stated: “*The Board shall have power to…make provision for the instruction and training of teachers, and for those purposes expend such moneys [sic] as they shall in their own discretion deem advisable*.”

### Sir Arthur Renwick: Life And Career

Sir Arthur Renwick, who in his lifetime was a physician, philanthropist, and politician, was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1837. When he was four years old, his parents relocated as bounty immigrants—people incentivised to migrate to help colonise Australia.

After graduating from the University of Sydney, Renwick studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh and became a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. He took further research courses in Glasgow, London, and Paris, until finally returning to Sydney in 1862.

Renwick soon established a growing medical practice in Redfern and became a leading physician. He then served as the first President of the local branch of the British Medical Association, the President of the NSW Medical Board, the Minister for Education in the NSW Government, and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sydney. As an early advocate for the foundation of a medical school at the university, Renwick helped establish a scholarship for the faculty of medicine. He also donated much time to Sydney Hospital and was its President for 29 years.

Not content with his accomplishments in the medical field, Renwick tried his hand at politics, eventually being nominated to the Legislative Council, of which he was a member for the remainder of his life, though never in office again. As a politician, he recognised the State’s responsibility towards the poor, and so began the philanthropic part of his career.

Despite his heavy workload, he authored the Benevolent Society’s Incorporation Act (Australia’s oldest charity) and served as a long-term President. He founded the State Children’s Relief Department, and as President of its original committee, had much to do with establishing old-age pensions in New South Wales. Renwick also took much interest in the Royal Hospital for Women in Paddington.

Further, Renwick was a New South Wales commissioner for the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1880, a Vice-President of the commission for the Amsterdam Exhibition in 1883, Vice-President and later President of the commission for the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition in 1887, and a New South Wales representative commissioner at the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, in 1893.

Renwick was knighted in 1894 and died in his home on November 23, 1908, survived by his wife and six children. His wife, Lady Elizabeth Renwick, was also an energetic charity worker and helped her husband in the State Children’s Relief Department. She was President of the Young Women’s Christian Association and the New South Wales Bush Missionary Society. She was also connected with the National Council of Women of New South Wales, the Sydney Ladies’ Sanitary Association, the Australian Trained Nurses Association, and the Women’s Suffrage League of New South Wales. She died on March 17, 1918.

## The Royal Commission of 1898

The second significant Royal Commission, “*appointed to make a diligent and full enquiry into and report upon the methods of carrying on government charitable institutions*”, happened in 1898. In this instance, they raised concern over two ‘handsome towers’ added to the Institution’s building in Darlington in 1892. The commission passed only one negative comment: “*Expenditure on the buildings has been excessively out of proportion to the necessary requirements of an establishment for this purpose.*” Given that it was a time of economic depression, other voluntary organisations were not as successful and called for government support.

This concern aside, the report would go on to say: “*the Committee cannot be too highly recommended in regard to the provision they have made for the comfort and happiness of the pupils*.” Regular inspections at the Institution followed, always resulting in favourable reports, including “*this is one of the most philanthropic and... best administered [sic] institutions in this city*.”

## The International Congress on Education of the Deaf (ICED) today

Today, the ICED is the peak international forum for sharing evidence-based practice, research, and ideas about the education of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. There have been many advances in the development of the ICED since its beginning in 1878, which have not only improved the congresses themselves but also helped improve education worldwide.

The first international Congress was organised by the representatives of the Pereire Society, established in honour of Jacob Pereire, the first teacher of the deaf in France. While the main purpose of the congress at its start was for the general adoption of the oral method, today it acknowledges that no one single philosophy or methodology can be passed as a resolution, given that the delegates at any one conference do not represent the thinking of the profession as a whole. Instead, it’s about providing an opportunity for every country to learn from others and to further progress to the maximum extent possible.

In 2000, the ICED was held in Sydney—its first time in the southern hemisphere—with 1,067 delegates from 46 countries attending. The Chairman of the Congress was the Director of NextSense Institute, Professor Greg Leigh, who became Chair of the International Committee following the 2005 Congress in Maastricht, The Netherlands—a position he held until 2021.

## The history of braille

One of the first recorded instances of embossing paper as a means of reading for the blind was by Valentin Haüy, a French man who founded the first school for the blind in Paris. While Haüy’s version is no longer in use, a young man by the name of Louis Braille entered the school in 1819.

Louis Braille had lost his sight at a young age, after accidentally stabbing himself in the eye with a tool from his father’s leather goods workshop. In his early teens, he was inspired by Charles Barbier’s ‘night writing,’ a method using raised dots on paper that could be read without light, used by soldiers to communicate safely at night. Braille would modify Barbier’s raised 12-dot cells to 6-dot, allowing the human fingertip to register all dots in a cell in one touch, and he would spend years developing and refining it.

The system that would become known by his surname, Braille, was first published in 1829. While immediately embraced by fellow students, the Paris school would only come to adopt it formally in 1854, after Braille’s death. An English version of the system was adopted in 1932 when representatives from Britain and the United States met in London and agreed upon the Standard English Braille system.

Louis Braille’s legacy has enabled people who are blind to enjoy all that the printed word has to offer—empowering them to achieve success in education and beyond.

## Braille writers and stereotype makers

Appointed the representative of the colony as Executive Commissioner at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Arthur Renwick spent some time in the US. During his time there, he procured two Hall braille writers and a Hall stereotype maker, for the students who were blind.

Braille writing machines were mechanical devices, similar to a typewriter, that used pins to emboss the underside of the paper, allowing the operator to read what they wrote, as it happened. They were invented in 1892 by Frank H. Hall, Superintendent of the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Blind. These proved very useful to the students at the Institution. However, the stereotype maker, used to impress braille characters into plates of copper, would take time to bring into practical application.

## Government grants and fundraising

By the 1800s, the Institution had become very good at fundraising. While annual government grants were helpful, it was insufficient to cover all their expenses. As such, a Perpetual Subscribers’ Fund was established, which would go on to receive many bequests over the years, with the interest from this fund going to the Institution. Income was also generated via subscriptions and donations, plus some from other State Governments that went towards the upkeep of children from their states.

## The invention of the hearing aid

The history of hearing aids is long and varied, given that hearing loss has been with us throughout humanity’s existence. In the 13th century, those with hearing loss would use hollowed-out animal horns to help funnel sound, and in the 17th century, the ear trumpet became the latest technology that was used, improved upon, and commercialised into the next century.

The first electronic hearing aid, however, came along in 1898 and was prompted by the invention of the telephone. Thomas Edison saw room for improvement and, in 1870, invented a carbon transmitter for the telephone that amplified the electrical signal and increased the decibel level.

Using this technology, Miller Rees Hutchison invented the Akouphone, the first electronic hearing aid. The device was an expensive, bulky tabletop device that limited its use. However, with support from Queen Alexandra of Denmark, who was experiencing progressive hearing loss and was personally helped by the device, Hutchison was able to refine the aid and make it portable. It was marketed as the Acousticon. The American press called it a miracle, and Hutchison staged publicity events. While it had some drawbacks, it was successful enough that large-scale manufacturers went on to further develop and improve the device.

# Part Four: A new century, a new nation 1900–1929

Amid the nationwide celebrations for the turn of the century, there was a rising sense of nationalism. It was the dawn of the 20th century, and Sydney was humming with promise, energy, and growth—a bustling city led by trade.

This increase in trade was expanding to outer suburbs, through the evolving means of transportation, and transitioning into the electric era.

Leading up to Federation, people hoped that a unified country would create a better society—providing opportunities for all people, not just the wealthy and privileged. Many reforms followed the newly federated nation, including education. The Australian Constitution of 1901, however, vested formal responsibility for primary and secondary education in the State Governments, meaning that New South Wales could develop its own educational policies, independently of other states and without input from the Commonwealth Government.

What followed was a review of the approaches to education: Several Royal Commissions were formed to outline desired educational outcomes, and new reforms were implemented, such as a new curriculum, training for mainstream teachers, and the abolition of fees.

However, children who were deaf and blind continued to be excluded. The Institution would spend the first few decades of the new century continuously lobbying the government for that to change, even though such an act had been passed in the UK in 1893 and there had been a concerted push for such a move since the 1880 Public Instruction Act in NSW.

In 1904, a Bill was prepared and submitted to the Minister of Education, who at the time expressed his approval. While it brought about actions and conversations that engendered some hope—and it continued to be positively received by a succession of ministers—by the end of the 1920s, nothing had changed.

This created one of the Institution’s most significant challenges—the inability to compel parents to provide adequate education for their children. It resulted in developmental delays that only helped to exacerbate societal prejudices towards people who were deaf or blind.

## Building greater awareness

While the government left the responsibility of education to schools like the Institution, it was still encouraged to expand its reach. At the time, a Royal Commission on Public Charities recommended that the Institute undertake “*a more extended energetic canvass for public subscriptions be made, particularly in the districts of the colony*.” Coupled with the need to cover the increasing costs of running the Institution, the Committee had to extend their canvassing efforts.

In 1902, greater efforts to expand enrolments began with a wide distribution of illustrated pamphlets and, with the consent of the Minister of Public Instruction, circulars were sent to public school head teachers across the state. Seven years later, as government inaction continued—and on the advice of Governor Sir Harry Rawson—a successful campaign based on parent and pupil testimonials was set in place. These were sent to parents, many of whom responded positively, and helped drive enrolment to capacity. Then in 1927, a Publicity and Propaganda Sub-Committee was formed to continue a focused drive.

## Government funding and the act of parliament

As the Institution’s enrolments grew, so did its funding needs. Assistance from the New South Wales Government came in 1903 when it granted funding through Act 10 of the Charitable Allowances Act, conditional on private contributions matching the amount. It meant seeking contributions from influential members of the community and prominent men of the time, including Sir Arthur Renwick and John Goodlet, were appointed as trustees.

Then, in 1905, an Act of Parliament was passed to incorporate the Institution, known as the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind Incorporation Act. It provided better management of the Institution, removed the provision of the trustees for the various properties of the institution, and simplified the financial work. It also codified the rules for running the Institution and gave the Board of Directors greater power over finance, staff, and management.

## Harold Earlam: A new superintendent

As Samuel Watson neared 40 years of service at the Institution, he advised the Board of his intention to retire. Sadly, while the Institution was in the process of securing a successor, Samuel Watson passed away.

By this time, John Goodlet had stepped up as President of the Institution. Similarly to the hire of Watson 40 years earlier, Goodlet was visiting Great Britain when Harold Earlam was selected as the succeeding superintendent.

Earlam came to the School in June 1911, about five weeks after the death of Samuel Watson, with some 20 years of teaching experience, and understood the importance and honour such a role meant, especially following a leader like Watson. On arrival, he expressed his desire to win the confidence of the Board, the students parents, and the supporters of the Institution. From the start, he stated that his ambition—with the assistance of the Board—was to make the Institution not only the first in Australia but one of the best in the world.

With experience in school administration, Earlam had clear views on the government’s role in education. Like Watson, he was a proponent for compulsory education and government funding for the School—and he believed that until this happened, students who were deaf or blind would be allowed to ‘*grow up without the rudiments of education*’ and face limited accomplishment. As such, he quickly picked up the negotiations with the Department of Education.

One of the first changes he recommended was hiring more teachers and creating a pupil-to-teacher ratio far more conducive to working individually with children. He realised this ambition by 1916, and by 1918, the maximum class size was 13 students per teacher.

Harold Earlam was a progressive educator, who extended the use of spoken language for children who were deaf, and the use of braille within the School for children who were blind by ensuring students had access to the most suitable braille books and the latest braille equipment. He also believed in boosting children’s confidence and physical well-being and introduced outdoor classrooms and sports.

He, like Watson, would continue to teach the combined method—a broadminded view given that many other schools around the world had banned signing and preferred the exclusive use of the oral teaching method. In the Institution’s 1924 Annual Report, he explained that while there was a preference for the oral method, the School’s policy would not sacrifice a child’s education if they made greater progress under the manual method.

Understanding that a large part of the role included attracting more fee-paying students, Earlam appealed to medical practitioners, who were typically the first line of communication for parents with children who were deaf or blind and who could offer wise counselling in terms of education. He also turned to the British Medical Association and used a demonstration of teaching methods at one of their meetings to entreat members to influence parents.

At a 1920 inspection by the Department of Education, the inspectors observed what they thought would strike any visitors to the School: “*The intimacy of relationship between teacher and pupil seldom if ever found in the ordinary day school…[an] intimacy such as is found more often in the family than in the school*.”

While this was likely as much a result of the smaller class sizes he had instituted, the fact that it was a boarding school also played a role. This success and impact, however, led to inspectors considering a change to the student-to-teacher ratio to be as low as six to eight students per teacher.

## Educating teachers

One of the challenges that Earlam faced during this time was finding qualified teachers, the shortage of which was impacting the School negatively. Apart from an ongoing pupil-teacher system, there were no specialised training facilities in New South Wales, which meant that little could be done to ensure qualifications standards for local teachers, and a continued reliance on recruiting from abroad.

In the early days of the Institution, the typical qualification was to have some experience dealing or communicating with children who were deaf or blind. However, over many years of expansion and experience, it became clear that teachers needed to be fully qualified. They needed knowledge in areas including child psychology, the physiology of speech and hearing, speech training and phonetics and—similarly to the new educational approach in mainstream schools—teaching in a child-centred environment. Earlam himself had been qualified in England, and he would be instrumental in creating a similar program in Australia for all teachers of children who were deaf.

Earlam worked hard to secure and train qualified teachers and create better means for retention. He established Life Endowment Assurance, which offered a retirement allowance for teachers and dependants. He held regular staff meetings and encouraged discussion on professional and educational issues. In 1928, the completion of a new building on campus provided additional accommodation to engage more junior teachers-in-training to fill vacancies.

As a result, teachers at the Institution gained strong reputations. By the end of the 1920s, three teachers were selected to take charge of institutions in other states.

While the new century began with great optimism, the world would soon face a devastating period of epidemics and war. The resulting post-war Roaring Twenties provided a brief time of optimism and societal change: The purchase of new cars soared, hemlines rose, there was innovation in art and aviation, and a new Australian dream was born. The post-war marriage boom and the beginning of urban sprawl characterised all these new developments.

## The impact of epidemics, a pandemic, and World War I

### The impact of World War I

When war broke out in 1914, Australia’s physical distance from the destruction in Europe did little to lessen the impact on its people. Of the population of 5 million, seven per cent of its people served overseas, and two-thirds of those were wounded or killed.

One of the key post-war concerns was rehabilitating servicemen returning with war-damaged hearing and sight. The Red Cross Society worked with the Sydney Industrial Blind Institution to deal with all cases of soldiers who returned blind. The Institution realised it had every facility to aid those with hearing loss, including tuition in lipreading, which would be very advantageous for those soldiers. Members of the staff skilled in that special field of work volunteered their services outside of ordinary school hours under the direction of Harold Earlam.

The resulting success with these servicemen led to a renewed interest in rehabilitation techniques, such as surgery, hearing devices, and lipreading. It spurred interest in medical practitioners to explore the use of similar rehabilitation with children who were deaf.

### Facing a series of epidemics

The Institution was no stranger to health issues, which was not uncommon for the time. In 1900, an outbreak of bubonic plague in the city and suburbs meant the School was closed to visitors for a few months. The children were prevented from heading home for holidays to protect them as much as possible.

A rampant rubella outbreak would follow in 1905, with serious and long-lasting impact. At the time, it was not known that deafness and blindness in newborns could result directly from mothers contracting rubella in the early stages of their pregnancy. As a result, a large influx of children to the Institution would follow some four years later. The connection between the two would be discovered forty years later through research by Sir Norman Gregg.

Then, the same year World War I began, an outbreak of diphtheria affected and infected pupils and staff, which meant the School was shut down and thoroughly disinfected to help stop the spread. The more serious patients were sent to Little Bay Hospital, while the remaining were treated at the Institution. Despite the severity of the illness, every one of its patients recovered.

### The influenza pandemic

The pandemic that became known as the Spanish Flu remains one of the greatest natural disasters in recent history. When it reached Australia in 1919, it caused close to fifteen thousand deaths—certainly less than other countries, but no less difficult for the millions of Australians still grieving loss from the war.

New South Wales was hit with two waves of the flu, which pushed the medical system to its limits—particularly since many doctors and nurses were still overseas due to the war. It led to insufficient hospital beds, and fifth-year medical students from Sydney University offered or were asked to volunteer, as did many retired medical professionals. Admission to influenza hospitals was controlled by Public Health, which issued an urgent appeal to the Institution’s Board for the use of its on-site hospital facilities as an emergency hospital. When it was taken over, several of the Institution’s officers and teachers tendered their services to the government, including Harold Earlam as manager and the Matron, who continued in her role while the epidemic lasted.

As for the students, they were sent home in time for the government to take possession of the building. The Institution did not underestimate how this would impact the children’s education and progress. Still, it recognised that the alternative could have led to disastrous results regardless of how many precautions were taken.

## Alice Mary Betteridge 1901–1966

Alice Mary Betteridge Chapman is known as the first deafblind child to be formally educated in Australia. She was born in Sawyers Gully, New South Wales to parents George and Emily Betteridge in 1901. Sometimes referred to as ‘The Australian Helen Keller,’ Alice lost her hearing at the tender age of two, as a result of meningitis.

