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2 A young girl with Williams Syndrome – a genetic irregularity that is often associated with learning disabilities

3 **Disabled? How far have people with learning**  
4 **disabilities been included in the societies they**  
5 **lived in?**

6 *“If you are reading and teaching the history of learning*  
7 *disability, then you are engaging with a fascinating history of a*  
8 *group of interesting people who have always had a struggle to*  
9 *be included in society. They are sometimes called the ‘out*  
10 *group of all out groups’.*

11 *However, you are doing more than this. You are also exploring*  
12 *a history which tells us much about the ideas of belonging,*  
13 *inclusion, community, difference, and acceptance. This history*  
14 *helps us to understand the sort of society we are today, and*  
15 *have been in the past. I am delighted that Ben Newmark has*  
16 *done such a terrific job in adapting this history for the*  
17 *curriculum, and am sure it will stimulate much classroom*  
18 *discussion, reflection, and interest.”*

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Simon Jarrett

20 Author *Those they called idiots: the idea of the disabled mind*  
21 *1700 to the present day*

## 1 **Why learn about this?**

2 As long as there have been people in the world there have  
3 been people who have not been able to learn as quickly as  
4 others.

5 Sometimes the cause of this is an accident that changes the  
6 way a person's brain works. Sometimes people are born with  
7 genetic differences which makes learning more difficult than it  
8 is for most other people. Sometimes we don't know the reason.

9 Today if a person's ability to learn is limited and this is part of  
10 who they are rather than a specific issue that could be  
11 overcome, we describe them as having learning disabilities.

12 Perhaps you feel you have learning disabilities, or have friends  
13 or members of your family who do and you are thinking about  
14 them right now.

15 People with learning disabilities are made vulnerable in  
16 societies that do not include them and deny them rights others  
17 take for granted. Tasks may take them longer and they may  
18 need help to do some things others can do on their own. They  
19 may also need help to stay safe, to make and keep friends, to  
20 care for themselves and to stay healthy.

21 When thinking about this bear in mind all of us might be  
22 considered to have disabilities when we are compared with  
23 others – for example, you probably would be classed as having

1 a learning disability if compared with Albert Einstein, and there  
2 will be tasks you need help with other people can do on their  
3 own.

4 How people have defined learning disability has changed over  
5 time and is dependent on the values and beliefs of the past  
6 society. People who are regarded as having learning disabilities  
7 today may not have been regarded as having any disability at  
8 all in some past societies, just as you might be regarded as  
9 having a learning disability in the future if you lived in a society  
10 in which most other people learned faster than you.

11 Just as people without learning disabilities are different so  
12 people with learning disabilities are different to each other too.  
13 Disabilities range from very mild to very profound and some are  
14 complicated by associated separate conditions that affect  
15 health. Like all people, those with learning disabilities have likes  
16 and dislikes, ideas, dreams, hopes and fears.

17 Like everyone they find some things funny and other things  
18 sad.

19 In this enquiry you will learn about how different societies at  
20 different times and in different places have both included and  
21 excluded people with learning disabilities and reasons for this.  
22 Finding out is often difficult – people with learning disabilities  
23 can struggle to communicate in ways that are easily  
24 understood, which means we often rely on records left by

1 others. These records – often called sources by historians -  
2 also show the impact people with learning disabilities have  
3 made on those around them and by paying careful attention to  
4 this we can hear their voices too. Here we see upsetting  
5 examples of cruelty but also humour and deep affection.

6 As well as telling us about what people thought about those  
7 with learning disabilities, these records also tell us very  
8 interesting things about past societies – what did they care  
9 about and value? How did they decide who had learning  
10 disabilities and who did not? How did they explain and see  
11 difference? How did they treat people who needed more help  
12 than others? To what extent were people with learning  
13 disabilities included as part of the societies they lived in?

14 This enquiry is of course about people with learning disabilities,  
15 but it is not just a history of people with learning disabilities – it  
16 is also a history of the societies in which they lived.

17 People with learning disabilities are human so their stories –  
18 which are just as important as those of anyone else - are part of  
19 the human story. You are human so the history of people with  
20 learning difficulties is not just their history – it is yours too.

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## What words is it OK to use?

The words used to describe people with learning disabilities in the past can seem offensive to us today.

Sometimes the people who used these words meant them as insults but at other times they were not intending to be cruel.

In order to be historically accurate this enquiry contains some of these words. What was meant by them at the time will always be explained. Some of these words – for example ‘idiot’ and ‘imbecile’ are in common use as insults today.

You should not use words we regard as offensive and insulting outside of their historical context. This means you should not use them unless you are talking about history and you are certain the person you are talking with understands your meaning.

Using words to describe people with learning disabilities as insults is wrong. It is disrespectful of the people you are learning about. In many cases it is also against the law.

Don't do it.

# 1 How far were people with learning disabilities 2 included in the prehistoric period?

## 3 The prehistoric period

4 The period we call 'prehistoric' spans a huge amount of time. It  
5 is often divided into three parts:

6 Palaeolithic (2.5 million years ago to 10,000BC)

7 Mesolithic (10,000BC to 8,000 BC)

8 Neolithic (8,000BC to 3,000BC)

## 9 Prehistoric lifestyles



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*Artistic reconstruction of prehistoric people hunting a mammoth*

12 In the Palaeolithic and the earlier parts of the Mesolithic people  
13 survived by hunting animals such as mammoths, bison and  
14 deer. They also gathered wild fruit and nuts. They moved  
15 around a lot in small groups to find prey, other resources and  
16 better climate, which meant they did not own very much and as  
17 a result have left little behind them for us to find. They were not  
18 literate so there are no records we can read.

1 When we study prehistoric people we have to make informed  
2 guesses about the reasons they did things.

3 It is extremely hard to be certain.

4 **Why would have a learning disability been hard to**  
5 **manage?**

6 From the way in which we know people hunted and gathered  
7 food it is fairly safe for us to say quick decision making and  
8 movement would have been important. Life was hard and food  
9 could be scarce – everyone in the community would be  
10 expected to help.

11 People who had learning disabilities may have struggled to  
12 keep up and to learn the skills they needed to survive and to  
13 contribute in practical ways. Many of those with associated  
14 health issues probably did not survive for very long.

15 Caring for people with disabilities would have been tough in the  
16 prehistoric world and we might have expected communities not  
17 to prioritise their survival. Perhaps sometimes they didn't.

18 But we know sometimes they did.

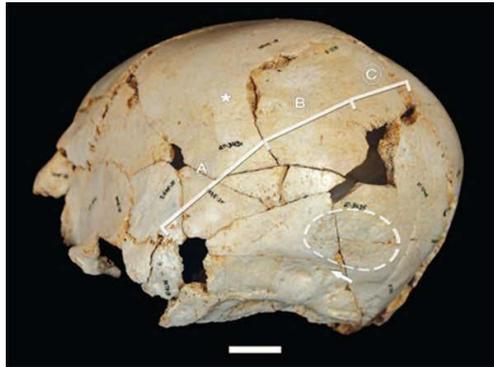
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# 1 The inclusion of people with learning disabilities.



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3 *500,000 year old skull of child with craniosynostosis found in*  
4 *Spain in 2001*

5 In 2001 a 500,000 year old skeleton of a five to twelve year old  
6 child was found in Spain<sup>1</sup>. After years of careful work, in 2009  
7 the team announced that this child had a condition called  
8 craniosynostosis. This happens when the skull of small child  
9 does not develop in the usual way, which can change the way  
10 the brain develops and lead to learning disabilities.

11 The condition would have resulted in the child looking  
12 distinctive, so it would have been clear this boy or girl had not  
13 developed typically. If the child had learning disabilities they  
14 would have needed support from their community to survive.

15 The boy or girl had been cared for and looked after for a long  
16 time – perhaps as much as twelve years and this would have  
17 taken considerable resources in a time these were hard to find.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn16873-early-humans-may-have-cared-for-disabled-young/>

1 We cannot be completely sure this little boy or girl had a  
2 learning disability and perhaps these early societies did not  
3 always care for those who needed extra help.

4 But we also know there are examples of times they did. There  
5 is skeletal evidence from other prehistoric sites showing people  
6 with congenital physical disabilities were sometimes supported<sup>2</sup>  
7 – perhaps this is evidence people who found learning difficult  
8 were – at least sometimes – valued, included cared for and  
9 loved.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/18/science/ancient-bones-that-tell-a-story-of-compassion.html>

1 **Did ancient societies exclude people with**  
2 **learning disabilities?**



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4 *Diagram of the Comuna Lactaria in Ancient Rome. A place where unwanted children were known to*  
5 *be abandoned.*

6 **Ancient Greece and Rome**

7 For the purpose of this enquiry we are defining ancient history  
8 as the period beginning with the development of writing, which  
9 first happened around 3000BC, to the Fall of the Western  
10 Roman Empire in 476AD.

11 There are too many different civilizations in this period for this  
12 enquiry to cover them all. We will be focusing on how people in  
13 Ancient Greece and Rome viewed people with learning  
14 disabilities.