Alice’s mother brought her to the Institution at age four, seeking admission without scheduling an interview. Alice, who was described as ‘a very interesting child,’ remained there for assessment for three months. Samuel Watson faced a dilemma. Her intelligence was apparent, so the Institution decided to take on the considerable expense of educating her, as they believed it their duty to do all they possibly could. However, Alice was only four years old, and Watson deemed she was too young for instruction. He offered to admit her when she was old enough to receive an education. So, at age seven, Alice became the School’s first deafblind student.

Similar to the teaching methods used in the United States with students like Helen Keller, teacher Roberta Reid would fingerspell words into Alice’s hand while she was touching the associated object. This was repeated until she could make the connection between the word and the object. As the story goes, it was a shoe that brought about her breakthrough. Alice had become accustomed to going barefoot on her family farm and would often remove the shoes she was made to wear at school. Her relationship with these hated shoes, which were repeatedly placed back on her feet, was significant enough that she could make the connection and repeat the word back. From that moment, Alice’s progress accelerated in just a few months. She learned some 200 nouns and several verbs, and her capacity and curiosity were limitless. Braille instruction soon followed, and her ability to read and write fluently was a testament to what could be achieved against the odds.

Unlike Helen Keller, whose teacher, Anne Sullivan, devoted all her time to her pupil, Alice’s teacher, Miss Reid, took Alice on as a special assignment—a responsibility over and above her other pupils. While initially seen as a drawback, this situation made Alice’s progress even more remarkable. By the time she graduated in 1920, she was dux of the School.

Alice Betteridge married Will Chapman in 1939, a man who had been deafblind since he was twenty-one, with whom Alice, an avid pen pal, had been corresponding by mail for some time. They settled in Melbourne, where Chapman made a living at a sheltered workshop and lived at the Blackburn Institute for the Deaf. They were married for nine years until Chapman’s death, at which point Alice returned to Sydney to be close to her family.

Alice was not one to be held back and considered life an adventure. She was well regarded for her intelligence, good nature, and independence, and travelled considerably. Alice eventually moved into an apartment at the Helen Keller House in Woollahra, Sydney, where she lived out her life. She died of cancer in 1966 at the age of 65.

## Roberta Reid 1883–1968

Roberta Reid was born Jane Sinclair Reid in Eskbank, New South Wales. She was educated at Sydney Girls High School from 1897 and graduated with a BA from the University of Sydney in 1904. She became a renowned teacher and a leading authority in Australia on the education of the blind.

Despite having no prior teaching experience or training, Reid began work at the New South Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, at Darlington, in February 1904. Just two years later, she became the Head or Senior Teacher of the Blind, in charge of some twenty pupils—a role which grew in responsibility over the next 40 years.

In 1908, she took on the education of Alice Betteridge, the School’s first student who was deafblind. The combination of Reid’s patience and perseverance and Alice’s intellect and curiosity meant that the child’s progress would be nothing less than remarkable. The knowledge and skills that Reid was able to impart to Alice, while she retained all her responsibilities to her many other students, makes this an extraordinary achievement in teaching.

Another of Reid’s pupils, David Hunter, would go on to become a politician and the first blind member of the Parliament of New South Wales. He was instrumental in passing legislation in 1944 that made the education of children who were deaf and blind compulsory.

Reid taught english, history, maths, and typing, and shared her love of language and literature with her students. Her view on education, however, extended far beyond the classroom. While she was naturally reserved, she showed warmth and a keen interest in her pupils—she encouraged them to sing and play the piano, to take an interest in current affairs, and fought for vocational training to help her students gain appropriate employment opportunities.

When the Institute opened a new school for children who were blind in Wahroonga, in 1946, Reid would become the first Department of Education Headmistress of the School for the Blind.

After her retirement in 1948, Reid continued to serve as a consultant. She was a member of the Sydney University Women Graduates’ Association and the Women’s Club, and in 1951 was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for ‘*services in training blind children*’. Roberta Reid passed away in her Roseville home on October 19, 1968.

## Harold Earlam 1874–1947

Harold Earlam was born in Cheshire, England, in 1874. His father, Samuel Earlam, was the Headmaster of a local school, and it’s here that a young Harold would commence his teaching career, as a pupil teacher.

Earlam would eventually transfer to the Liverpool Institution for the Deaf, and while there, he gained a Diploma from the College of Teachers of the Deaf and Dumb. Then, in 1897 he went to work under one of the leading educators of the time, AJ Story, and was appointed first Senior Assistant at the new The Mount, Stoke-on-Trent Deaf and Blind School. Since this school was a residential one that taught children who were deaf and blind, he became well-versed in its management—a skill that would serve him well when he eventually took on his role at the Institution.

Later, Earlam became Chairman of the Midland Branch of the College of Teachers of the Deaf and Dumb, and a member of the College of Teachers of the Deaf and Dumb (now the National College of Teachers of the Deaf). It was at this college that Earlam would be qualified as a teacher. It was also the program that would inspire his future involvement in the development of the Australian Association of the Teachers of the Deaf (AATD), where he sought to improve and standardise the qualification of teachers in Australia.

Earlam became a leading figure in his field, and his endeavours would not be limited to his role at the Institute. He cooperated with other organisations and advised similar organisations in Tasmania and Queensland. His travels took him to the United States and Great Britain, where, like Watson, he would look for new practices to apply at the Institution to improve teaching.

When the New South Wales Minister of Education organised a research committee to investigate the educational and general welfare of the deaf and blind in 1932, Earlam was offered a seat. Starting in 1934, he organised lipreading training for children who were deaf or hard of hearing and attending mainstream schools, and for adults who had lost their hearing in adulthood, eventually helping establish the New South Wales Lipreading League for Adults.

By 1936, he had become a member of the New South Wales Advisory Council of Education, and he held the role of President of the AATD from its inception until he retired from the Institution in 1946.

Harold Earlam was responsible for lifting the standard and reputation of the Institute. In his 35-year tenure, he would lead the organisation through two world wars, a depression, and a series of epidemics and pandemics, and create a new standard for local teachers that would change the face of education in Australia.

In the words of the Board, in one of its annual reports, his “*loyal and indefatigable work [has] raised the Institution to a high state of efficiency and maintained a standard of work and result comparable with the best*.”

Harold Earlam died in Paddington, NSW, within a year of his retirement. The Institution would honour his legacy by awarding an annual prize in his name for the child deemed “*best in general conduct and character throughout the year*.”

## Alexander Graham Bell visits the Institution

In 1910, the Institution noted that they were honoured by a visit from Dr Alexander Graham Bell and his wife. He enquired about the details of the School’s work and was especially interested in Alice Betteridge—not surprisingly, since he was instrumental in finding a tutor for Helen Keller.

While most people today associate Bell with the invention of the telephone, his greatest interest and work was in the education of children who were deaf. Some sources suggest that his study on sound transmission and the human voice led to the invention of the telephone.

Bell was one of the strongest proponents of the oral method. He used his fame and wealth from the telephone to advocate his belief that oral skills were critical to social integration, assimilation, and personal and professional advancement.

## The Institute for the Adult Deaf

Ever committed to supporting adults who were deaf, many of whom had been meeting at its premises since its start in 1869, the Institution purchased the lease of adjoining property in 1901. Here they built a dedicated space for people to meet for instruction, improvement, entertainment, and socialising. Under the guiding hand of Samuel Watson, the Institute for the Adult Deaf continued its progress and began a self-published and distributed paper, *The Silent Messenger,* to connect with deaf people across the state.

After Watson’s death, however, the relationship with the Institution, which had been seen as somewhat unequal, became increasingly strained. It became apparent that an independent organisation for adult deaf people in New South Wales was needed. As such, several members resigned to create The Adult Deaf and Dumb Society of New South Wales (later the Deaf Society of NSW, and now known as Deaf Connect).

While the Institution attempted to come to an amicable understanding with the new Society, that didn’t eventuate. Some members eventually chose to return, and the group continued to operate. In 1918, the Board approved the provision of classes in lipreading to adults with acquired deafness who were not in a position to pay for private tuition.

Despite the separation, this incident did create the opportunity for deaf adults to take management into their own hands and begin to manage their own affairs.

## The Silent Messenger and The Gesture

In 1906, The Institute for the Adult Deaf first published *The Silent Messenger*, a small journal distributed monthly. Each issue was designed to provide information that was specifically useful to the adult deaf community in the hope that it would help connect people across the state and beyond.

A national monthly magazine, *The Gesture*, had been launched three years earlier, and was the first of its kind. Its publication founded the Australasian Deaf and Dumb Association (ADDA), independent of any other organisation. Its aim was to promote the advancement of people who were deaf or hard of hearing and help educate the public on the real conditions and needs of the deaf community.

Its name was a deliberate nod to the fact that, regardless of how they were educated, people who were deaf would invariably resort to sign language. With the closing of the ADDA in 1930, the Australian Association of the Deaf (AAD) was formed in 1986. It is known today as Deaf Australia, an organisation that continues to work toward achieving equality for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

# Part Five: Advancing education 1930–1949

While the 1920s were a decade defined by change and provided a brief glimpse of a hopeful future, the 1930s ushered in a far more sober time. The Wall Street crash of 1929, in the United States, triggered a worldwide depression, and Australia was not spared. Unemployment skyrocketed, and the country was deep in debt. It would take nearly a decade to recover.

As the country laboured through trying times, the Board remained fully committed to raising the necessary funds to sustain the Institution. Harold Earlam was entering his second decade as superintendent and continued to lead the School’s progress. He ensured that he stayed well informed of scientific developments that could impact education and, together with the Board, continued to lobby for greater government support, compulsory education, and better teacher training.

In 1932, the Directors of the Board learned that the Minister of Education had appointed a research committee—the NSW Advisory Council of Education— to investigate matters concerning the educational and general welfare of the deaf and blind. They approved Harold Earlam’s seat on the committee, given it brought new hope for government support for compulsory education for children who were deaf and blind.

Meanwhile, at the School, the focus began on manual training—the development of sensory efficiency, visual and manual dexterity for children who were deaf, and tactual and manual dexterity for children who were blind. While not specifically about industrial or trade training, it was added to their education to ensure that general manual efficiency could help them later in life, as they moved into their chosen field.

The School was now also seeing an improvement in the length of stay: The age of graduation had risen to over 16 years, and the average school life to around eight years, indicating that parents were taking full advantage of the opportunities available for their children.

## Public perception of life in institutions

One of Earlam’s areas of focus was ensuring that the children at the School avoided all the concerns that could come from what he termed ‘*institution life’*. He pushed for all the advantages that came from full contact with the ‘outside, ordinary world’. In the Institution’s words: “*Routine is essential, timetables are equally necessary; but there is no necessity for a gloomy atmosphere; and our effort is always to do what we have to do in the happy way*.”

Having the term ‘Institution’ in its name was also problematic, given what it conjured for those outside the School, especially parents. Earlam and the Board sympathised with parents—especially those in country areas—who wished to keep their children nearer to home. Therefore, they went out of their way to explain that the Institution was more like a residential or boarding school, vital for children’s education and future success. The term ‘dumb’ also came under scrutiny at this time, given the prejudices this term played into.

By 1938, to further remove any misunderstanding or prejudice, the Board began steps to change the name to NSW Schools for Deaf and Blind Children, believing this would appeal to both pupils and parents.

They deliberated on the name for some time after this, but a change would take time, especially due to the required parliamentary action. Meanwhile, Earlam continued to push for a shift in perception. He encouraged parents to come and observe the schools first-hand, to witness a modern and progressive school where children could live under happy and normal conditions and receive special education from qualified and experienced teachers.

## The Department of Education steps up

A more positive outcome during the difficult war years was an event of historic significance: The passing of The Public Instruction Amendment Act of 1944. This Act made school attendance compulsory for children between the ages of six and 15 who were considered handicapped, including those who were deaf and blind, at special schools in their district. The Act finally came into effect in January 1948, nearly sixty years after the Institution began lobbying.

One of the members of the New South Wales Parliament, David Hunter, who had lost his sight at the age of six and was a former student of the Institution, was responsible for helping pass the Act. The School at Wahroonga immediately became a Department of Education school, and in 1956 the Department would finally assume responsibility for education at the Darlington School.

While this meant significant progress in education, the Board was quick to remind their subscribers and the general public that while this radical change would place a partial obligation on the government, there would remain a need for public support of the Institution.

Between the delay by the Department of Education, and the war’s impact on the School’s premises and teachers, it would be some time before this momentous Act would yield the fullest results. Still, it was a critical turning point in the lives of children who were deaf or blind.

## David Hunter 1905–1981

David Benjamin Hunter was an Australian politician who would become the first member of the New South Wales Parliament who was blind.

Born in Sydney, Hunter lost his sight at the age of six due to a bout of meningitis. He would then become a pupil at the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind under the tutelage of Roberta Reid. Hunter worked as an insurance broker before his election to parliament, where he held the seat of Croydon, then the seats of Ashfield-Croydon, and Ashfield for 36 years.

From the outset, Hunter determined that his disability would not impact his duties and performance. In his inaugural speech, Hunter stated that he would endeavour to make fellow members forget that he was blind and demanded that he be treated as a “normal, ordinary citizen.” He memorised his way around Parliament and made notes in braille, which he could read at the speed of over 200 words a minute.

Hunter was a passionate advocate for the deaf and blind communities throughout his lifetime, serving on several committees in various roles. He also strongly advocated for improved parliamentary services to allow members to better represent their constituents.

One of his most significant contributions was the passing of The Public Instruction Amendment Act of 1944, which made the education of children who were deaf or blind compulsory. In doing so, he would be instrumental in changing the lives of many children through access to the education they deserved.

David Hunter was made an Officer of the Order of British Empire (OBE) in 1975. He died in Sydney in 1981.

## The Impact of World War II

Barely twenty-one years after the ‘war to end all wars’ ended, the world was thrust into the Second World War. As it waged, the Institution’s premises were once again requisitioned by the military for use by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).

The Board sprang into action, attempting to mitigate the impact this would have on students. They made efforts to secure alternate premises, which led to the purchase of a property in Pymble to be used as the school for junior deaf children, another in Stanmore that was opened as a hostel for boys from country areas, and a minimal portion of Darlington used to accommodate some day students. It reduced the number of children who would have to rely on correspondence methods, and the Institution did its best to work with the circumstances. A day school for children who were blind, which opened in Strathfield just a year earlier, continued to operate despite increasingly challenging conditions.

Another significant impact on the Institution was the temporary loss of key personnel who took up various war duties. The Board appointed more junior teachers, who would eventually become valuable teaching staff members, but staffing issues would continue for several years after the premises were returned to them.

During his time, the admissions waitlist had grown significantly due to limited space and the extraordinary number of children born deaf or blind since the 1941 rubella outbreak. By the time the RAAF finally vacated the Darlington premises in November 1944, the significant building repairs and renovations required further delayed the resumption of school activities.

Once the School was back in full use, the Pymble location, which had played such an important part in maintaining the Institution’s work during the war years, continued as a necessary adjunct for new junior students for another year. The challenges faced at the Strathfield location had prompted the Board to purchase a larger property in Wahroonga, which was converted into a residential school for the blind run by Roberta Reid.

## Harold Earlam’s retirement

By the time the war ended and compulsory education for deaf and blind children had been passed by the government, Harold Earlam was nearing 35 years as superintendent. Although much of what he had fought for had come to be, the strain of recent years, especially the arduous work of getting Darlington back in working order, had begun to take its toll.

By this stage, the Board had appointed Mr E.H. Goldsmith, a teaching staff member, as Deputy Superintendent. With his intimate knowledge of the Institution, he could lighten Earlam’s duties. However, once all was firmly back in order, Earlam decided to retire.

Not surprisingly, this news brought on a series of functions arranged in his honour by the Board of Directors, by his teaching staff, and by a large gathering of ex-pupils of the schools, to recognise his excellent and capable administration and the love and regard he had won from several generations of students. He was then appointed as a consultant to the Board and was succeeded by W.E Johnson, who was hired from England.

During his tenure, Earlam would steer the Institution through two world wars, a depression, a deadly pandemic, and several epidemics, one of which contributed to more children needing support from the Institution. He witnessed great strides in technology, was personally dedicated to furthering teaching, training, and qualifications, and finally witnessed the government step-up to provide the right support for children who were deaf or blind.

As Australia emerged from the depression and yet another deadly war, it began to forge a new relationship with the United States. The nation realised it could not rely solely on Britain for protection and widened its migration policies to arrivals from post-war Europe. On home shores, a generation of women discovered the workforce and the possibilities outside of traditional family roles.

By the end of the 1940s, the school’s reported record attendance, and rising demand for admission of children aged five and six proved that parents were becoming far more aware of the benefits of an early start to education. With the Institution’s resources now taxed to capacity, the Board would take the next major step: purchasing and developing a larger, far more modern location.

## The post-war advance in technology

Better access to technology and medical intervention for children who were deaf began after the First World War, following the efforts to rehabilitate soldiers returning from service with war-damaged hearing. It brought about better use of technology, such as hearing devices, and the first speech therapy department in Australia was established in 1931 at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children in Sydney.

In 1936, the Institution introduced a modern group hearing-aid installation, which extended the work with children with partial hearing. The Institution was the first to install and employ this technology, and it gained traction because it supported the oral method of teaching. Even with promising results, Earlam recognised that this technology would only work for a limited number of students, so he stressed that such devices should not supersede instruction such as lipreading.

However, the most significant technological advances came after the Second World War, when the Armed Services faced two important issues: the communication between personnel under loud noise conditions and the harmful effect of noise from artillery on soldiers’ hearing. The Acoustic Research Laboratory (ARL) was set up to specifically investigate and address the impact of noise on military personnel, and in 1947, its role expanded to include the assessment and rehabilitation of children affected by rubella epidemics.

While all the advances in hearing devices were considerable, children who were profoundly deaf could not take advantage of such technology. As a result, a distinction began to arise between oral deaf and non-oral deaf students, which prompted the Institution to further its commitment to the combined method of teaching. The intent was to ensure that all children had an equal advantage in education, suited to their individual needs.

It also raised the question of whether children with partial hearing could be educated alongside their hearing counterparts. At first, Earlam expressed doubts as to whether this was possible, given that language development was the major subject for students who were deaf. At the time, education for children who were deaf focused on language development, social skills, and pre-vocational training, which meant many doubted whether children who were profoundly deaf could achieve the same academic levels as their hearing peers. This belief was dispelled over time, and mainstream education would be made available as an appropriate option for children who were deaf or hard of hearing.

## From The Acoustic Research Laboratory to Hearing Australia Today

One of the Institution’s key partners, known today as Hearing Australia, has its roots in the Acoustic Research Laboratory and continues to help people experience the power and wonder of sound.

**1926**The Federal Health Council (the precursor to the National Health and Medical Research Council) was established following a Royal Commission’s recommendations.

**1944**The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) establishes the Acoustic Research Laboratory (ARL) to investigate the effects of noise on military personnel.

**1947**The ARL’s role is expanded to include the assessment and rehabilitation of children affected by the rubella epidemics of 1939-1941. The Department of Health is given responsibility for the ARL, renaming it the Commonwealth Acoustic Laboratories (CAL), which is the birth of Hearing Australia.

**1968**The program was expanded to include social security pensioners.

**1973**CAL is renamed the National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL).

**1991**The Australian Hearing Services Act 1991 comes into effect. The organisation becomes the Australian Hearing Services (AHS), established as a statutory authority, and the NAL becomes the research division.

**2019**The organisation updates its brand and changes its name to Hearing Australia.

**Teacher training and the AATD**

At the start of the 1930s, the School still struggled to secure trained teachers. While teacher training and the pupil-teacher system had improved since the beginning of Earlam’s tenure, there were still issues given that without formal training facilities, little could be done to establish and uphold qualifications and standards. Few individuals had the skills or knowledge to adapt to changing teaching methods.

This issue would be a major topic of discussion in 1935 at a conference held by Superintendents and Principals representing the nine schools for children who were deaf across Australia. This conference would mark the founding of the Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf (AATD), with Harold Earlam as President, a role he held until his retirement.

Earlam had qualified as a teacher of children who are deaf or hard of hearing at the College of Teachers of the Deaf and Dumb (later the National College of the Teachers of the Deaf), a professional body that assumed the role of examining and qualifying members of its profession. He undoubtedly used this experience to help shape the AATD.

Described as “...*a professional, examining, and certifying organisation*,” the AATD’s objective was to help teachers of the deaf and promote their professional growth by “*setting up regulations governing the award of a Licentiateship, an Associateship and a Fellowship to experienced teachers*…” It began its process of examination and certification in 1937.

At the first conference, the process leaned toward the oral method of teaching, which was not surprising, given the teaching modalities employed in Europe and the United States at the time. Therefore, its subjects included the principles of education (with special reference to the education of the deaf), methods of teaching speech to the deaf, methods of teaching language and associated subjects to the deaf, handwork, hygiene, anatomy and physiology of the organs of speech, history of the education of the deaf, practical teaching, and speech. That said, there was a clear discussion that no teaching method should be dismissed if it benefited a child.

The conference had long been a desire of teachers across Australia. However, the vast distances that separated the schools and the complications of travel and finance had delayed such an event. It took the celebration of the centenary of the state of Victoria to provide an opportunity for the conference to gather.

By 1948, the Institution had five Department of Education teachers engaged on the teaching staff, and the examination held by the AATD yielded diplomas to an additional nine staff members. The Institution also took further measures to offer an attractive and satisfying vocation, including revising the salary scale, meaning teachers could receive substantial increases.

The Association exists to this day, now known as the National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf (NAATD). Its purpose is to promote unity, diversity, and understanding between teachers of the deaf and other teachers and professionals involved in the education of students who are deaf. It encourages the sharing of educational philosophies and practices, and provides professional development that meets the wide-ranging needs of its members.

Earlam, who was also voted chairman at the conference, wrote in the conference’s officially published report:

“*The first Australian conference of teachers of the deaf filled a long felt desire in the hearts of Australian teachers… It says much for the keenness of Australian teachers that such a high percentage of those engaged in our work was present at the conference, notwithstanding the expensive long journeys, and the discomfort of travel at the height of the Australian summer; and the spirit shown was in the best traditions of a devoted profession. Conference week will be a memorable week to all those who attended: and the better understanding gained of general and particular problems, the better knowledge we all gained of each other, and the better realisation that we are all working in a common cause – a cause as wide as humanity – must inevitably lead to the definite uplift and unification of effort.*

*We in Australia work under isolated conditions as compared with those of more populous countries, and have few opportunities of mutual discussion and consideration. We are carrying on a difficult work under difficult conditions, and under varying forms of control, but with the same steadfast aim and purpose – that of the uplift of one of the most necessitous classes of the nation’s children, rendering a particularly valuable service to the community, a service which is, I fear, not always realised or appreciated as it should be*.”

## Wahroonga School

In 1943, prompted by the military requisition of the Darlington building and the need to secure alternate locations for students, the Board committed to creating sectional schools. An impressive eleven-acre property in Wahroonga was purchased and dedicated to the education of children who were blind. It would be the first of its kind in Australia.

The Board of the Institution had long been conscious that the educational needs of children who were deaf versus those who were blind were highly distinct. They recognised there could be a benefit in separating them to dedicate the right resources to each. As such, this residential school was specifically developed to welcome more students who were blind, and as a result of its specialised nature, it saw a significant increase in enrolments.

The School opened in 1945, with Roberta Reid as Principal, and by 1948, it officially came under the direct responsibility of the Department of Education.

## Helen Keller’s visit

As part of an international tour after World War II, Helen Keller visited Australia in 1948, accompanied by her secretary and companion, Polly Thomson. Keller, who was deafblind, became a global sensation after her teacher (and then life-long companion) Anne Sullivan was able to reach and communicate with her. She educated her to the point that Keller would go on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.

As an adult, she was renowned internationally as a writer, activist, humanitarian, educator, and lecturer. She advocated for people with disabilities, for women’s suffrage, and co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union. Keller used this tour to Australia to send the message to people who were deaf and blind that society should step up and safeguard their liberties and rights.

The Institute held a function for Helen Keller at the Darlington premises and coordinated a visit to the Wahroonga School, where she would meet Alice Betteridge.

Betteridge, sometimes referred to as ‘Australia’s Helen Keller’, had long hoped to meet her. In fact, the very first book she had read in braille was the story of Keller. The Institute flew Betteridge from Melbourne to Sydney so the two women could meet and spend time together, and Roberta Reid met and connected with Polly Thompson.

## Radio advertising

Innovation in radio communication during World War I led to the establishment of radio stations. The first public radio station in Australia, 2SB, opened in Sydney in 1923. In July 1932, the Australian Broadcasting Commission was established, and radio advertising was born.

In 1934, station 2GB’s Charities Board conducted the first radio appeal on behalf of the Institution, helping it receive financial support and provide valuable publicity for the schools. Radio station 2UW generously allotted space ‘on the air’, giving the Institution 15 minutes a week to create greater awareness and garner further financial support.

## Rubella children

In the 1940s, the link between rubella infections in pregnant mothers and babies with birth defects was finally confirmed. Australian ophthalmologist Sir Norman McAlister Gregg was the first to discover the connection when he overheard two mothers discussing how they had both had rubella during their pregnancies outside his office. Both were there because their babies had been affected.

Gregg held positions as Paediatric Ophthalmologist Senior Surgeon at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children, as well as commencing private practice. While in practice, he became alarmed at how many children were coming to his office with congenital cataracts.

He tested his hypothesis at his practice and with the cases of other ophthalmologists. He concluded that “*children exposed to rubella virus in utero during the first trimester of pregnancy are at risk for not just cataract, but also deafness and other severe problems*.” While his findings were not initially accepted, by 1961, research scientists were finally able to isolate the rubella virus and develop a vaccine that helped end the epidemic.

# Part Six: A change in roles 1950–1969

After decades of difficulties and struggles, by 1950, Australians were ready to move on to better times.

Leaving the war and depression behind, Australia entered more prosperous and vibrant years—people worked to build homes and families, cars were now affordable for many, and more suburbs developed with access to electricity and sanitation. People had greater access to appliances and devices such as electric refrigerators and radios. Technology advanced rapidly, and television would provide a new link to the world.

The Institution itself, having only recently recovered from the war requisition of the Darlington building, was now running more than one school location, and it finally had some backing from the Department of Education to broaden and deepen its capacity to assist children. However, this would significantly impact the Institution’s role overall, just as it was about to celebrate its centenary.

## The Role of The Department of Education

The New South Wales Department of Education finally assumed responsibility for education at the Darlington School in 1956. This move demanded a great deal of cooperation and alignment on roles and responsibilities between the Institution’s Board, the Department, and its Director General of Education, Dr Harold Wyndham. Once it did, the Department became responsible for staffing, equipment, and materials. However, the buildings and residential facilities remained the responsibility of the Institution.

The Department of Education’s responsibility covered integrating children in specialised schools into mainstream schools, as well as the training of teachers, based on a 1947 inquiry into the education of children who were deaf. This inquiry coincided with an increased number of school-entry-aged children needing support due to an earlier rubella outbreak. The inquiry formally recommended continuing schools already in operation, adding pre-school education, and providing teacher training.

The government introduced a reasonably comprehensive training course for experienced teachers of hearing students so they could also teach children who were deaf or hard of hearing. While recognition of these qualifications was restricted due to bureaucracy, which limited course enrolments, it did help make integration into mainstream schools more viable.

## The role of residential

The changing role and support from the Department of Education left the Institution responsible for its buildings and residential services right around the time it was reconsidering the role of institutionalisation.

After nearly a century of responsibility for students and their education at every level, it was difficult for some at the Institution to relinquish personal control. W.E. Johnson, the Institution’s Superintendent, brought up this point at the 1953 Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf (AATD) conference. A very clear-cut program was necessary to give children who were deaf every chance possible and so that “*no personal interests of individual people or schools should stand in the way of such a plan*.”

During the negotiations and aligning of responsibilities and finances, doubts arose in the public as to whether the work of special residential schools should continue on a charitable basis. As such, the Board was forced to re-evaluate the role of the Institution beyond administration. Allowing the government to own their responsibilities permitted the Institution to assess and improve on its own.

Once it had settled into its new partnership with the Department of Education, the Institution’s Board identified a new opportunity to modernise and possibly redefine social welfare work as a means of support for education. It also reevaluated best practices in education for children with sensory disabilities—particularly for those who, due to distance, could not live at home and attend school daily. While the government subsidised state wards and children whose parents could not afford it, fees could not be abolished entirely. This meant that fundraising remained integral to covering the Institution’s full scope of support.

## A change in management roles

The change in the Institution’s role also meant that the Board had to re-evaluate its day-to-day management roles. Historically, the School’s activities were led by its superintendent, with the support of teachers and the Matron; the Board of Directors managed the administrative side, with many Board members stepping into honorary roles such as Treasurer, Secretary, Medical Officer, and others.

Once the Department of Education assumed responsibility for the teaching staff, including the superintendent and headmasters of the schools, and the Institution expanded its role, the Board recognised that it needed a management structure that fit this new approach.

One key hire by the Board was that of Stanley Swaine in 1957. With a background in administration, he was initially employed as Secretary and Manager and would go on to become the Institution’s first Chief Executive. Working with the Board, Swaine played an instrumental role in developing a new site for the Institution and getting the organisation to a firm financial position to continue its operation. He would remain Chief Executive until 1981.

W.E. Johnson remained Superintendent, and Keith Watkins and Jean Walters as Headmasters of the School for the Deaf and School for the Blind, respectively. The other was Dennis Plowman as Bursar, who, with accountancy qualifications, would eventually step up as superintendent when Johnson passed in 1968.

## Advancing teacher education

The decade began with a staff shortage at the Institute and at the Department of Education, which was also facing issues in mainstream schools. So, the Institution continued to push for strategic international hires and to lean on the Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf (AATD) for the examination and qualification of teachers trained at the Institution.

By 1952, Darlington alone had 31 members on the teaching staff, five of whom were trainees and eight of whom had come via the Department of Education, which had also taken responsibility for teacher salaries. Superintendent Johnson and his senior teachers provided mentoring and extended training at the Institution.

A decade later, as the Institute added further services, such as a school for children who were deafblind, teachers were sent overseas to undergo lengthy and intensive courses at renowned organisations. These organisations included the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Massachusetts, USA, where Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller’s teacher, had graduated. Perkins would go on to loan a qualified teacher to help with training locally.

Australia moved from the prosperous Fifties to the tumultuous Sixties with the birth of the civil rights movement and the beginnings of legal recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Women saw greater moves towards equality, an Australian Prime Minister disappeared, Australia converted to the decimal system, and man walked on the moon.

What would come next for the Institution was innovation like never before.

## A royal prefix and a name change

As early as 1938, the Board acknowledged the limitations of its name—the negative associations around institutionalisation and the use of the term ‘dumb’. In subsequent advertising, they often substituted or omitted these terms.

Then, in 1952, with a new approach to residential services and teaching focused on speech and expression, both were questioned again. The term ‘dumb’ was considered offensive, unfair to the children, and inconsistent with the School’s modern scientific teaching methods. As such, a series of applications were submitted to the Premier of New South Wales, with various names proposed.

In 1957, Queen Elizabeth conferred the prefix ‘Royal’ on the organisation, giving it greater societal status and resulting in the Institution finally being able to make a name change. Interestingly, after so many debates around the term ‘institution’, it was retained in the rename, and only the term ‘dumb’ was removed.

The Institution was officially renamed the Royal New South Wales Institution for Deaf and Blind Children, and the Act of Incorporation was amended.

“*It is with pride that we are able to report that during the year, the Institution received the honour and privilege of bestowal of the prefix ‘Royal’ by Her Majesty the Queen. Such a mark of Her Majesty’s favour and kindly interest and approval is a wonderful encouragement to further effort and surely is a clear indication to the public, of the essential worth of the Institution’s work. Approval has been given by the Chief Secretary to change the name of the* *Institution to ‘The Royal New South Wales Institution for Deaf and Blind Children’. The necessary Amendment is being made to the Act of Incorporation.*” Annual Report, 1957

**Expanding services**

### The beginning of Early Intervention

As a result of the rubella epidemic, there was a significant rise in demand for earlier admittance for children who were deaf or blind, some younger than three years old. The Institution was simply not equipped for such early admissions. However, it began a plan to meet this demand since no public authority had made adequate provisions, and the New South Wales Government played no direct role in providing early intervention programs.

The Wahroonga nursery was delayed due to buildings being at capacity. However, a nursery for children who were deaf at Darlington was up and running by 1951 and proving to be a success. Much of the credit went to Superintendent Johnson for taking on this additional responsibility. By the time the Schools moved to the North Rocks location, both included nurseries. In 1969, Varvaressos House was opened as an adjunct to the Institution’s school, providing a nursery section for very young children who were deaf, plus a Parent Counselling Service for the Deaf, which was growing rapidly in its activity and scope.

### The first school for the deafblind in the southern hemisphere

One of the areas the Institution’s Board had considered for some time was how to support children who were deafblind. Both Superintendent Johnson and Headmaster Keith Watkins had views on the unique needs of these children. With approval from the Board, they began investigations into education following a report outlining examples from overseas schools. They connected with the Perkins Institution for the Blind, which had been active in such education for some 80 years.

These investigations took about a year since there were no facilities in Australia for such specialised education or teacher training. In 1964, with a clear plan formulated, the Board decided to accept responsibility for care for children within the state and to build the necessary facilities. They commenced fundraising, hiring, and sending teachers for specialised training in the United States.

The first school for the deafblind in the southern hemisphere opened in North Rocks in 1967. Keith Watkins, who spent some time at Perkins, would preside over the School, and he would go on to be regarded as the leading authority on deafblind education in New South Wales, and dedicated himself to specialised education for children at the Institution.

The School began with five students and three specialised teachers. The Department of Education and the Institution partnered on teacher training at Perkins—the former covering salaries, travel and expenses, and the latter covering training fees and, for some, a side trip to the UK to spend time at Condover Hall in Shropshire. When, in 1970, the Department of Education planned the establishment of a Deafblind Teacher Training Programme, it coincided with the Board’s plans to enlarge its residential and teaching facilities. The Institution made some of these facilities available for the Department’s use.

It was only a short time before enquiries from parents from other states began. While the building of the School had been financed solely by the generosity of the Institution’s private supporters within New South Wales, it was only natural to appeal to other states and the Federal Government for financial support so they could extend enrolments to children across the country.

## The development and move to North Rocks

While the Darlington building had been a significant milestone, by 1948 the Institution was being stretched beyond capacity despite running schools at multiple locations. As with Darlington, the Board now had to consider a new site to accommodate the rising number of admissions and meet their ambitions for expansion and innovation.

Intended to replace both Darlington and Wahroonga, the Board sought a site where children could live “in cottage homes in the country instead of in dormitories on the fringe of a great industrial area” to “replace the last vestige of Institutionalism and surround the resident children with a home atmosphere in almost every respect.”