15 As with the prehistoric period it is difficult to learn about the  
16 lives of people who were not literate. In Ancient Greece and  
17 Rome although some people could read and write not much  
18 was written about those with learning disabilities. Modern

1 treatments for many medical conditions were not available in  
2 the Ancient World, which means the life expectancy of those  
3 with conditions such as Downs Syndrome – which is often  
4 associated with medical issues as well as learning disability -  
5 was probably much shorter than it is today.

### 6 **The exclusion of people with learning disabilities.**

7 There is enough evidence for us to be learn life was very  
8 difficult for some people with either physical or learning  
9 disabilities, especially if these were obvious. Ancient Greek and  
10 Roman philosophers had a very narrow view of what  
11 constituted an ideal human – they believed beauty and  
12 intelligence were divine gifts and people that deviated from the  
13 ideal were barely tolerated, if they were tolerated at all – at  
14 least in public discourse and rhetoric.

15 We see the emergence of the term ‘idiot’ in the Ancient world,  
16 which originally meant anyone who lived a ‘private’ life and did  
17 not contribute to society – people with learning disabilities were  
18 probably often seen this way if they had difficulties  
19 communicating.

20 In Ancient Greece parents of babies born with obvious  
21 disabilities were legally allowed to and encouraged to expose  
22 them. This meant leaving them outside to die. In the military city  
23 Sparta, laws may have stipulated those not perfect in the Greek  
24 sense had to be killed.

1 In Ancient Rome children with learning disabilities may not  
2 have fared any better. Some sources suggest children were  
3 sometimes publicly humiliated and persecuted and there are  
4 reports of parents drowning them in the River Tiber that runs  
5 through the city. As in Ancient Greece abandonment and death  
6 by exposure was permitted and approved of. This could involve  
7 leaving children in clay jars by the side of roads or at temples<sup>3</sup>.

### 8 **Were children with disabilities always killed?**

9 We cannot be sure exposure and abandonment were common.  
10 Physical disability may have been seen more practically than it  
11 is seen today, with the status of all people more dependent on  
12 what they could contribute than how clever they were perceived  
13 to be. The Ancient Greeks and Romans may have made less  
14 binary distinctions between the disabled and abled than is often  
15 made today. There are records of people we might consider  
16 disabled working in lots of different types of job with their  
17 disability seen as not particularly noteworthy if it could be  
18 managed.

19 Perhaps if this was true of people with physical disabilities the  
20 same might be true of those with learning disabilities<sup>4</sup>, which  
21 might have been less disabling when fewer jobs demanded  
22 literacy or complex decision making, which meant they could

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels/one/3.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9jg5z235>

1 fulfil meaningful roles and may have gone through life without  
2 comment.

3 The existence of laws allowing the exposure of children does  
4 not mean it always happened, and evidence of disabled people  
5 living in Ancient Greece and Rome shows at least some  
6 parents did not choose to kill their children if they had  
7 disabilities. Even when this did happen we still can't be sure  
8 how people felt about it. While very disturbing it may not have  
9 been as discriminatory as it first appears. This happened in a  
10 context in which children were killed for reasons unrelated to  
11 disability too – sometimes simply because babies were  
12 unwanted or because families felt they could not care for them<sup>5</sup>.

13 Perhaps the abandonment of infants in clay jars at places  
14 where they knew they might be found rather than exposing  
15 them suggests the parents of these children hoped they would  
16 not die but would be adopted.

17 Finally, we know some children with learning disabilities were  
18 cared for by richer families, which might mean decisions about  
19 keeping children or not were made on the basis of whether or  
20 not the family had the resources to make this possible –  
21 something that is still true for some families today.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-14401305>

## 1 **The end of infanticide**

2 The gradual spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire  
3 helped change publicly expressed attitudes towards all types of  
4 disability. In the Bible Jesus cares for those with disabilities and  
5 early Christian teachers such as St Paul taught people should  
6 'comfort the feeble-minded.' Although we would not use a  
7 phrase like this today it is intended to be progressive in its  
8 suggestion people with learning disabilities were of value  
9 regardless of what and how they contributed to wider society.

10 By the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (300-399) the practice of infanticide  
11 (killing babies when they are born) was made illegal for any  
12 reason in Rome, and increasingly caring for those who needed  
13 help to come to be viewed as more of a sign of strength than  
14 weakness<sup>6</sup>.

15 But this does not mean this is always what happened in  
16 practice.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels/one/4.html>

1 **How fully were people with learning disabilities**  
2 **included in medieval and early modern**  
3 **society?**



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5 *An image of Will Somer, an innocent fool in Henry VIII's court from Henry's personal psalter.*

6 **The Bible and the Christian Church**

7 The medieval period lasted from the 5<sup>th</sup> century (400-499) to  
8 the late 15<sup>th</sup> century (1400s). The early modern period lasted  
9 from around the 1500s to the 1800s. The Tudor and Stuart  
10 period – which many children learn about in school - was in the  
11 early modern period.