The earliest plans were for a location in Frenchs Forest. Although it was given an official go-ahead by the Minister for Public Works, a green ban appeal by a local landowner held it up for a few years before plans were finally abandoned. They turned their sights to a 30-acre piece of land in North Rocks, surrounded by beautiful bushland—an ideal location given it was closely situated to Parramatta and served by excellent bus services that would provide access to many residential sections of the city. The development ran from 1959 to 1962.

In anticipation, Superintendent Johnson travelled to the United States and England to extensively assess organisations and help define best practices. His findings may have influenced the shift from cottage-like buildings to two-storey block facilities designed to accommodate and segregate girls and boys, juniors and seniors, and the deaf and blind. The complex was based on the most up-to-date global methods around the care of children who were deaf and blind. It also included staff quarters, gymnasiums, playgrounds, ovals, a kitchen, and administrative buildings, all set in a spacious landscape.

Ground at North Rocks was broken in September 1961, after nearly a decade of intensive work and planning, and the transfer and accommodation of children began precisely 12 months later. 1963 marked the official opening by His Excellency the Governor of New South Wales, Lieutenant General Sir Eric Woodward, who unveiled a handsome bronze plaque to commemorate the occasion. More than 2000 visitors, including the Institution’s many committees, supporters, and kindred organisations, attended the ceremony.

The University of Sydney purchased the Darlington building as part of its expansion.

### Wahroonga School and consolidation with North Rocks

As the Wahroonga School grew, its hope to expand in its existing location was impeded by a lack of available acreage in the surrounding area. So, moving to the North Rocks site proved to be the best solution—it gave them room to expand and brought education together in one location.

Although the Board planned to build separate schools on one site, the move was met with considerable resistance, particularly from parents. It had not been that long since the initial separation of the two had happened, and one of the benefits was the focus and dedication to the unique needs of children who were blind. The move raised concerns that the children would once again be disadvantaged, and children who were deaf would be given greater consideration and investment.

The Board continually stressed that the schools would be separate entities, and each would receive the attention they merited. They went as far as to confirm that there would be no physical contact between the two groups of children in any activities whatsoever, not even recreational or domestic. Despite all these reassurances, the concerns were such that the Board had to go one step further: The property was eventually divided by a wall, providing a physical manifestation of the Board’s promise to parents.

When the School for children who were blind opened, with Keith Watkins as Headmaster, most parents did enrol their children. Still, others continued to believe that the setting was not right. Eventually, the Department of Education offered to place some of these children in mainstream school classes.

However, this integration into the mainstream came with some challenges and resistance of its own. The Minister of Education had to step in, and he gathered a group of experts to help decide on the matter. Along with the Minister, Robert James Heffron, the group included Sir Harold Wyndham, then Director-General of Education, and Dr Frederick Gregory-Roberts, a prominent ophthalmologist who was also an Honorary Ophthalmologist and a Director at the Institution. The opinion was to educate children with low vision alongside sighted peers, as was done in the United States.

Once adopted, many of the students with low vision were transferred to new, special units attached to primary schools at Asquith, Lidcombe, and Tempe, and high schools at Kingsgrove North, and Northmead. Some were enrolled in the regular classes of their local neighbourhood schools. In some locations, desks were adjusted to facilitate reading, and the Department of Education provided large print books and other low-vision aids.

## Centenary and celebrations

October 1960 was a time of celebration and anticipation as the Institution marked its 100th anniversary while developing the North Rocks site. The Centenary itself was wisely used as a public relations opportunity to launch a building fundraising appeal.

As for celebrations, special thanksgiving services were held at protestant churches in New South Wales on Sunday, October 22. The Dean, Rev. Eric Pitt, graciously arranged a special evening service at St Andrew’s Cathedral on October 23 for the Directors and their wives, as well as various auxiliaries and members of the public interested in the Institution’s work.

A ‘Hundredth Birthday Party’ was held for the children earlier that week, where afternoon games for the students and the staff were followed by a tea party featuring a giant cake that towered over most of the children. A ‘Back to Darlington’ event was later held for alumni and former staff members, and two very special guests attended: Dr and Mrs Vickery. The latter was the daughter of Samuel Watson, the beloved superintendent of the Institution whose 40-year tenure had started in 1870, just ten years into the School’s founding. Hundreds of attendees came together to celebrate this momentous occasion.

This milestone year saw a lot of highly visible activities that helped further publicise the work at the Institution throughout the year—from a visit by actor and movie star Charlton Heston to an impressive display by visiting warships USS Eldorado and HMAS Canberra, which served to entertain the children.

### The Birthright film

One of the publicity highlights in 1960 was the release of the film Birthright. Made by Artransa Film Studios, it featured students who were deaf being educated at the Institution. Students Toni Rose De Luca and Amanda Reuben played important roles in the film. Its release was timed with the Centenary celebrations and building appeal. The Institution considered the film a masterpiece.

### A first in radio programming

In 1953, a broadcast first occurred when a program featured children who were deaf on the radio. That year’s annual report described it as follows:

“*The babbling of the Nursery group, the recitation and speech correction of an intermediate class, and the free conversation of a senior girl were distinctly heard. Numerous letters of appreciation were received, and the hearing public were made to realise that deafness does not necessarily mean speechlessness*.”

### Eartha Kitt visits

During her visit to Australia in 1963, iconic entertainer Eartha Kitt visited the Schools and spent considerable time with the children.

## Public relations and advertising

From the late 1950s, a great deal of attention was placed on public relations and its impact on fundraising. The Institution knew it needed extensive publicity to get the most from appeals. In 1958 alone, 80 television telecasts made mention of the Institution; there were 188 radio broadcasts on behalf of, or prominently mentioning the Institution; newspapers devoted some 799 inches of column space to the Institution’s work and welfare; and 125 photographs of the Institution’s work appeared in the Sydney press. This continued to expand, year on year, into the 1960s.

## Lantern Clubs

In the mid-1960s, the Board of the Institution underwent efforts to create auxiliaries in suburban and rural areas to assist with both fundraising and to publicise the work of the Institution.

The efforts that the Ladies’ Visiting Committee had once led were rechannelled, and two new groups formed. One was the Golden Committee, under the presidency of Lady Barwick, wife of then President of the Board, Sir Garfield Barwick. The other was the Lantern Club movement.

With its starting motto of “*affording light to the blind and guidance to the de*af,” Joyce Oberg was appointed to spearhead these efforts. Lantern Clubs formed in Grafton, Mosman, Ashfield, Randwick, and Parramatta in their first year. Today, they go as far north as Forster, as far south as Batemans Bay, and west to the Blue Mountains.

Since its start in 1964, Lantern Clubs have raised millions in funds, with over 500 volunteers. Their activities include literary luncheons, open gardens, morning teas, raffles, fashion shows, and more. The Lantern Clubs exist to this day.

## The Lantern Light

In 1967, the Lantern Light newsletter was launched. Its purpose was to keep all the committees and members appraised of each other’s activities and keep them abreast of what was happening at the Institution. Published quarterly, it often featured articles on global trends in education alongside updates on social and charitable activities, and it provided insight into the lives of children and their progress.

## The Royal visits

The first of the Royal visits during this time happened in 1954. On February 7, the Governor arranged for the children of the Institution to greet Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh as they left St Andrew’s Cathedral. The Darlington establishment was floodlit for the duration of Her Majesty’s visit to New South Wales.

The second visit came in 1963 when Her Majesty the Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh made a fleeting visit to the State’s Capital. Ella Westwood organised for a group of students to be aboard the ferry made available to the Royal Overseas League, so they were amongst those who welcomed the Royal Yacht as it entered Sydney Harbour.

## Kindred charities

One of the key characteristics of the Institution has been the strong relationships it forged with other organisations, especially charitable ones that share the same goals. At the time, it included a close liaison with the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society of NSW (now known as Deaf Society of NSW), Guide Dogs for the Blind Association of New South Wales (now known as Guide Dogs NSW/ACT), and the Royal Blind Society (now known as Vision Australia), assisting each other and working together to support people in their communities.

# Part Seven: The dawn of revolution 1970–1989

As Australia stepped into the 1970s, it faced a decade of rapid social change. From women’s liberation to gay rights, the personal became political. It was a period that transformed Australia. At the Institution, this rapid rate of change was met with innovation and advancement at an unprecedented rate.

With the Government now well involved in and helping fund the educational side, the Institution was able to broaden its services, explore more ways to support children and their families, and advance the industry. This shift in resources and investment didn’t just create a new path forward: it brought about a period of radical progress and expansion that would fundamentally change the very fabric of the organisation and its role in the world.

In the mid-80s, the Board undertook a managerial reorganisation and focused on bringing in new, highly qualified professionals to fill administrative roles under the Chief Executive, such as accounting and facilities management. It also created a new role that would have a longterm impact on how the organisation supports people, one created to oversee client services to improve the lives of people receiving services from the institution. Garth Smith, a teacher and then principal at the Institution’s schools, was the first person appointed to this role. The Board’s dedication to education didn’t waver. Instead, it focused on exploring and providing education that addressed more individual and unique needs through specialised schools. It also put greater effort into mainstream integration, as was the case in education more broadly, to ensure that children with sensory disabilities were effectively included in regular schools.

To support these educational advances, the Institution began to invest more specifically in research and development, which would impact more than just education—it would help advance the entire field.

And a new technological breakthrough would change everything.

## Early Intervention and Homestart

As it became more evident that early detection, diagnosis, and intervention were the cornerstones of successful education, the Institution realised that for parents to understand or even know about this, it needed first to reach medical professionals who would provide the appropriate referrals.

The Institution commenced a community information program about early intervention and used pamphlets to inform medical practitioners, hospitals, baby health centres, community nursing services, and hearing testing centres—including the National Acoustics Laboratory, the two Children’s Hospitals in NSW, and the Royal Blind Society. Home visits and parent counselling followed so parents could provide home-based care until enrolment in the appropriate school. A correspondence version of the course saw engagement with families in every state and as far afield as Fiji, New Caledonia, and Switzerland.

By 1989, this program—appropriately named Homestart—provided early intervention services consistent with the growing international consensus on the importance of early intervention to help children with sensory disabilities achieve positive long-term developmental outcomes.

It would have a tremendous impact on the parents and families of children who were deaf or blind, as it allowed children to stay in their homes. It also helped minimise the adjustment period for children entering schools.

As enrolments increased and more families participated in the program, the need to provide residential services for children fell, inevitably changing the Institute’s role.

## Expanding beyond education

The Institute, now established for over a century, stepped into a new phase where significant progress happened within its educational model, including the expansion of available support services.

The Institute introduced services such as a careers program, independent living, and welfare and support services, among the many new ways to support children and their families. The career program was created when it became evident that offering a high-standard academic program was insufficient. The Institute created a program offering social integration, living skills, personal development, work experience, and job placement.

As an extension to this program, a new service to support independent living was introduced, wherein flats were made available as living spaces for students, supervised by houseparents. The program aimed to replicate independent living arrangements and help students make the transition. The associated welfare services at the time ranged from job placement to providing advice and guidance to families—especially those in remote locations.

The 1980s, a time of economic reform in Australia, also characterised by high consumption and big corporate deals, came to a close with a sobering recession as the new century came into sight.

## A name change to match the times

The Royal New South Wales Institution for Deaf and Blind Children had, by now, gained national and international recognition. However, the Board was still concerned with one aspect of its name: the term Institution, which “*suggested regimentation and harsh discipline which is the antithesis of the Board’s aims and objectives at its Centre at North Rocks.*”

This was by no means a new concern—attempts to change this term dated back to the 1930s, but the move to North Rocks, and the evolution in residential care, made the change much more relevant and necessary.

However, this required an amendment to the Act of Parliament that governed the management of the Institution. The title change became law in 1974 and was officially amended to the Royal New South Wales Institute for Deaf and Blind Children.

## A revolution in education

### Education for children with multiple disabilities

In its very early years, many requests for admission to the Institute’s schools came from parents of children who had multiple sensory disabilities. The Board felt that the School was not set up to support such children at the time, and it often had to turn them toward different schools or services that could better accommodate their needs, even though they may also have been ill-equipped to support them adequately.

A turning point came in the 1970s, as society’s attitude toward children with disabilities started to change, as did the way the government supported them, particularly for children with multiple disabilities who deserved education designed specifically for their needs. Stanley Swaine approached the Board after noticing increasing requests for such enrolments.

A pilot program was launched after the Board approved intensive investigations in Australia and abroad. Initially named the Special School for Multi-Handicapped Blind Children (later the Alice Betteridge School), it was the first of its kind in Australia. The Board appointed Garth Smith as Principal, an experienced teacher of the deaf and blind at the Institute, who had undertaken a course at the Condover Hall School for Blind Children with Other Handicaps in Great Britain. Development and fundraising began in 1972, and the School was officially opened in June 1974.

The development of the School’s program required a range of innovative strategies, recognising that the educational needs of children with multiple sensory disabilities differed significantly from those with either hearing or vision loss alone. This meant a different teacher-to-student ratio was required. A specialised in-service training course was developed for houseparents and other non-teaching staff who were engaged in caring for children with multiple disabilities and made compulsory for all staff as a condition of employment.

It also meant reviewing the physical space of the School. Based on best practices observed in schools abroad, the architect accounted for particular needs, such as extra wide corridors and hallways for wheelchairs, special floor coverings, walls fitted with rails, specially designed cupboards and elevated bathtubs.

By 1977, a more profound commitment by the Government and welfare agencies improved the delivery of services to children who were disabled and provided much-needed subsidies to keep the School going. A growing waiting list for admission highlighted that more was needed, including new buildings and equipment. By the Institute’s 120th anniversary, the School was fully open, and some 70 pupils, both day and residential, were accommodated.

Expansion then continued—from the collaboration with Macquarie University on research into training and teaching methods of children with multiple disabilities to an ongoing program of care and training for young men and women emerging from the School. As the need for residential facilities declined, spaces became available for refurbishment for additional services, such as the Activity Therapy Centre (later the work-oriented Community Skills Program). Medical and paramedical services were made available, as were speech pathology and occupational therapy, plus a program for independent living or work placement for those graduating from the School.

In 1990, the School would become the Alice Betteridge School, honouring the Institute’s first deafblind student.

### Mainstream integration: The Garfield Barwick School and Rockie Woofit Preschool

By the end of the 1980s, the Institute had spent over 100 years at the forefront of education for children who were deaf or blind. During that time, incorporating children who were deaf into mainstream education had become an increasingly common practice. Transitioning children from specialist schools into regular school environments, where they could access the same type and level of education as their hearing peers, was a goal shared by educators across Australia.

However, not all children were sufficiently prepared for the transition, and it became apparent that, for some students, a more intensive program to assist their development of spoken language skills might be required to support their successful inclusion in their local schools.

To help with this transition, the Institute began plans to open a school with new state-of-the-art facilities and experienced staff, based on the principles of auditory-verbal teaching that would help accelerate the preparation and successful transition of its pupils into mainstream education. The Garfield Barwick School, based in North Parramatta, was officially opened in 1989, initially working in collaboration with four schools in the vicinity: The King’s School, Tara Anglican School for Girls, the Redeemer Baptist School, and Saint Patrick’s Primary School.

The School’s philosophy was simple: children who were deaf or hard of hearing should have the same options and opportunities in life as their hearing peers. The success of integration depended on some key areas: early detection and diagnosis, the use of advanced technology as appropriate, early intervention, and intensive development of the language and communication competence required in mainstream settings.

In the mainstream setting, each student’s integration was tailored to meet their individual needs and abilities, and teachers were supported by a teacher of the deaf or a teacher’s aide based on the student’s specific needs.

By 1989, the co-located Rockie Woofit Preschool opened using a philosophy of ‘reverse integration’, meaning the Preschool enrolled both hearing and hard-of-hearing children in a program primarily designed to meet the needs of the children with hearing loss. This was in contrast to the integration into mainstream preschools, where children with hearing loss would be enrolled in a program designed to meet the needs of hearing children. The North Parramatta location was built with proper acoustic treatment and facilities to meet the needs of children who were deaf or hard of hearing.

## Advancements through Research and Development

One of the areas that characterised this period of revolution was a commitment to research and development. The Board, then under the leadership of Presidents Sir William Walkley and Sir Garfield Barwick, respectively, continued their leading-edge stance on innovation, new ways of working, and the investment in infrastructure that this required.

### Macquarie University and research

1973 saw a new research-specific partnership with Macquarie University. The first research program, overseen by a joint committee comprising of representatives from the Institute, the University, and the Department of Education, focused on communication and language comprehension for children who were deaf. Running across three years, it focused on improving the standard of language comprehension and language usage amongst children who were deaf.

That program was followed by a 1978 research project designed to provide materials and teaching strategies for use by teachers of deafblind children—with potential application to educational strategies for children with severe or profound developmental disabilities. It was led by the Institute’s Research Fellow, Dr Angela Wilson, with oversight by Professor James Ward and Dr Bernie Thorley of the Macquarie University Special Education Centre.

Research around an Exemplary Classroom was also conducted and set up at the Institute, led by a master teacher with a postgraduate qualification, with the support of two experienced aides. The classroom was designed to be an environment that included optimal use of auditory and visual aids and devices and the most advanced procedures for instruction and classroom management. Case studies and research reports generated by this experimental project became essential components of an evidence base on which future programs would be developed.

Interestingly, the introduction of a systematic method of instruction resulted in further highlighting the complex needs of the students, and a new awareness of individual children’s needs arose. Since then, the Institute’s emphasis on individualised programs has helped many children recognise their unique potential.

## Braille goes digital

A critical addition to the Institute was a Science Block and Braille Library (eventually known as the Computer and Library Services Department), which opened in 1972. Six years later, the Institute would set up the first computerised braille production department in Australia—and the Southern Hemisphere. Located initially at Walkley House in St. Leonards and managed by John Berryman, who later became a long-serving chief executive of the Institute, its prime function was braille production.

To shift braille production into a digital future, the Institute invested in computing systems and programs, many of which were purchased from American suppliers, and introduced the use of Australia’s only automated braille embossing devices. Automated production required a sophisticated computer program to translate text to braille. All translated texts were then permanently stored on magnetic tape, which became masters for future printing.

While this undertaking was a significant investment for the Institute, it produced braille of excellent quality and accuracy much more efficiently than traditional manual methods. By 1985, upgrades and a new mini-computer came with an interpoint embosser that produced braille on both sides of pages, thereby halving the bulk of braille books.

John Berryman joined the Institute with IT experience in the private sector, a Bachelor of Science degree, and studies in data processing, management, and social administration. Intending to work in a charitable organisation for just a few years, Berryman would stay with the organisation for some 32 years. He eventually stepped into the role of Deputy Chief Executive supporting Jim Harris, and held the Chief Executive role from 1985 to 2010.

The Institute hit a landmark moment in 1987, with 1,000 titles transcribed into braille.

**The cochlear implant revolution**

One of the most significant innovations Australia can claim is the invention of the commercial multichannel cochlear implant. The first attempts at cochlear implantation were made in France in the 1950s, but it wasn’t until the 1970s in the USA that William House developed a single-channel device. This device, commercialised by 3M, helped distinguish the pitch and rhythm of speech, but it was still limited in its ability to discriminate speech sounds effectively.

This progress prompted further research worldwide, including that of Professor Graeme Clark in Australia. In the 1960s, while researching otolaryngology and the brain’s ability to decode speech sounds, he expanded into methods to stimulate the auditory nerve electrically. This research led to the development of the multielectrode cochlear implant, which significantly improved the ability to distinguish speech. In 1978, Professor Clark successfully performed an implant surgery on an adult at the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital using this new device.

Initially, this extraordinary breakthrough was seen solely as a means to help adults with lipreading or speech recognition, specifically those who had once had full hearing and lost it due to illness or injury. Few recognised the full scope of what these implants could do and the incredible impact they would have globally.

## Implants and the congenitally deaf

Professor William (Bill) Gibson was a visionary surgeon who recognised the full potential of multielectrode cochlear implants—or the ‘bionic ear’, as it was sometimes called. He was intrigued by the early results, but he believed he could do more with such a signal.

In 1984, Gibson performed the first implant surgery in New South Wales as part of a ground-breaking study by the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and the University of Sydney. The recipient was 22-year-old Sue Walters, who had lost her hearing six months earlier due to meningitis.

The switch-on of her implants was the first to be documented on film anywhere in the world—and the first to convincingly show she could understand speech using a multielectrode cochlear implant.

After her successful surgery, a phone call between Gibson and Sue Walters led to the next leap. He noticed they could communicate clearly, and she could hear speech without any contextual clues, such as lipreading. For Gibson, this sparked the possibility of what cochlear implants could do for those with congenital hearing loss, recognising that the auditory system had the capacity to learn and adapt—certainly in adults, but especially in children.

Conversation between Professor Bill Gibson after the implant:

Profession Bill Gibson: “Is That Susan?”

Sue Walters: “Ah, yes, this is Susan.”

Profession Bill Gibson: “I thought I’d ring you and ask about your holiday.”

Sue Walter: “About my holiday? Ah yes, I went to Burning Palms.”

## Cochlear implants for children

Despite medical reservations, location challenges, funding and legal issues, by 1986, Gibson and his team had successfully carried out twenty implants on adults. The success of these surgeries led to increasing queries from parents about the possibility of implants for children. Gibson understood it would take a great deal of planning and examining every aspect and potential outcome of such an undertaking before they could even consider surgery on children.

As a result, he gathered a highly qualified team of specialists to explore what it would take during and post-surgery, plus the habilitation needs and complete journey over time for children and their families. The final multi-disciplinary team consisted of ENT surgeons, biomedical engineers, audiologists, teachers of the deaf, social workers, and other professionals. The task for the team was to leave very little to chance—to prepare and plan for any eventuality as best they could. Once approval was granted in the US, Europe, and Australia to hold clinical trials for children between the ages of two and eighteen, Gibson and his team took on the challenge.

Gibson performed cochlear implant surgery on 4-year-old Holly McDonell—the youngest recipient at that time—in June 1987 at the Children’s Hospital in Camperdown. Holly, like Sue Walters, had lost her hearing due to meningitis, which meant she had some understanding of sound before the implant. Sue Walters was there when Holly’s implant was switched on by an audiologist who established the comfort and threshold levels, so Holly would not experience too many sounds at once.

Holly required daily habilitation sessions with her mother under the guidance of trained teachers. They helped her to develop both listening and language skills.

## The first implant for a congenitally deaf child

The success of the multi-disciplinary team approach, the surgeries themselves, and the highly detailed habilitation process that followed became a best-practice model replicated globally to this day. It also created the foundation from which Gibson and his team could consider surgery for children who were congenitally deaf.

Implanting a child who was congenitally deaf was a bold move, and the child at the centre of that breakthrough was 5-year-old Pia Jeffrey. Her August 1987 surgery came three weeks before her sixth birthday. The first sound she heard was “hello.” She said hello back, then listened to her voice say hello again.

Pia’s habilitation required her teachers to go back to the beginning of language development, but after several years of intense habilitation, Pia had transformed into a talkative child. Her younger brother, Alex, also received an implant in 1988.

Pia’s experience would change everything. It broadened the possibilities for all children who are deaf—and for their families, who now had more options for their children. By the end of the 1980s, Gibson’s practice successfully ran two pilot programs: One for adults, the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital implant program, and the second for children, which would eventually become the Children’s Cochlear Implant Centre (CCIC).

## Cochlear Implants and the Deaf Community

As with many innovations, the development of the cochlear implant was met with scepticism along the way. At first, some in the medical community expressed reservations. It was also an area of great concern for the Deaf community. However, much of the pushback was not about the device itself but instead out of concern about how it was being described and promoted in the media. In particular, the Deaf community took issue with comments that sought to characterise alternatives to implantation in a very negative way and with suggestions that the implant would supplant the need for anyone to have a deaf identity, rather than promoting it as another means for those with hearing loss to access spoken language.

## CICADA

The Cochlear Implant Club and Advisory Association (CICADA) is a charitable and volunteer organisation that helps support people who use cochlear implants throughout their journey. The organisation supports prospective cochlear implant recipients by connecting them with people who use them and have first-hand experience, as they can best explain what it’s like and how the technology has worked for them.

As the story goes, the association began with Professor Gibson’s first two cochlear implant recipients: Sue Walters and Cathy Simon. While Gibson was in England, the two women found support in each other, and on his return, Cathy Simon shared her idea for a self-help group where people with cochlear implants could support each other.

Its first meeting was held on December 1, 1984, at the Adult Deaf Society in Stanmore. Gibson typed the association’s first newsletter; as he was doing so, he noticed the loud racket of cicadas outside his window and decided that would work as a name for the association, retrofitting it as an acronym.

CICADA continues today, embracing people from all walks of life and working with many different social groups and associations across Australia.

## The invention of the cochlear implant

While the cochlear implant is a relatively new technological innovation, its beginnings date back to 1800, when Alessandro Volta, an Italian physicist (after whom the Volt, as a unit of measurement, is named), managed to stimulate his internal ear using an electrical current.

However, little else happened until 1957, when André Djourno, a professor of medical physics, and otologist Charles Eyriès invented an early version of the cochlear implant in France. Their breakthrough restored auditory sensation rather than full hearing, but it would lead to further innovation. In the USA, in January 1961, otologist William House developed a single-channel device and, together with neurosurgeon John Doyle, performed the first true cochlear implant.

The next advancement occurred when the implants went from single channel to multichannel and with the use of multiple electrodes by pioneers like Professor Graeme Clark in Australia, and independently by Professor Kurt Burian and pupils Ingeborg and Erwin Hochmair in Austria.

## Cochlear Ltd and commercialisation

As the cochlear implant began to gain traction, visionary entrepreneur Paul Trainor would help drive its commercialisation, further advancement, and availability for more people worldwide.

Trainor used cash flow from his company, Nucleus Ltd, and its leading product, the pacemaker, to help fund and incubate medical start-ups in Australia. Recognising the potential of the cochlear implant, Trainor teamed up with Professor Graeme Clark to begin clinical trials. He wisely hired talented engineers from Clark’s team, including Jim Patrick as head of research, who continued to advance the technology.

In 1985, the company would be the first to get approval for a commercial multichannel device from a health regulatory body. Today, Cochlear Ltd dominates the cochlear implant market globally and was named one of the world’s most innovative companies by Forbes in 2011.

The Institute was involved with Cochlear from the start, and the two organisations continue a very close collaboration. NextSense is one of Cochlear Ltd.’s largest clients, and its new premises on the Macquarie University campus are located near Cochlear’s global headquarters and main manufacturing plant.

## Emeritus Professor William Gibson AO

William (Bill) Gibson was born in Devonshire, England, in 1944. With a history of family members in medicine, Gibson felt his path was inevitable, and he graduated from Middlesex Hospital, London University, in 1967. Gibson was drawn to otology, or ear surgery, and held various appointments in teaching hospitals in London before becoming a consultant surgeon at The National Hospitals for Nervous Disease and The Royal National Throat Nose and Ear Hospital. His work in electrocochleography, a test of electrical activity generated by the cochlea, made him a leading diagnostician.

In 1983, with support from Professor Barry Scrivener, Australia’s first specialist otologist, he immigrated to Australia with his family to become the inaugural professor of otolaryngology (ENT) at the University of Sydney.

While cochlear implants were still nascent, the University of Sydney, supported by the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, gave Gibson the go-ahead to work in this area. Between 1984 and 2014, Gibson performed the ‘bionic ear’ operation over 2000 times, making him one of the most prolific surgeons in his field. He also developed a new technique that used a smaller incision site, which would become the standard. During those 30 years, he trained surgeons from around the world.

In 2012, Gibson retired from his role as Chair of Otolaryngology at the University of Sydney and scaled down his surgeries. However, he continues to publish research papers, visit hospitals, and support patients and teams, including NextSense staff and surgeons.

Gibson pioneered electrocochleography to investigate the inner ear and has become a world leader in the study of Menière’s Disease. He has received citations at international conferences for his contributions to both cochlear implantation and Menière’s disease, and was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for his contribution to medicine.

He is the founding director of the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre (SCIC), which today, as part of NextSense, is Australia’s most extensive implant program.

## Auslan and the first Auslan dictionary

Auslan is the name given to the sign language of the Australian Deaf Community. The name, coined by Dr Trevor Johnston in the 1980s, is a portmanteau (or a shortened form of) ‘Australian sign language’.

While Auslan has its roots in sign languages from the United Kingdom, which were introduced to Australia in the nineteenth century by educators such as Thomas Pattison, it has since evolved into a distinct language. While it differs from modern British Sign Language, the two languages can be mutually understood. Like all sign languages, Auslan has a separate grammatical system from spoken and written English.

Because it is a natural language, no one person is responsible for codifying Auslan. However, in 1989, Trevor Johnston authored the first *Auslan Dictionary*, a groundbreaking effort and one of the first in the world to index signs according to the language’s productive features, including handshape, position, and movement. This feature allowed users to search for signs by their characteristics, to find a sign’s meaning, or to search by an English word to find a sign translation.

In partnership with the Institute, extensive research and development led to a multi-media digital version of the dictionary on CD-ROM in 1998.

Today, through a website known as *Auslan Signbank*, Johnston has created an online version of the dictionary, which draws on an expanding corpus of Auslan signs made available to users as video clips showing them in natural usage.

Notably, after extensive lobbying by the peak Deaf community group, the Australian Association of the Deaf (now Deaf Australia), Auslan was recognised as a community language by the Australian government in 1991.

## Professor Trevor Johnston

Trevor Johnston is a renowned linguist and expert in the Auslan (Australian Sign Language) field, and a leading figure in the Australian Deaf community. He holds a PhD in Sign Language Linguistics from the University of Sydney, based on research focused on the structural aspects of Auslan and its relationship to other sign languages worldwide.

Johnston is a native Auslan user, growing up with Auslan as his first language. While hearing, Johnston is known as a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) as both his parents are deaf, and some of his grandparents and many relatives on both sides of his family were or are also deaf. Johnston’s father worked at the Institute for some time.

As such, he has had firsthand exposure to the Deaf community and its culture, which has played a significant role in his career specialising in Auslan. Johnston has contributed enormously to the recording and analysis of Auslan and its recognition as a community language in Australia, and academically on several research projects, some in collaboration with the Institute.

He has played a pivotal role in raising awareness about the linguistic rights of the Deaf community, working closely with educational institutions, government bodies, and non-profit organisations to ensure that Auslan is recognised and supported. This includes the professional development of teachers of the deaf and teachers of signed languages and the implementation and evaluation of Auslan/English bilingual education programs.

Johnston was an Associate Professor at the Institute’s Renwick College (now NextSense Institute) and the University of Newcastle, leaving to become a Professor in the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Human Sciences, at Macquarie University—a position from which he retired. Most recently, he has worked with Monash University on research into Integrating Auslan Resources into the Language Data Commons of Australia.

## Celebrating 125 years of service

The Institute celebrated a major milestone in 1985: 125 years of service. Alongside more traditional events, what the Institute celebrated most was all the significant service developments underway and the generous individuals and organisations that helped make that possible.

## Sir Garfield Barwick 1903–1997

Sir Garfield Barwick—who joined the Board of Directors of the Institute in 1958, and became President of the Institute in 1976—was appointed the first Chancellor of the newly established Macquarie University in 1967.

At the time, Barwick held the role of Justice of the High Court of Australia, and his public service was recognised by a knighthood in 1953 and then elevated to the rank of Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George (GCMG) in 1964. As such, it was a great honour for the university that such a distinguished man would help further establish their reputation.

These varied roles no doubt helped create a connection between the Institute and Macquarie University—a partnership that began as a research collaboration in 1973.

Barwick’s storied career included roles as a solicitor, barrister, and King’s Counsel (later Queen’s Counsel) before being elected to Federal Parliament in 1958. In the same year, he became Attorney-General and additionally, in 1961, Minister for External Affairs—positions he held until he left Parliament to become Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia. He remains Australia’s longest-serving Chief Justice, having held the role for 17 years until 1981. In 1993, in grateful recognition of his 35 years of service and leadership, Barwick was made a Life Governor of the Institute, as was his wife, Lady Barwick.

Upon his death in July 1997, the Prime Minister remembered him as “*a truly remarkable Australian who demonstrated in very effective fashion what can be achieved from humble beginnings with those great qualities of determination, tenacity, and ability*.”

The Barwick family have continued to support the organisation to this day.

## The Legend of Islay wishing well and fundraising

A sandstone wishing well sits outside the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney, near the Queen’s statue, featuring a small bronze statue of a dog named Islay, her favourite companion.

Built in 1987, Islay greets passersby audibly and helps collect donations for the Institute. “*Hello, my name is Islay. I was once the companion and friend of the great Queen Victoria. Because of the many good deeds I have done for deaf and blind children, I have been given the power of speech. If you cast a coin into the wishing well now, I will say thank you*.”

If you throw a coin in the wishing well, he says, “*Thank you, woof, woof*.”

## Fundraising and The Motherhood Quest

The Motherhood Quest, a well-publicised and highly successful fundraising event at the time, was responsible for generating great support for the Institute. At the 1987 Motherhood Quest, Mrs Carolyn Cartwright, whom the Randwick Lantern Club sponsored, earned the distinction of being the highest fundraiser. The Quest’s Patron was Ita Buttrose, and the major sponsors included Grace Bros., the Sunday Telegraph, and Channel TEN, which also televised the event.

## Michael Parkinson and Rockie Woofit

In 1983, English broadcaster, journalist, and author Sir Michael Parkinson created a mascot for the Institute. His name was Rockie Woofit. Parkinson, a dedicated supporter of the Institute, had created animated characters called the Woofits, featured in a series of books he wrote that went on to become a television series.

Parkinson created Rockie (the name taken from the location of North Rocks) as an Australian version of the characters, specifically for the Institute. Rockie Woofit became both the Institute’s mascot and the name of its first preschool.

In 1989, Parkinson became an official ambassador of the Institute, a role he continued until he passed in 2023. He also had personal experience with the Institute—his granddaughter was born with significant hearing loss, and he reached out to Chief Executive John Berryman and the organisation for support and guidance through the family’s journey.

# Part Eight: The next generation 1990–2009

Emerging from a decade of incredible highs and sobering lows, Australia was fundamentally altered by social and economic change as it began its path to the new millennium. The end of the Cold War resulted in a rising global optimism, and new technologies would come within reach of everyone.

It was a sentiment that the Royal Institute not only embraced but put into effect. As the term ‘globalisation’ was bandied about in media and business, the Institute finally achieved its mission of expanding its national and international reach. It put technology to its full use, pushed it further, and listened to the community for ways to improve education.