12 In England the Christian Church was very powerful and  
13 influential during these periods. Many legal and political  
14 decisions were based on interpretations of teachings in the  
15 Bible.

16 In medieval society the word 'idiot' was still used in the Ancient  
17 Greek sense – to mean a private person who could not

1 contribute to decision making. For the medieval elite, to an  
2 extent, all poor working people were 'idiots'<sup>7</sup>, because they did  
3 not make or contribute to important political decisions.

4 The Bible used Jesus' example to encourage people to care for  
5 people who could not care for themselves. 'Natural' or  
6 'innocent' fools, which is how people considered to have what  
7 might be described today as learning disabilities were the  
8 responsibility of the monarch. The monarch was supposed to  
9 appoint a guardian for the person and meet their living costs  
10 until their death. These people had their property confiscated to  
11 the crown, which would be returned to any heirs after they died.  
12 If the the person had lots of property this would have been a  
13 significant decision, which means we have court and other  
14 records of times this happened.

### 15 **Natural and Innocent Fools.**

16 Those described as being 'natural fools' probably did not  
17 include many people who would be regarded as having  
18 learning disabilities today. This is because – as in Ancient  
19 Greece - in a society in which few people could or needed to  
20 read and write there were more jobs in industries such as  
21 farming in which those who had trouble learning as fast as

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<sup>7</sup> <https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/discovering-the-history-of-learning-disability/>

1 others could still contribute and blend in among the general  
2 population.

3 We know less about poorer people with learning disabilities  
4 than we do richer people but we do know a bit. In 1383 a poor  
5 woman named Emma de Beston appeared before a crown  
6 court, who were trying to work out whether she was an 'idiot.'  
7 Emma was asked a series of questions to test her  
8 understanding of the world – these included the names of her  
9 children and whether one amount of money was worth more  
10 than another. The type of questions she was asked tells us  
11 quite a lot about what was considered important to understand  
12 in the medieval period. The court listened to her answers and  
13 decided she was not able to live on her own. She would  
14 probably have been placed in the care of her community, where  
15 she would be looked after and given tasks to do within her  
16 capabilities.

### 17 **Life in medieval communities.**

18 Whether rich or poor, the care of 'natural fools' and 'idiots' was  
19 a function of the community in the medieval period. Greater  
20 value might have been placed on other qualities – for example  
21 conscientiousness, loyalty and bravery. Those with what we  
22 would call learning disabilities may have been regarded as odd  
23 or amusing but would still have been viewed as being part of  
24 the communities in which they lived with useful things to offer.

1 There was no suggestion those with learning disabilities should  
2 be separated, institutionalised or imprisoned unless they were  
3 dangerous, and this only happened if the person had no friends  
4 or family who could keep them and others from harm. Emma  
5 was asked the names of her children, which meant she had  
6 some and these were known to those questioning her –  
7 evidence she was included in society and contributed to it.

8 None of this means life for people with learning disabilities was  
9 easy or that principles of Christian charity were always enacted.

## 10 **Changelings**

11 Children who looked and developed atypically were  
12 occasionally said to be changelings. Changelings were  
13 believed to be supernatural beings left in exchange for the  
14 human child. Medieval descriptions of changelings vary, so a  
15 range of conditions that cause physical and/or mental  
16 disabilities could have been explained in this way. We know  
17 that doctors prescribed medical treatments and saints  
18 miraculously cured children who were called changelings, but a  
19 small number of parents of suspected changelings might also  
20 have tried magical rituals to get their human child back. There  
21 are also stories from Europe of parents that looked after  
22 supposedly changeling children for many years. It is hard to  
23 believe they would have done this if they had not loved them<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Dr Rose A. Sawyer, email to the author, 02 April 2021



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*The Devil steals a baby and leaves a changeling. Martino di Bartolomeo (early 1400s)*

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### **Why did rich families adopt natural and innocent fools?**

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Some rich noble families adopted people with learning disabilities as 'innocent' or 'natural' fools. This meant people born with learning disabilities in contrast to 'artificial' fools who told witty jokes and only pretended they didn't understand things to amuse others.

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'Innocent fools' would have been provided with food, clothing and shelter in exchange for being an exotic curiosity who provided entertainment for the family. The treatment of these people probably varied a great deal. Some were treated kindly but others would have been subjected to cruelty and humiliation. Regardless of how they were treated their position – like that of many people in court - was not secure. If their Lord decided they no longer wanted them they could be cast out to beg what they could to survive although we know this did not always happen – sometimes the fools of monarchs were given generous pensions or allowed to retire to monasteries where they would be cared for. There are also very moving records of tributes like this poem written after the death of, Lobe, a

1 beloved ‘innocent fool’, which offer good evidence those with  
2 learning disabilities were loved and appreciated:

3 *“And Lobe, God have mercy on thy innocent soul,*  
4 *Which among innocents I am sure has a place.”<sup>9</sup>*

5 There are suggestions some royal Fools may have had real  
6 influence on their monarchs. Will Somer, who was an innocent  
7 fool in Henry VIII’s court, who went on to be a fool for Henry’s  
8 children Edward and Mary, may have played in a role in  
9 restoring the fortunes of Eston Neston, an out of favour noble.  
10 There are sources that say Will stood up for Eston after a  
11 furious Henry confiscated Eston’s property and threw him in  
12 gaol.

13 If true this means fools were sometimes listened to<sup>10</sup>, perhaps  
14 because they were valued for their perceived propensity to tell  
15 the truth without artifice.<sup>11</sup>

16 Moving accounts of the relatives of royal ‘innocent fools’ visiting  
17 them for many years where they were sometimes given  
18 presents by their kings and queens shows even when not living  
19 in the home communities they remained loved and cared for by  
20 their families.

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<sup>9</sup> John Southworth. *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*. Sutton Publishing. 2003. P84

<sup>10</sup> John Southworth. *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*. Sutton Publishing. 2003. PP92-93

<sup>11</sup> Professor Suzannah Lipscomb, email to the author, 05 April 2021

1 While there are examples of cruelty and mistreatment the  
2 status of 'natural' and 'innocent' fools in the society was not a  
3 matter of debate.

4 They were part of the fabric of their communities. Nobody  
5 disputed their right to live in them, although this may have  
6 begun to change after the reformation.

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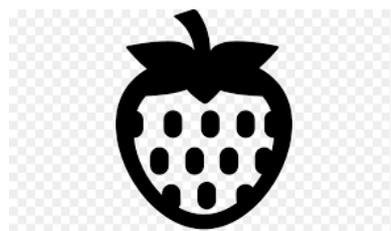
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1 **What do Fanny and Thomas’ stories reveal**  
2 **about how far people with learning disabilities**  
3 **were included in 18<sup>th</sup> century society?**

4 **Fanny’s story<sup>12</sup>**

5 In 1764 a baby girl was born to a rich and well-connected family  
6 near Bath. They named her Fanny. It soon became clear she  
7 was not developing the way typical children did. She couldn’t  
8 count to twenty, didn’t know her left from her right hand or the  
9 names of the days of the week. Once while out walking in  
10 thunderstorm, delighted by a bolt of lightening, she asked her  
11 companions to “do it again”. Even as a young adult she needed  
12 help dressing and protection from dangers like the garden  
13 pond.

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17 In 1786 when she was twenty-two she was kidnapped by an  
18 army lieutenant called Henry Bowerman, who tricked her into  
19 going to a nearby village by telling her there would be

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Jarrett. Those They Called Idiots. The idea of the disabled mind from 1700 to the present day. Reaktion Books. 2020. P38

1 strawberries and cream. Here she was separated from her  
2 trusted companions and taken to France, where Bowerman  
3 tried to find a priest who would perform a marriage ceremony  
4 so he could take her inheritance. Bowerman struggled to find a  
5 priest to do this because it was clear Fanny did not understand  
6 what was happening. Eventually Bowerman and his co-  
7 conspirators got an English priest drunk enough to agree to  
8 conduct the service.

9 We can only imagine what Fanny's mother went through.

10 When she found out where her daughter was, she sent four  
11 investigators to locate Fanny and bring her home. The  
12 investigators found her and, accompanied by three French  
13 Cavaliers, they took her away from Bowerman and returned her  
14 to her mother.

15 Bowerman appealed to courts, claiming the only reason Fanny  
16 did not understand what had happened was because her  
17 mother gave her alcoholic drink and that the marriage should  
18 be considered valid. The court quickly rejected this ridiculous  
19 excuse after it became clear Fanny could not give logical  
20 answers about who she wanted to marry and how much  
21 property she owned.

22 Fanny's mother reluctantly agreed to have her daughter  
23 declared an 'idiot' so she could have official guardianship of her  
24 and so legally protect her. She had not wanted to do this before

1 “on account of her maternal affection and extreme tenderness  
2 for her daughter.”

3 The marriage was annulled. Fanny was returned to her mother  
4 who now had legal guardianship of her<sup>13</sup>.

## 5 **Thomas’ Story**<sup>14</sup>

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9 In 1780 a poor young skin-gatherer who worked in a London  
10 meat market appeared in court accused of taking part in a riot.  
11 Regularly teased by other boys, Thomas Baggott was accepted  
12 to be an ‘idiot’ who did not really understand the value of  
13 money and would do no work unless he had to.