It would also see the most significant change: from a residential institution to an organisation with physical and virtual reach across the country and beyond.

## National reach and becoming RIDBC

As the Institute began to broaden its reach across the nation, it made another significant change to its name. In 1997, it removed ‘The New South Wales’ part and went simply by Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, or its abbreviation, RIDBC, which would become the predominant name.

In doing so, it signalled that it had met an ambition set as early as the 1880s: To bring all children who had vision and hearing loss across the country (then referred to as colonies) within the scope of the Institute. That scope would manifest well beyond what was imagined when that ambition was set.

## Towards 2001

RIDBC’s Board began the decade with a detailed blueprint for service planning and the development of a long-term strategic plan. It was designed to ensure RIDBC would enter the new millennium as a relevant and essential special education provider meeting the needs of children who were deaf or hard of hearing, blind or had low vision.

Titled *Towards 2001*, the strategic plan was directed by the Board and Chief Executive John Berryman, and authored by a team led by John Race. He had come into the role of charting the future of client services in 1987, having been a teacher, principal, and Teacher’s College lecturer with more than 20 years of experience in special education. He was appointed Deputy Chief Executive in 1990.

The plan went a long way toward answering some critical questions for the Board: Determining how much more RIDBC should be doing and what role it would play in the industry moving forward. As such, it emphasised the development of new services, research, staff development, and the continuing enhancement of most existing programs and services. It proposed significant upgrades to the Institute’s education research and professional training capabilities. The early adoption of technology would help accelerate these plans.

While RIDBC’s initial goal was toward 2001, it continued to surpass its goals as it moved into the 2000s. It became Australia’s foremost independent special educator, reaching children throughout Australia, including remote locations.

Entering the new millennium meant the School had now supported children in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. It progressed from providing a limited number of years of localised education to holistic support and commitment to children and their families from infancy to high school completion. It embraced and helped advance the quality and effectiveness of specialised technology, employed more highly trained teachers and specialists, and contributed to much better long-term outcomes for children through early intervention and early education.

The Institute also weathered good times and bad, including economic downturns. However, with continued generous support— both private and public—and savvy investing, it was able to continue to provide much-needed quality services to families across Australia.

## The introduction and expansion of new services

Much of the expansion RIDBC introduced during this time focused on early intervention and supporting students in mainstream schools. At this time, technological advances, greater focus on early intervention, and the introduction of newborn screening came together to change how the organisation could support children and their families.

### Early childhood services department

Recognising the importance of early intervention and education, RIDBC expanded its service to provide comprehensive assessment and planning services for families. The Early Childhood Services Department—created in 1991 under the leadership of Jan North, who had been recruited from the University sector—included audiologists, speech pathologists, orthoptists, and psychologists. They would work collaboratively with occupational therapists and teachers to conduct play-based assessments of children in their homes or at RIDBC. This assessment and planning team helped improve the quality of the Homestart program. Teachers and therapists were a resource to families to ensure the implementation of appropriate educational programs for babies and young children. They also assisted children in their transition from home to preschool or school.

In 2004, the Welwyn Early Childhood Centre was built with the support of a remarkable bequest from the late Leslie Lillie. The centre brought together all of RIDBC’s childhood programs, and its enrolment growth was one of the fastest.

### The VisionEd department

A VisionEd department, created in 1997, centralised all of RIDBC’s programs for children who were blind or had low vision. The benefits were immediate, bringing together itinerant teachers with the Publications Officers responsible for producing braille and large-print materials. The use of laptop computers, remote access to computerised braille and the large-print transaction network, and desktop publishing software meant faster turnaround in alternative format materials production. In turn, VisionEd provided better outcomes for students in mainstream independent schools who relied on braille or large print.

### Itinerant Teacher Service

To support the inclusion of children with sensory disabilities in mainstream education, RIDBC introduced the Itinerant Teaching Service in 1991. While itinerant teachers supported students enrolled in Government schools in their inclusion, there needed to be equivalent support for those in the independent school sector.

Itinerant teachers were engaged to provide specialist assistance and support for students within regular classes in schools of their choice through in-class support, note-taking, team teaching, and tutorials as needed. Importantly, RIDBC provided a service to transcribe texts and class papers into braille, large print, tactual diagrams, and voice output computer disks.

### Community support services

In a country as diverse as Australia, the ambition of RIDBC to reach every child who needed its support meant providing access to First Nation peoples, particularly those in more remote areas, and those from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds whose needs were unique. The priority for these groups was better ways to reach them, to make them aware of how RIDBC could support them, and give them access to this support.

One vital characteristic of the program was that, unlike services offered by other organisations, RIDBC hired and trained teachers who were native language speakers, so no teaching would have to happen via interpreters.

Community Services Support, established in 1998, undertook networking and community outreach that helped increase referrals. It was also responsible for translating informational materials into widely used languages in Australia, including Vietnamese, Arabic, and Chinese.

### Newborn Screening and the Jim Patrick Audiology Centre

In 2002, the NSW Government introduced state-wide newborn hearing screening. It allowed all babies born in the state to be screened for hearing soon after birth, meaning that cases of congenital hearing loss were diagnosed within the first weeks of life. The Institute played a vital role in developing this landmark program via its newly established Jim Patrick Audiology Centre, which became one of only four sites in the state for diagnostic audiological assessment of newborns.

Named after one of the pioneers in the development of cochlear implant technology, babies whose initial screening indicated the need for further investigation were referred to the Jim Patrick Centre for diagnostic testing. Following confirmation and diagnosis, parents would then be able to determine the best steps forward, from early aiding or cochlear implantation to early instruction in language and speech. The centre continues to offer audiological services for babies, toddlers, and children.

## Auslan and expanding bilingual education

Increased interest in Auslan occurred across the education sector following the recognition of Auslan as a community language in 1991, and increased visibility of the language in school communities due to mainstream school integration. Combined with greater advocacy by the Deaf community and support groups, it reinforced RIDBC’s belief that different modes of education should be made available, built around a child’s intrinsic characteristics and their parent’s preference. As such, RIDBC created two new preschools for children who were deaf or hard of hearing, which offered an auditory-verbal program and a sign language program.

The Roberta Reid Centre, opened in March 1992, welcomed children between the ages of two and five who were either deaf or hearing and had deaf parents who used Auslan, or were deaf and had hearing parents who wanted them to learn Auslan. Staffed by both deaf and hearing staff, all of whom used sign language, it provided a bilingual program with language acquisition and development as the primary focus.

The Centre was named after Roberta Reid, who had taught Alice Betteridge and served the organisation for 44 years, notably as the first female principal of the School for Blind Children.

Within two years, its value was so evident that the organisation planned to extend the bilingual program beyond preschool. The Thomas Pattison Annexe, named after RIDBC’s founder, commenced with a hybrid Kindergarten and Year One composite class. By 1998, the new Thomas Pattison School would offer integrated classes at Hills Grammar School and start a ‘Host Family’ program for children who lived beyond commuting range. During the school term, children could reside with a host family whose members were fluent in Auslan. A year later, a high school program commenced.

The Roberta Reid Centre and the Thomas Pattison School would join the other schools and services established in the previous decade, offering comprehensive education and services to serve all children’s needs.

### Research into bilingual teaching

Best practices in bilingual education and plans for program renewal were debated in 1996, which led to a new research program. The research aimed to identify the parameters for a strong sign language-based bilingual teaching model and to monitor the progress of students taught under it. It would lead to an Australian Research Council Grant to investigate the outcomes of Auslan/English bilingual educational programs. The research was led by Dr Trevor Johnston, who created the first dictionary of Auslan, Renwick College’s Dr Greg Leigh, and the University of Newcastle’s Associate Professor Phil Foreman.

## Training the next generation of teachers and specialists

### Renwick College

From the time Superintendent Harold Earlam pioneered teacher training and qualifications standards in the 1930s, RIDBC remained dedicated to identifying and developing the latest teaching methods, using research to further advancement in education, and ensuring access to highly qualified teachers and specialists. Its next significant initiative was establishing Renwick College, in 1991, in partnership with the University of Newcastle. **AUSLAN AND THE FIRST AUSLAN DICTIONARY**

Named after the former long-serving President and philanthropist Sir Arthur Renwick, Renwick College, located at the North Rocks Campus, offered both degree programs and short courses in the education of children with sensory disabilities (vision or hearing loss). The Institute provided professional teaching staff and facilities, and the University of Newcastle conferred the academic qualifications.

Officially opened in 1994, it commenced instruction in its first Master’s Degree course in Special Education, specialising in sensory disability. By 1995, the College had 26 students, and the first class graduated in 1997 with a Master of Special Education (Sensory Disability) degree.

The Institute and the University formed an equally represented Academic Board to guide the curriculum development of the coursework for Masters and Graduate Certificates, and the delivery of research degree programs for Masters and Doctoral degrees. Many of RIDBC’s existing programs, such as the Research Fellowship, Staff Development Unit, and the Braille and Large Print Unit (later the Alternative Format Publications Unit, or AFP), also came under the College’s management.

The College served to focus RIDBC’s diverse research activities. It also included an academic and research library as a satellite of the University’s main library in Newcastle. As a result, the organisation could dedicate resources to research and professional development in sensory disability, publish and disseminate research papers, present at conferences and seminars, and participate in national and international forums. Some of its early and major research undertakings were into Auslan/English bilingual education and the recording and study of Auslan.

By the turn of the century, the Renwick Centre, as it was renamed, had become the largest and most comprehensive centre for professional training and research in sensory disability in Australia, with a growing international reputation. It played a significant role in the planning and running of ICED 2000 (the 19th International Congress on Education of the Deaf), which convened for the first time in the southern hemisphere in 2000 in Sydney and was attended by more than 1,100 delegates.

By 2008, under the leadership of Professor Greg Leigh, the Centre had expanded to such an extent that the building of new space was required to accommodate enrolments.

Professor Greg Leigh began his career in education of the deaf at the Queensland School for the Deaf in Brisbane in 1979, holding qualifications in Special Education from Griffith University. He went on to complete a Master of Science (Speech and Hearing) at Washington University and a PhD in Special Education at Monash University. He joined RIDBC as a Senior Lecturer and Head of Renwick College in 1993 and was appointed Director of RIDBC Renwick Centre (as it would become known) in 2006, responsible for expanding and developing its world-class research and education programs and facilities. In 2014, he was made an Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) “for distinguished service to the deaf and hard of hearing community, particularly children, through education, research, public policy development, and specialist services”.

## The adoption of new technology

Early adoption of new technology and innovation was always at the organisation’s core. With the rate of progress around technology in the 1990s and 2000s, RIDBC continued to test and invest. The success of early programs meant that in 2008, the Board approved significant investment in the organisation’s IT infrastructure for educational programs, research, and telecommunications—particularly videoconferencing.

### The internet and braille

While the organisation made Braille digitally accessible in 1978, the internet enhanced the production technique for textual material for transcription—the material being in machine-readable format made the input stage much faster. The introduction of text-to-speech features provided even greater access for those with vision impairment.

### Alternative Format Production

As technology made it easier to reproduce materials such as books into a variety of accessible formats, RIDBC dedicated resources to producing books in alternative formats for children who were blind or had low vision. The Alternative Format Product Unit (AFP) employed various technical improvements to create accessible education materials, such as large-print production, tactile diagrams, and enhanced braille embossing techniques. Initially, the materials produced were textbooks, class hand-outs, and exam papers.

Today, the NextSense Accessibility and Inclusion service makes all types of printed materials accessible—from novels to knitting patterns and commercial menus to school textbooks. Services are available for individuals, community groups, schools, and any organisation requiring materials in braille, large print, accessible e-text, and 3D/2D tactile graphics.

### The Australian Childhood Vision Impairment Register (ACVIR)

One of the more challenging aspects of supporting children with vision loss was that there was insufficient data outlining how many children actually required it, which made it much harder to plan for services or to secure funding for much-needed research.

So, in 2009, RIDBC, in partnership with key Australian service providers, corporate donors, government departments, and health professionals, began a major research project to develop and maintain an Australia-wide record of children with vision impairment.

Under the leadership of Dr Sue Silveira, the Australian Childhood Vision Impairment Register, the first of its kind in Australia, is an ongoing project that collects accurate information on children diagnosed with vision impairment by an ophthalmologist. The data captured is used to establish the number of children with vision impairment, the causes and level of their impairment, and any additional disabilities and health conditions these children have. This much-needed data is made available to researchers in the field, and used to improve services for children.

### The first computerised Auslan Dictionary

In 1998, RIDBC published the first interactive Auslan dictionary on CD-ROM: *Signs of Australia*, produced as an extension of the lexicographical research of Dr Trevor Johnston, who authored the first print-based version of a dictionary of Auslan in 1989.

This major undertaking started in 1995, documenting even more of the signs of Auslan. On launch, the CD featured on-screen video clips of each sign and included a unique system that allowed users to search for a sign based on the features of the sign rather than searching based on the English translation.

Also available in book format, the *Signs of Australia* publications assumed an essential role in education and linguistics—and in the day-to-day lives of people who are deaf or for those who live or work with people who are deaf. These publications went on to receive wide critical acclaim. Over 3,000 copies of the CD-ROM version of the dictionary have been distributed, and more than 10,000 copies of the print dictionary have been sold.

### Remote learning and the impact on residential

The Institute’s investment in computer and communications technology significantly impacted access for children with hearing or vision loss across Australia. In 2001, RIDBC began research into the use of technology for reaching children and their families in rural and regional areas who were unable to access physical locations. The program proved to be a highly effective education tool.

Government funding covered a four-year rollout to make the program national, resulting in the development of the Institute’s Teleschool. This innovative new service installed in-home technology, which meant videoconference teaching sessions could occur in the child’s home rather than in a studio.

Technology and new services, like Teleschool, meant that expansion across Australia was independent of physical locations, and access was available almost anywhere. State lines no longer bound education and support—the only limitation was connectivity. It meant more children had access to education from home, and with a 66 per cent increase in Teleschool enrolments by 2008, RIDBC was reaching more children than ever.

Children no longer needed to be residents or boarders of a school to receive the early intervention or education they needed, nor face challenging treks or separation from loved ones. Even children with high support needs required less residential support, as parents accessed greater assistance and advice that allowed them to remain at home and commute to preschool or school. The Institute’s family-centred early intervention programs ensured parents and families could adapt to the unique needs of their children from the outset.

From 1990, RIDBC saw a steady drop in residential students, even though the number of students at the schools was unaffected. While it discontinued less essential services, it kept and enhanced ones that offered assistance as needed. By the mid-1990s, the only programs with on-site accommodation were respite services for children with high support needs.

### Disability Discrimination Act 1992

In 1992, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was introduced. This federal law makes it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities in areas including the workplace, education, housing, transportation, and the provision of goods and services. The Act ensures that anyone with a disability has the same fundamental rights and equality before the law as others.

Under the DDA, one of the provisions is assistance for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or have low vision when accessing information or entertainment in physical locations and online. It includes providing alternative ways to access information, such as braille, enlarged print, closed captioning, and text-to-speech capabilities.

### Towards Excellence textbook

Published in 1998, *Towards Excellence: Effective Education for Students with Vision Impairments* was the first textbook written and published in Australia on the education of children who were blind or had low vision. Produced under the joint editorship of Renwick College Lecturer Dr Pat Kelley and Research Fellow Gillian Gale, 31 Australasian chapter authors contributed their wide-ranging expertise to the book. The textbook was launched by Graeme Innes, a former pupil of the school at North Rocks, who would go on to be Australia’s Disability Discrimination Commissioner.

The textbook was hailed as a very welcome addition to the scholarly literature in the field by teacher educators, teachers and student teachers who worked with students who were blind or had low vision, and the parents of those students.

### The modern hearing aid

The development and miniaturisation of the modern hearing aid began after World War I. Technological advances accelerated after soldiers returning from the war needed support with hearing loss due to injury or damage sustained during active service. The invention of transistors in 1948 resulted in smaller devices that required less battery power.

Groundbreaking developments in the 1970s and 1980s, such as microprocessors, high-speed processors and microcomputers, and digital technology, led to unprecedented miniaturisation. The National Acoustics Laboratories (now Hearing Australia) were at the forefront of these developments in Australia.

The first commercial all-digital hearing aid was developed in 1995 by the Oticon Company in the United States, which distributed it only to audiological research centres. It took a company named Widex to prove commercial success with their Senso device marketed for individual use, which prompted Oticon to follow suit with DigiFocus, and these devices revolutionised hearing assistance.

Today, with Bluetooth integration, hearing aids can seamlessly connect with other devices and offer wearers enhanced functionalities.

# Part Nine: Redefining what’s possible 2010–2019

Climate disasters, political upheaval, and an extraordinary win for marriage equality defined the 2010s in Australia. The decade began with flooding and ended with devastating bushfires. Division in government saw five prime ministers in parliament in a mere ten years. And Australia voted for legalising same-sex marriage, with the Marriage Amendment Act passed in 2017.

At RIDBC, 2010 was a landmark year in its history—October marked its 150th anniversary. It gained a new, world-class tertiary facility for the RIDBC Renwick Centre, and it was reaching new heights, assisting thousands of children each year as Australia’s largest non-government provider of therapy, education, and diagnostic services for children who are deaf or hard of hearing, and blind or have low vision.

It was also a decade of significant expansion. A series of strategic mergers, partnerships, and a focus on technology would broaden its footprint, scope, and influence on the sector.

## RIDBC’S outlook for 2020

Never content to stand still, RIDBC continued to look ahead and set its sights higher. In 2015, the Senior Leadership (SLT), led by Chris Rehn, backed by the Board and its President, Sean Wareing, developed a new strategy for 2020. There were several driving forces behind RIDBC’s change management agenda, one being the Government’s new National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This new strategy focused on adapting the organisation to work with the scheme, reaching more people through expansion and partnerships, strengthening its identity and operations, and remaining responsive to the needs of the children, adults, families, and professionals it served.

Its 2020 outlook was as ambitious as ever. While most of the strategy focused on expanding services, new locations, and organisational performance, one specific ambition was reviewing its business structure and its brand’s effectiveness.

## The impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The Gillard Labor Government introduced the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in July 2013. It began with a trial phase, the NDIS Launch, before being rolled out across Australia in July 2016.

This new government initiative changed funding in the disability sector, aiming to put control in the hands of people versus providers. To do so, it removed block funding provided directly to organisations like RIDBC and allocated funds that individuals could apply for and use at their discretion. It gave people eligible for disability support greater choice and access to more services that would help them improve their quality of life.

The scheme was revolutionary, and a life-changing development for many Australians with disability who had previously not received services or support. Still, it had its challenges, especially at the outset. While giving people greater control over funds was never disputed, the impact on many not-for-profit organisations was untested and, therefore, unknown. The trial phase soon showed that many organisations were not set up nor entirely prepared for the full impact the scheme would have on their administration and how they supported clients.

For individuals, navigating the scheme was more complicated, creating challenges in qualifying and accessing funds. For organisations, it created new financial strain. Removing consistent funding meant organisations like RIDBC had to reassess how to manage a far more variable income stream.

As a result, charitable organisations had to face one of three outcomes: increase the size of their financial investment in the organisation to compete, choose to close down their efforts, or decide to merge with a larger organisation for greater economies of scale.

RIDBC fell in the latter category. As a large organisation, it could consider mergers with smaller yet invaluable service providers. However, it meant rethinking everything.

**A new competitive landscape:** with funds now in the hands of consumers, there was a sudden rise in small private players that claimed to offer the same or similar services. This created a completely different competitive landscape—now RIDBC was competing for share of wallet, as these private companies campaigned for consumer attention the way commercial brands did, despite lacking the breadth and depth of experience that charitable organisations had established for some time.

**The impact on culture and people:** the role of people working in charitable organisations also underwent a significant cultural shift. They suddenly went from specialist practitioners to case managers who had to manage the financial aspects of client service— something they had never had to deal with before. Then, there was the lure of newly opened roles in the private sector. For RIDBC and many other organisations, staff retention and attraction became a new challenge.

**Services marketing and customer outreach:** it also changed the organisation’s outreach to clients. Under this new scheme, the Institute had to reconsider how it could deliver optimal individualised programs, especially for people less aware of all available service options. It demanded more effective education across the board—from referral pathways to direct-to-customer messaging as part of their marketing efforts. With individuals now able to choose their providers, RIDBC needed to rethink the role of their brand and how it could support their marketing efforts to stay ahead.

Participating in the trial phase helped RIDBC overcome some of these challenges and become NDIS-ready for its official rollout. It was also the impetus for a new strategic plan. In June 2016, RIDBC was chosen to host the NSW Government’s official launch of the NDIS, a milestone event and media announcement that was a testament to RIDBC’s leading position within the sensory disability sector.

**The changing role of fundraising:** the Institute’s fundraising activities—and the role of fundraising in general—were directly impacted. Not only was RIDBC now relying on fundraising to balance the variable nature of incoming funds, but it also had to cover much-needed services that fell outside of the NDIS. Meanwhile, fundraising was also facing new competitive challenges, which meant the Institute needed to reassess how it marketed its services, as well as its approach to fundraising and campaigns.

## Restructuring, rebranding, and advancing the industry

The first step was to undertake a restructure of services. With the introduction of cochlear implant services and the associated expansion of services to adult clients, it was necessary to acknowledge the breadth of service delivery beyond educational services. RIDBC had to look ahead once again. It was time to consider what it would take to continue its leading-edge approach to education, particularly in areas the Department of Education did not cover, and establish a role in advancing the sector.

The considerable expansion that began in the 1970s had progressed to the point that by the 2010s, the organisation offered a diverse range of services, of which education was just one, albeit large and vital, part. The restructure sought to align and consolidate the breadth of services under strategically managed portfolios overseeing education, client services, and research and professional education.

It focused on a sustainable transdisciplinary service model, structuring quality fit-for-purpose services and programs based on the individual client’s requirements. That included expanding Allied Health services: so RIDBC could build a dedicated team around every client as part of a program to support their unique needs. Then, it took effectively marketing these services to clients and industry partners, refining information technology systems, supporting local service growth, and collaborating with other organisations to deliver flexible premium services that offered value for money.

The second step was determining whether its current brand could successfully stand for all the organisation offered. New mergers, diversification, an expanding client base, the changing donor landscape, and increasing competition meant the organisation needed to reevaluate what it stood for in the marketplace and the level of recognition and awareness it carried for a broadening audience. So began an exploration into the perceptions of its brand and what that might mean for the organisation going forward.

In 2015, the Board backed a highly rigorous research and discovery phase to determine the right approach for the organisation—it sought quantifiable proof that any change would improve how the organisation reached and supported people. The research listened to representatives from every part of the organisation, supporters such as donors and partners, and clients.

By the decade’s close, RIDBC and its group of organisations were reaching more people than ever. After significant research, analysis, internal restructuring, and brand exploration, it had a new ambition and a brand to match. It was ready to face the next decade and a new era of growth. However, all its carefully laid plans came to a halt when a new pandemic hit.

### A potential new site

In the second half of the decade, RIDBC began to plan a new move. After over 55 years at North Rocks, an opportunity arose to build a head office and new centre for innovation on the Macquarie University campus. An expression of interest for the sale of North Rocks started in 2017, and by 2019, an agreement was finalised with the University and architectural and design projects were underway.

## Partnering for the future

As a state-of-the-art facility, the Australian Hearing Hub has attracted a number of industry-leading members to drive innovation and collaboration.

During a 2008 visit to RIDBC, Dr Chris Roberts from Cochlear mentioned to then Chief Executive John Berryman and Professor Greg Leigh a potential move to new premises on the Macquarie University campus. Cochlear was looking for new premises, and he put an interesting idea out there—the possibility of like-minded organisations co-locating to create a virtual ‘water cooler’ around which key organisations in the hearing field could gather to collaborate.

Some years later, the Macquarie idea would become a reality when the Australian Government set out to transform higher education and vocational education training. They created the Education Investment Fund (EIF) in addition to an earlier Higher Education Endowment Fund (HEEF). The main priorities of EIF were capital expenditure and renewal and refurbishment in universities and vocational institutions, as well as in research facilities and major research institutions.

The fund proved to be the ideal motivator for Professor Jim Piper, then Macquarie University’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, who used it to bring Roberts’ idea to fruition. Piper was credited with establishing the University’s research capabilities, and pioneering the Master of Research degree. He proposed the idea to the Federal Government and championed the project, which became the Australian Hearing Hub (AHH).

Considered a revolutionary independent research facility inspired by the interdisciplinary working environment of the University, the Hub offered state-of-the-art facilities for some of the country’s best hearing organisations, together with staff, students, and researchers from one of the country’s leading research universities. While all organisations, including RIDBC, saw the potential, how it would work out was genuinely unknown.

By this point, RIDBC and SCIC were already co-locating as they expanded their collaboration with new facilities in Newcastle, Gosford, and Penrith. So, when SCIC made the move, it was only natural to do so with RIDBC. It would prove to be an excellent opportunity to foster collaboration with commercial, service, and research partners in the hearing arena, and it would enable the extension of clinical and education services.

Officially opened in 2013, the AHH brought together Macquarie University, SCIC, RIDBC, Australian Hearing, the National Acoustic Laboratories, Cochlear Ltd, and The Shepherd Centre.

## RIDBC Renwick Centre and Macquarie University

In 2010, sixteen years after launching Renwick College, the Institute finally realised its ambition to build a new centre by refurbishing a space in North Rocks alongside the associated Ross Field Building.

Five years in the planning and making, the new facilities and newly renamed Renwick Centre immediately saw positive results, with steadily increasing enrolments and new research projects.

The Centre helped cement the Institute’s position as Australia’s premier provider of postgraduate qualifications in special education, ongoing professional development, and hearing and vision loss research. Student enrolments hit record levels in 2012. The creation of the Australian Hearing Hub a year later provided new opportunities for further collaborative research with service and industry partners.

The Renwick Centre had continued its highly successful partnership with the University of Newcastle since its first intake of postgraduate students in 1994. However, new possibilities were emerging at the Australian Hearing Hub. Given the Hub’s focus on both collaborative research and the collaborative development of professional education and practice, moving the academic affiliation to Macquarie began to make more and more sense.

As a result, in 2016, RIDBC and the Renwick Centre finalised a formal agreement with Macquarie University, developing new programs under the auspices of the Macquarie University academic structure, ensuring long-term growth and sustainability for the field of postgraduate education and research in sensory disability.

This partnership brought together and streamlined the Institute’s higher education and research services. In 2017, despite the challenges associated with leaving one university while students were still studying there, Renwick Centre accepted its first intake of students into the Macquarie University Master of Disability Studies program. Thirty-six students commenced their studies in three different specialisations, leading to qualifications as teachers of the deaf, teachers of students with vision impairment, or orientation and mobility instructors.

Today, renamed NextSense Institute, the Centre continues to provide for the internal professional development of NextSense staff and, more broadly, plays a vital role in professional education and research for the field across Australia and internationally.

Since its first intake of students in 1994, there have been more than 1,200 qualifications (graduate certificates, masters, and doctoral degrees) awarded to graduates who have undertaken their studies through the Centre. Among those graduates are people across Australia and as far afield as Botswana, China, Hong Kong, Brunei, Canada, Germany, Kenya, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Since its start, the academic staff members of NextSense Institute (as it’s known today) have produced more than 500 international and national conference papers, journal articles, book chapters, books, and monographs.

## Mergers and expansion

A significant part of the organisation’s growth during this decade included mergers that helped expand its footprint and services. Some mergers were part of a strategic plan, and others came about as a result of the NDIS. All contributed to RIDBC’s role as a leader in the industry.

### Matilda Rose and Hear The Children

Two key mergers in early intervention happened during this time. One began as a relationship with SCIC and the Carnegie family. Based in Bronte, the Matilda Rose Early Intervention Centre worked with children with hearing loss and additional disabilities. It provided support for children and families navigating the complexities of developmental challenges. Led by Maree Rennie, one of the most experienced teachers in this area, the Matilda Rose Centre often collaborated with SCIC to provide comprehensive care for children. As such, it turned to SCIC for support to keep the program running.

The relationship between Matilda Rose and SCIC was led by Chris Rehn, then General Manager of SCIC. It would become a part of the RIDBC family when SCIC and RIDBC merged a few years later.

The Hear the Children Early Intervention Centre was established under private ownership following the decision by St Gabriel’s School Castle Hill to close down its early intervention program. The centre came about because parents with children at St Gabriel’s—led by Mandy Crispin and Yvonne Keane—recognised the need for this vital program to continue, providing children with auditory-verbal therapy.

As a small organisation where fundraising was critical, becoming a part of RIDBC meant better access to the resources needed to keep this service going. It was also an excellent addition to the Early Intervention program at RIDBC.

### Sydney cochlear implant centre (SCIC)

By the 2000s, the cochlear implant programs that Professor Bill Gibson had started—the adult program with the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and the Children’s Cochlear Implant Centre (CCIC)—had merged to become the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre (SCIC).

The New South Wales Department of Health had allocated space for the program in 1996. The location was the former women’s psychiatric wing of the Old Gladesville Hospital, which required some renovation, and many suspected was haunted. However, it allowed the program to expand, and Gibson brought on Chris Rehn as the children’s cochlear implant program manager.

It soon became apparent that there were many advantages to combining the programs, a prescient move given that, over time, the program would serve more adults than children. Rehn was responsible for integrating and operationalising the new program and became General Manager.

As a not-for-profit organisation, the Sydney Cochlear Implant Centre (SCIC) was officially formed in 2001, with a Board appointed. The newly combined program’s clients ranged in age from their late eighties to babies as young as five months old.

The program underwent rapid growth, opening new centres across the state. The cochlear implant went from being an option for people who were deaf or hard of hearing to the expected standard of care. As SCIC expanded its outreach, its staff often worked collaboratively with RIDBC to see children at several of the Institute’s locations. Gibson also referred children with cochlear implants to the Institute’s programs. By 2003, SCIC and RIDBC formed a close two-way collaboration, including exploring co-locating at centres across the state.

### The SCIC and RIDBC merger

The next phase for SCIC came when its General Manager, Chris Rehn, became the Chief Executive of RIDBC in 2010, following John Berryman’s retirement. It was in his new role that Rehn further explored the possibility of bringing the organisations together, given the two provided complementary services.

Rehn approached Professor Gibson and SCIC’s leadership in 2012. While the prospect seemed promising, SCIC raised two key concerns. One was that the Institute focused on children, while SCIC covered a broad range of ages. The second was that SCIC would become a minor player within the much larger RIDBC. Any merger would have to be on the right terms for both organisations.

As these initial conversations stalled, the Institute moved ahead with its own cochlear implant program. In early 2013, the RIDBC Cochlear Implant Program (CIP) launched and marked a significant change in RIDBC’s client base. It was the start of the organisation working with adults as well as children. The program leveraged new advances in the Institute’s telepractice model and its state-of-the-art videoconferencing technology. It offered more opportunities for people of all ages in regional and remote locations to access the benefits of cochlear implants. It also created a fully integrated, seamless service and support program for children and adults.

While SCIC had continued with the support of the University of Sydney, the latter’s intent had been to support the initial pilot program. The expansion of SCIC over many years meant it could no longer be accommodated within the University’s structure. This reignited merger negotiations, with the University eventually transferring its interests to RIBDC.

In 2014, under the leadership of Chris Rehn, SCIC merged with CIP and officially became a part of RIDBC and its services, with the implant program continuing under the name SCIC.

Since its inaugural year, which saw eight people receive a cochlear implant in one location, SCIC expanded into a network of sites providing more than 380 surgeries in 2023, as part of NextSense.

The merger, however, was about more than just reach. While many other providers had a relatively narrow idea of cochlear implants, the two services coming together meant that RIDBC could explore broader applications. RIBDC’s advances in its telepractice model provided significant opportunities for families in regional and remote locations, with the organisation offering a fully integrated, seamless service and support program for children and adults in the implant program.

### A new medical director

On finalisation of the merger, Professor Bill Gibson took this as the opportunity to retire from his day-to-day responsibilities and assume the role of Founding Director, where he could continue to guide the program. When looking for a medical director to assume this vital role, RIDBC turned to Catherine Birman, a leading ENT and cochlear implant surgeon, who was also on its Board. She stepped up as Medical Director for the SCIC program, a position she’s held since, alongside Honorary Clinical Professor roles at Macquarie University and the University of Sydney.

Clinical Professor Catherine Birman OAM is one of the world’s most experienced cochlear implant surgeons, having performed more than 2,000 cochlear implant procedures. In 2022, she was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for service to medicine through otolaryngology.

### EEP and Taralye merger

In 2017, RIDBC merged with two services in Victoria. The first was with Victoria’s Early Education Program for Hearing Impaired Children (EEP), which provided early intervention services to help children with hearing loss develop communication, speech, listening, and language skills.

A merger with Taralye, an early intervention, preschool, and audiological service provider with a proud 50-year history, followed. Together, the three merged organisations continued providing the best possible future for children in Victoria who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families. It also made Victoria the Institute’s second-largest service region outside NSW.

### Catherine Sullivan Centre

The final merger during this time was the Catherine Sullivan Centre, an early intervention program for babies and preschool-aged children in Strathfield, NSW, offering an auditory-verbal approach for developing spoken language for children with hearing loss.

The Centre was one of the organisations that considered closing following the announcement of the NDIS. When considering a merger with RIBDC, one of the concerns of this faith-based Catholic organisation was retaining this as part of the program. While RIDBC is a non-faith-based organisation, the two found common ground when they realised their values were completely aligned. As such, the Catherine Sullivan Centre became yet another extension to RIDBC’s early intervention offering.

## RIDBC’s expanding role in the industry

As RIDBC continued to expand its services and reach, its influence in the industry also grew, and the organisation realised it had a much more significant and broader role to play.

RIDBC began to reach a much wider audience globally, including many outside of the field, which would go on to impact how others outside of the industry viewed accessibility. There were also advancements in existing technology that would provide learnings that could be applied outside the industry. Some of the technology-based offerings from this period are examples of this influence.

### Auslan Tutor

RIDBC’s Auslan (Australian Sign Language) Tutor was one offering whose audience adoption extended to the mainstream and even to areas where Auslan was not readily used.

The interactive, easy-to-use app for smartphones or tablet computers was developed by experts at RIDBC in consultation with the Australian Deaf community. While it was designed for parents with children learning Auslan, the app proved helpful for anyone wanting to learn Auslan.

Auslan Tutor contains over 500 signs, each carefully chosen as the most needed when interacting with and teaching children who are deaf or hard of hearing. The app uses an easy-to-follow hierarchy to help build upon previously learned signs to help people develop the confidence to use Auslan in everyday life.

The recently launched Auslan Tutor 2 is a video-based teaching application developed by NextSense experts to further assist people in learning Auslan.