14 Witnesses claimed he had been seen drunk helping destroy a  
15 house. Shocked by the level of violence in the riot the  
16 government encouraged harsh sentences. Thomas could be  
17 hanged. His life was at stake.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5H0I\\_9FFpE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5H0I_9FFpE)

<sup>14</sup> Simon Jarrett. Those They Called Idiots. The idea of the disabled mind from 1700 to the present day. Reaktion Books. 2020. P46

1 At Thomas' trial<sup>15</sup> six witnesses appeared in his defence, which  
2 included his workmates, his employer, his sister and his  
3 mother. Three other people provided character witness  
4 statements.

5 All the witnesses provided Thomas with alibis – claiming he had  
6 been with them at the time of the riot. The only thing consistent  
7 about the statements was Thomas wasn't at the riot. He  
8 couldn't possibly have been with all the people who said he  
9 was with them at the same time!

10 The judge clearly knew this and warned the witnesses they  
11 could themselves get into trouble for perjury, which means lying  
12 to court. He told them to be careful. They did not change their  
13 stories with one saying *"I am very careful, and very sure he was  
14 employed in the yard until dinner-time."*

15 It seems pretty clear Thomas had taken part in the riot but the  
16 jury chose to go along with the witnesses stories and acquitted  
17 him, probably because they thought the best place for him was  
18 in his community with his family and friends.

19 Thomas' life was not perfect. From the witness statements in  
20 the court we know he was teased and probably often treated  
21 badly, but when his life was at stake the people who knew him  
22 were willing to risk their own freedom to stop him being

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t17800628-113-defend1484&div=t17800628-113#highlight>

1 punished for committing a crime they knew he might not have  
2 really understood.

3 When push came to shove, he was one of their own.

4 The judge and jurors were also happy to collude with the  
5 stories of Thomas' friends, showing they thought the best place  
6 for him was in his community with his friends and family.

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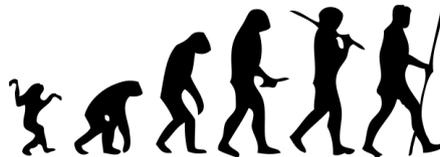
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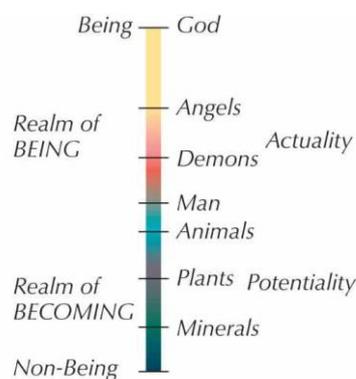
1 **Why did 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century societies lock**  
2 **away people with learning disabilities?**

3 In the 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes towards people with learning  
4 disabilities changed. Whereas previously they were regarded  
5 as having a right to live in society with everyone else, in the  
6 1800s more and more people began to think people with  
7 learning disabilities should be separated from the rest of the  
8 population.



10 *A diagram wrongly interpreting Darwin's work to mean human evolution is linear and progressive.*

11 One reason for this was the development of new types of  
12 science influenced by Charles Darwin's work on natural  
13 selection and evolution, reinforcing existing ideas – which  
14 Darwin did not agree with - about a 'great chain of being,' in  
15 which all living beings existed on a hierarchy of higher and  
16 lower organisms.



18 *Simplified diagram of the Great Chain of Being*

1 Although Darwin did not include humans in his theories some  
2 people interpreted them to mean there was a hierarchical chain  
3 of humanity too, from the simple and basic to the sophisticated  
4 and advanced.

5 People with learning disabilities, regarded as being the lowest  
6 links of the human chain, were seen as a threat because  
7 people feared their children would also have disabilities and so  
8 would hold back the development and improvement of people  
9 and the societies they lived in.

#### 10 **Intelligence and race.**

11 These ideas about evolution were not limited to those with  
12 learning disabilities – they were also applied to people in other  
13 parts of the world encountered and then colonised by European  
14 countries. People across all continents found themselves  
15 divided into ‘idiot’ and ‘imbecile’ races not capable of the  
16 supposedly higher levels of intelligence of European white  
17 people.

18 People with learning disabilities had been described as ‘idiots’,  
19 ‘imbeciles’ and ‘the feeble-minded’ before this, with many  
20 doctors and scientists working to try and find methods to divide  
21 people into these groups. Those with learning disabilities, like  
22 ‘inferior races’ in other parts of the world were thought to be  
23 ‘unimprovable’, which means that no matter how hard they tried

1 they could never be anything but a burden to the societies and  
2 communities in which they lived.

### 3 **Unimprovable?**

4 The categorisation of people with learning disabilities as  
5 'unimprovable' meant they were believed to be incapable of  
6 functioning within complicated democratic societies where  
7 literacy and knowledge about politics and religion was  
8 considered essential. Increasingly more and more people  
9 began to feel people with learning disabilities were a problem  
10 and should be separated from everyone else – this is a similar  
11 view to that held by many Ancient Greeks.

12 Whereas previously people with learning difficulties were rarely  
13 incarcerated and then only if their actions suggested they were  
14 too dangerous to live in local communities, from the late 19<sup>th</sup>  
15 century just having a learning disability was now seen as a  
16 good reason for people to be shut away.



17

18 *Earlswood asylum – a place in which people with learning disabilities were incarcerated in the 1800s.*

1 With learning disability being increasingly seen as a medical  
2 problem hospitals and asylums were established to house them  
3 in. Doctors and other medical professionals decided who  
4 should go into these and supervised them. From 1913 colonies  
5 began to be constructed. Here people with learning disabilities  
6 were supposed to be supported in doing simple work while  
7 under supervision. Men and women were strictly segregated  
8 because of the fear they might have children. The way in which  
9 people in these places were treated varied but regardless of  
10 how kind the people in them were closely controlled and  
11 allowed very limited freedom

12 Many people grew up, matured, aged and died without ever  
13 seeing the outside world, tightly controlled and given little  
14 choice about how to live their lives.

15 As people with learning disabilities disappeared from Britain's  
16 public places they also disappeared from culture and public  
17 consciousness. Shut away and made invisible, the proposed  
18 elimination of people with learning disabilities from the world  
19 was now a much smaller step.

20

21

22

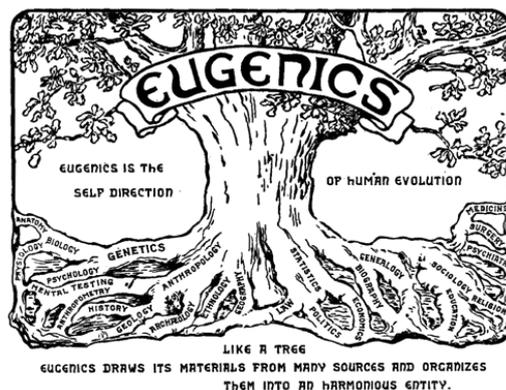
23

1 **Why did some societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century try**  
2 **to get rid of people with learning disabilities?**

3 **Eugenics**

4 The arrangement of human reproduction to increase  
5 characteristics believed to be desirable, and to reduce or  
6 eliminate characteristics believed to be undesirable is known as  
7 eugenics.

8 These principles had been applied to domestic animals for  
9 thousands of years to – for example – increase meat and milk  
10 yields in cows. Applying this to humans meant encouraging  
11 some people to have lots of children and discouraging or even  
12 forbidding others from doing so based on what eugenicists  
13 considered to be positive or negative characteristics.



14  
15 *Logo from the Second International Conference of 1921, depicting eugenics as a tree which unites a*  
16 *variety of different fields*

17 Influenced by perversions of Charles Darwin's ideas, in the  
18 1900s more and more people joined eugenics societies. The  
19 aim of these was to try and find ways humanity could be

1 'improved' by reducing the number of children born to less  
2 intelligent people. Those with learning disabilities were  
3 considered particularly unsuitable parents because it was felt  
4 they would pass disabilities to their children.

5 The complexity of increasingly technological and urbanised  
6 societies led to arguments less intelligent people would not be  
7 able to cope and should not be included in modern societies. In  
8 1930 Julian Huxley, a committed eugenicist said:

9 *“Every defective needs care, and immobilises a certain*  
10 *quantum of energy and goodwill, which could otherwise be*  
11 *put to good use.<sup>16</sup>”*

12 Assumptions were made about the quality of life of those with  
13 learning disabilities. It was often claimed less intelligent people  
14 did not have the capacity for happiness or even human  
15 feelings. Perhaps – it was argued – the world would be a better  
16 place if people with learning disabilities did not exist at all.

17 Not everyone agreed. In the early 1900s, MP Josiah  
18 Wedgwood, the great grandson of Josiah Wedgwood who  
19 campaigned against the slave trade, gave many speeches in  
20 parliament in which he argued - as humans - people with  
21 learning disabilities had the same rights as everyone else. His  
22 point was no humans should be pushed aside just because

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<sup>16</sup> Simon Jarrett. *Those They Called Idiots. The idea of the disabled mind from 1700 to the present day.* Reaktion Books. 2020. P272

1 others did not think they fitted in. His speeches were largely  
2 ignored.