### UEB Online AND dApDots

One of the most significant programs launched during this time was the UEB online program. UEB, or Unified English Braille, is a braille code designed by the International Council on English Braille (ICEB). It provides a single braille code that English-speaking countries use for literary and technical materials.

The UEB Online program, developed by a team at RIDBC led by Dr Frances Gentle in 2013, was the world’s first online training program teaching sighted learners to use Unified English Braille. This groundbreaking program opened new paths for parents, educators, professionals, and members of the general public to learn Braille and to provide better support for children and adults with vision loss. Following a rise in international demand, a more innovative and technically highly complex version of the website was launched, allowing people who are blind or have low vision to learn braille online.

The UEB Online website currently offers courses in UEB literacy, UEB introductory mathematics (primary school level), and UEB advanced mathematics (lower secondary level), with more to follow. This globally available program has over 20,000 subscribers across 197 countries.

dApDots is an educational resource that also supports children and families learning the Unified English Braille (UEB) code. It was designed to provide a strong foundation for braille literacy for parents and children. Launched in 2019, it provides a collection of braille books and braille resources that assist children and families with understanding the basics of the UEB code.

### Teleschool celebrates its 10th anniversary

Teleschool’s 10th anniversary celebrated the Institute’s ongoing commitment to reaching more people no matter where they are. It continued to enable people living in remote areas of Australia to access specialist vision and hearing services.

Initially, telepractice for early intervention programs was costly due to connectivity limitations and the need to install specialist hardware in children’s homes, as this was well before the popularisation of video conferencing platforms made such access more common and affordable. RIDBC’s investment in the Teleschool program included several developments that provided a blueprint for other organisations to follow. An instructional manual, initially developed for teachers and therapists working in Institute programs, was ultimately produced as a book and made available for sale nationally and internationally.

The popular publication—*RIDBC Teleschool: Guiding Principles for Telepractice*—outlined how the technology should be applied, including guidance on such issues as creating rooms with the proper colour contrast for better accessibility. It also demonstrated how to develop physical tools that teachers, therapists, and students could use in video-conference lessons. As an example of best practice, the book described the practice adopted at RIDBC of sending packages home to families with toys and teaching aids identical to those used by the teachers or therapists, so that parents and children in remote locations could mirror their activities.

RIDBC focused extensively on connectivity in remote regions. In areas where the internet was not readily accessible or was insufficiently powerful to allow for video conferencing, the organisation used satellite connectivity. During the rollout of NBN (the National Broadband Network, Australia’s national wholesale open-access data network), RIDBC’s Teleschool was one of the exemplary programs used in promotions and advertising, including being featured in advertisements appearing on many of the NBN’s trucks deployed across the country.

Telepractice—as pioneered by RIDBC through Teleschool—would become an essential tool for continuing services during the pandemic the world was about to experience. It went from being a separate service to becoming a modality applied across all the Institute’s programs during that time, as it has since.

### Teleschool Braille Camp

As part of the Teleschool anniversary celebrations, the Institute staged Australia’s biggest Braille Camp, bringing together children with vision impairment and their families from all over the country.

### Expanding its reach across Australia and beyond

Throughout its lifetime, the organisation explored all the ways it could reach more people—through its services and teacher education. It began with geographic access, but with advancing technology and means of communication, it could reach new places in new ways.

Aside from expanding current sites, fit-for-purpose sites were built in areas like Port Macquarie, Canberra, and Werrington, bringing all services together.

By 2019, RIDBC had 10,000 adults, children, families, and professionals accessing its hearing, vision, education, and research services.

### Celebrating 150 years

One of the most gratifying features of RIDBC’s 150-year celebration was the extent of the philanthropic support from Australia’s generous community. Throughout the 150th anniversary year, television and radio stations across Australia regularly aired Community Service Announcements featuring RIDBC ambassador Sir Michael Parkinson.

The year’s highlight was the See me, Hear me Radio Appeal conducted by Sydney radio stations 2GB and 2CH. The 12-hour event raised $200,000 from over 500 donors, most new to RIDBC. The publicity this event gained proved invaluable.

Thérèse Rein, the wife of then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, officially launched the celebrations after touring the facilities.

### The first National Auslan curriculum

While Auslan (Australian Sign Language) was recognised as a community language in 1987, the formal teaching of the language in schools was not made possible until the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) published the first Auslan curriculum to be rolled out nationally. Launched in 2016 after years of lobbying by parents and advocacy groups, the national curriculum offered the opportunity for deaf children who use Auslan to study their own language, and a pathway for other students interested in learning it as a second language.

Dr Breda Carty, a lecturer at RIDBC Renwick Centre, and Dr Louise de Beuzeville, a teacher at the RIDBC Thomas Pattison School who completed both her master’s degree and PhD at the Renwick Centre, were very involved in the writing of the groundbreaking curriculum.

Dr Carty was made an officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 2021, for distinguished service to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, to education and research, and to the community.

### The RBA introduces tactile banknotes

In 2016, The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) rolled out the first of next-generation banknotes—a $5 note with an embossed, tactile feature. It was followed by the $10 banknote in 2017 and a plan to introduce it to other denominations in subsequent years.

Designed to assist people who are blind or have low vision to distinguish between denominations, it was the first time such a feature was included on an Australian banknote—and it began with a 13-year-old boy.

Connor McLeod, who has been blind since birth, received money as a Christmas gift but became frustrated when he could not tell how much had been gifted. So, he began a campaign to add raised markings to banknotes. Over 57,000 people signed an online petition that Connor and his mother, Ally McLeod, started.

His successful campaign has not only changed how money is printed in Australia—and helped thousands of people with low vision— it has served as a case study for other countries considering making similar changes.

Connor began attending RIDBC VisionEd Preschool when he was three years old, and while attending a mainstream high school, he received support from RIDBC School Support Service.

# Part Ten: A new era 2020 onwards

The year 2020 was like no other in recent history. In Australia, it began with devastating bushfires and flooding. Then, just two months into the new decade, a global pandemic threat emerged as a novel coronavirus began to spread across countries.

Within a few months, Australia, like many other nations, imposed lockdowns to help prevent the spread of the highly infectious COVID-19 virus. It was also the year that RIDBC celebrated its 160th anniversary.

While the organisation had faced epidemics and pandemics in its past, one this infectious and with such widespread devastation had not been seen since the early 1900s. What this would mean for populations and economies worldwide was feared and unknown.

As health organisations rushed to find a cure, governments scrambled to protect their people and sustain their economies, and people stormed stores for fast-diminishing supplies, many organisations, especially those that relied on face-to-face interactions, came to a standstill. RIDBC was no exception.

## Managing the organisation through a pandemic

2020 was poised to be one of the most significant years in RIDBC’s strategic plan, set to hit some major milestones. Instead, like all organisations, it quickly had to create new ways to deliver its services within government-imposed lockdowns and the confines of social and physical distancing.

David Dinte, the Vice-President of the Board, had stepped into the role of President in 2019, following the retirement of Sean Wareing, meaning he had to lead the Board through this critical period early in his tenure. With support from the Board, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) led by Chief Executive Chris Rehn had to reassess the organisation’s strategic priorities very quickly.

The original ambition for 2020 was launching a new brand alongside 160th-anniversary celebrations, all built around a series of stakeholder and employee events. The pandemic forced the organisation to delay any launch, instead focusing on ensuring its clients could continue access to the vital services the organisation provided.

The year turned out to be as remarkable as it was difficult, mainly because every part of the organisation pulled together and continued putting clients first. RIDBC’s values quickly came into action as the organisation’s incredible staff showed the courage and willingness to adapt.

The shifts the organisation was forced to make came with other advantages. It’s where RIDBC’s investment in technology and remote services came to the fore—a leading approach it had developed and refined over many years. A generous gift from the J&K Wonderland Foundation helped further support the organisation’s technology needs and adapt all service delivery from in-person to telepractice. As a result, RIDBC was able to pivot reasonably quickly, and it did more than just survive trying times—it was able to thrive.

For RIDBC’s leadership, the priorities were to keep its people safe and their jobs secure, continue delivering vital services, preschools and schools, and professional education in the safest and most effective ways possible, and operate in new and innovative ways. It also meant maintaining financial sustainability.

Reaching more people took on a whole new meaning in 2020. For clients, RIDBC continued to provide essential, in-person services to children and families in a COVID-safe way, and it developed creative new ways to work with all clients while pivoting in and out of online delivery. The Schools and Preschools resumed in-person learning at the earliest opportunity.

The RIDBC Renwick Centre (now NextSense Institute) had provided online access for its continuing professional education events since 2012 and was well trusted in the digital learning space. The shift to online-only learning resulted in higher participation rates for conferences and workshops.

Internally, RIDBC’s bolstered IT resources enabled people to collaborate and engage as a well-connected organisation, activating communications that kept people well informed. RIDBC also launched well-being programs to support staff in navigating a challenging environment and the added pressures caused by isolation.

The start of the decade may have been challenging. However, RIDBC’s ability to adapt quickly meant it could still move several critical strategic priorities forward and make fundamental decisions about the organisation’s future.

Once the world could see past the pandemic, and people and industries could resume some level of what was previously considered normal activity, RIDBC was ready for the next era in its journey.

## Reimagining the organisation

Much of the strategic and organisational foundation work completed in the previous decade was set in motion in the lead-up to 2020. It would ensure the organisation was ready to live up to its new ambition and rebrand, positioning it for future growth.

Even though the entire organisation had to marshall its resources toward managing the impact of the pandemic, the Board and SLT kept enough focus on its new strategic ambition to progress several organisational priorities. These included continuing the development of new sites, strengthening relationships with partners, further enhancing client experiences, building the future schools model, and continuing progress on the rebrand and a potential move.

### A new organisational ambition

With rapid expansion, driven by both mergers and the rollout of new locations, and the diversity of offerings reaching more people, one of the priorities was outlining how RIDBC would move forward as a single unified organisation. Connecting the organisation was as much structural as it was focusing everyone within the organisation around a single, clear ambition.

Ensuring the organisation functioned as a connected and collaborative whole made it stronger and more resilient. It also channelled the efforts of the organisation to help drive the sector forward so that it could continue to impact clients’ lives positively. By aligning services, it ensured the organisation could expand and deepen how it helped people, and by advancing research, education, and innovation, how it would continue to break down barriers and lead the way.

“As a unified organisation, we lead and influence the field of hearing and vision, through dedication to our services and advancing research, education, and innovation.”

### A new purpose and role

Alongside the ambition, it was essential to clarify the organisation’s purpose—its role in the industry and beyond, and its promise to clients. Articulating the strategy took rigorous research and involved representatives from every part of the organisation and key stakeholders to understand the essence of the organisation. It crystallised an internal truth that had been at the heart of the organisation for over 160 years, but written for the future.

From its start in 1860, RIDBC believed every child deserved an education that helped them achieve their personal potential. As the organisation grew, began to reach people of all ages, and stepped up to play a leading role across the sector and beyond, the idea of potential took on a far more significant meaning. The purpose was built upon three key elements. The first was enhancing lives, and how the organisation works with individuals to reach their personal potential. The second, acknowledging that people are active participants in their journey. And, finally, an organisation-wide commitment to breaking down barriers to lift the limits of what’s possible.

“We exist to enhance lives by working with people who have hearing and vision loss so, together, we can redefine what’s possible.”

## A new brand

In March 2021, RIDBC and its group of services—Taralye, SCIC, Renwick Centre, schools, and many other historic names and brands— rebranded as a single, unified organisation.

RIDBC’s leadership recognised that every organisation needs to invest in their brand to succeed in an ever-changing competitive landscape, and that brands are not solely for commercial organisations— they’re as critical for not-for-profit organisations if they want to grow and prosper.

A strong brand presence in the market would help the people the organisation supports—making it easier for them to find the organisation and the right services when they need them most. A strong brand also helps the organisation stand out and connect with donors.

RIDBC, as one of Australia’s oldest not-for-profit brands, wanted to honour its incredible legacy, so the rebrand was as much a celebration of its extraordinary history as it was a stepping stone to the future.

Changing the brand, especially the name, of an organisation with a 160-year legacy was no small feat. However, extensive research showed that RIDBC’s brand had not evolved in the same way, nor at the same pace, as the organisation had, which created significant limitations to its growth. It no longer accurately communicated the breadth of people it served, the breadth and depth of services it offered, its world-leading teaching and research programs, or the ambition to advance the sector.

RIDBC had always been an organisation of firsts, so with a great deal of courage and Board backing, the organisation launched a new brand for a new era.

The launch event was filmed in a studio and live-streamed to stakeholders and internal teams across the country, who could join in and celebrate while remaining COVID-safe.

### A new name

Selecting a new name for the organisation took a great deal of diligence. For one, the name had to stretch sufficiently to bring together all the different services and many historical names and brands within its family. To move forward as a single, strong, unified organisation, operating under a single name was the ideal springboard for the journey ahead.

The name also had to do something unique in the category—it had to represent two distinct services: hearing and vision. It also had to encompass all the diverse people the organisation supports: children, adults, families, professionals, and the people around them.

Further, it had to stand out in the market. For one, so that all supporters and donors, current and future, would be aware of the organisation and understand what it does and why they should help. For clients, it was so that they could easily find it and quickly understand everything they could access in one organisation.

How it came together:

**Next** is all about the future and finding new ways to innovate. It’s the dedication to helping our clients achieve what they want next. It’s why we help redefine what’s possible—for everything that’s next.

**Sense** is about the senses and covers both hearing and vision. It’s also about smarts and common sense—the practical support we provide and the understanding it takes to meet the unique needs of every individual.

### A new brand identity

When it came to designing the brand’s look and feel, it was essential to consider the people the organisation represents—a brand that is adaptable, accessible, and can speak to different people in different ways across all the stages of their journey.

Our logo:  
Our wordmark logo also contains an icon, which uses an abstract soundwave to represent the initial N in our name, and dots that allude to braille, representing hearing and vision together in one engaging, modern mark.

Accessible-first design  
Accessibility was a principle hardwired into the design and brand identity. It’s accessible first and AAA (Triple A) compliant, featuring a bespoke font and vibrant colour palette. It’s also people-first—a brand that adapts to people and their needs, flexing as they go through their journey.

Awards and accolades  
In 2022, we received ten international awards for the NextSense brand across the categories: Naming, Brand Identity, Communication and Voice.

## A new location

This new era for the organisation included the move to a new location. As with the two previous moves, to Darlington and North Rocks, the site was designed specifically to fit with the organisation’s best practices in services and to meet the organisation’s ambition to advance the sector.

Located on the Macquarie University campus, it follows existing collaborations and co-locations with Macquarie, including the Australian Hearing Hub. This new centre for innovation is home to the organisation’s national operations, a school and preschool.

### Designing the space

The building is a custom-designed space for people with hearing and vision loss, showing what it means to create inclusive spaces. The vision was to create a tactile, tailored, and therapeutic space incorporating technology, within which different groups can come together—connecting function, people, and space. The design considered the needs of a broad range of people to maximise access and ensure everyone feels welcome and included.

The new brand was integrated into the fabric of the façade and cast into the concrete at the entrance to the main building. It also embraces Connection to Country, with courtyards and outdoor spaces that blur the line between building and landscape. The featured plant species pay homage to the traditional planting found on indigenous sites.

### NextSense centre for innovation

This state-of-the-art centre is custom-designed for people with hearing and vision loss in a vibrant campus community. It’s a place to nurture, trial, and share new ideas to drive better outcomes for people with hearing and vision loss, offering a collaboration space for the organisation’s people and partners.

Beyond service delivery, its purpose is to increase the organisation’s influence within the broader ecosystem to advance the fields of hearing and vision loss. Within the space, the organisation can scale up and refine in-person and remote services to meet growing demand, improve access to early intervention services for families, connect more professionals and clients with world-leading cochlear implant programs, and address the growing need for adult cochlear implant services.

As the national operations centre, it will harness the rich expertise across all 20 sites around Australia, from our clinical leadership and standards, research and education strength, remote service delivery innovation, and many pioneering approaches.

The ambition, over time, is to build demonstration models of best practice service delivery and education to influence and inspire others. It will serve as a drawcard for leading thinkers and practitioners and promote collaborations to solve significant issues. By leveraging bench strength across multiple fields—service delivery, research, health, disability, education, government, and industry—it will combine world-leading knowledge with real-world expertise and bring a valuable service delivery perspective to the broader conversation.

Ultimately, it will help build a more inclusive Australia, a nation that’s the world leader in hearing and vision loss.

### Education services

As part of the organisational restructure, one of the areas reviewed was education and the schools. The potential move to Macquarie prompted an assessment of what a future model could look like, focusing on both in-person educational services and the demonstrative and influential benefits of building best-practice models of inclusive education.

In 2016, the three schools were co-located at North Rocks, and the plan went into effect to merge the schools into one, with three distinct streams.

By the end of the decade, coinciding with the rebrand and the Macquarie build, the model came into full effect, introducing a single leadership approach across the preschools, schools, and school support services. This new model aims to deliver an expanded core curriculum across streams of specialisation and, over time, to define best practices for inclusive education.

NextSense School was specifically designed using The Better Placed Design Guide for Schools as a framework, to ensure it considers the diverse needs of students. The classrooms are specifically designed for students with hearing or vision loss, and the space features a sensory garden.

As NextSense steps into a new chapter of its history, one thing remains true—people are at the centre of everything we do. It’s why we will continue to work with people who have hearing and vision loss so, together, we continue to redefine what’s possible.