### 3 **Eugenics to murder**

4 Eugenic ideas became commonplace in wider culture across  
5 the world. In Britain this resulted in many supposedly voluntary  
6 sterilisations in which healthy people had operations that  
7 stopped them being able to have children. In the United States  
8 many sterilisation operations were compulsory, taking place  
9 without consent.

10 The most extreme and upsetting expression of eugenics  
11 occurred in Nazi Germany.



12

13

*Nurses outside the Hartheim execution centre.*

14 In 1933, almost as soon as Adolf Hitler came to power, a law  
15 was adopted which resulted in more than 200,000 people with  
16 learning disabilities being sterilised. Things escalated rapidly  
17 and in 1939 the Nazi state began to kill children, described by  
18 the law as being 'garbage'. Boys and girls were murdered by  
19 lethal injection or left to starve to death. In the same year the

1 T4 programme began. Six centres were fitted with gas  
2 chambers and by 1941 it is estimated more than 40,000 people  
3 with learning disabilities had been executed. The Nazis did their  
4 best to keep this secret and lied to the relatives of people they  
5 had murdered, claiming they had died of natural causes and  
6 had been well cared for. Families received letters of  
7 condolence such as this one, which was sent from the  
8 Grafeneck asylum:

9            "We can report that Irmgard was still overjoyed with the  
10           little coat, and above all with the lovely dolly, which she  
11           had in her arms to the very end.<sup>17</sup>"

12 The Nazis were forced to end the centralised gassing  
13 programme after a public outcry led by parents and religious  
14 and community leaders, which shows that despite years of  
15 propaganda much of the German public was unwilling to accept  
16 the murder of people with learning disabilities.

17 Despite the closing down of the six centres, more secretive  
18 murder by lethal injection, starvation and mass shootings  
19 continued right up to and even beyond the end of World War  
20 Two in Europe.

21

22

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<sup>17</sup> Greg Lacey and Keith Shepherd Germany 1918-1945. Hodder Education. 2013. P100

## 1 **The end of open eugenics**

2 The horrors of Nazi Germany disgusted people and discredited  
3 eugenic ideas in Britain. People found the involvement of  
4 medical professionals particularly disturbing. British eugenic  
5 societies lost most of their members and famous public figures  
6 distanced themselves from the movement. In addition  
7 advances in science steadily demolished the idea evolution and  
8 human beings should be seen hierarchically.

9 Ideas about learning disability were also changing. During the  
10 war people with learning disabilities who might not have been  
11 previously seen as fit to play a role in society had made  
12 obvious contributions. Some worked for the Pioneer Corps  
13 building airfields, bridges and roads, while others worked on  
14 war fronts building roads or acting as stretcher bearers.

15 Post war Britain was developing a different attitude towards  
16 people with learning disabilities. After centuries of  
17 marginalisation and exclusion, society began to consider ways  
18 in which people with learning disabilities might be included  
19 again<sup>18</sup>.

20 But things did not change overnight.

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Jarrett. *Those They Called Idiots. The idea of the disabled mind from 1700 to the present day.* Reaktion Books. 2020. P280

1 **Back in the community? – how included are**  
2 **people with learning disabilities now?**

3 **Life in hospital**

4 The falling away of support for the organised eugenic  
5 movement resulted in less interest in people with learning  
6 disabilities overall. Many continued to live in colonies, asylums  
7 and hospitals. In 1948 these were transferred to the newly  
8 established National Health Service.

9 Those who worked in these institutions did not have option of  
10 returning the people to their communities and struggled to  
11 understand how best to approach people who were different  
12 but not ill.



14 *Bathing scene from a hospital used to house people with learning disabilities.*

15 The NHS institutions were grim places. The people in them had  
16 little freedom and their lives were organised in ways that made  
17 them convenient for others. This is the way one person  
18 remembered bath time:

1           *“Taps were took off ‘cos they were like taps you had to*  
2           *screw on and when you’d had your bath they took ‘em*  
3           *away. Or else some people would kill themselves, drown*  
4           *themselves.<sup>19</sup>”*

5 Residents who would not comply with the rules were harshly  
6 treated. The right to visit family or have visitors could be taken  
7 away for ‘bad behaviour’. Some were stripped naked to  
8 humiliate them or locked away in dark rooms. Breaking rules  
9 around interacting with the opposite sex were particularly  
10 harshly punished, showing while eugenic ideas were no longer  
11 publicly or openly shared, the underlying attitudes beneath  
12 them remained strong.

13 The birth of a baby with learning disabilities was viewed as a  
14 great misfortune with parents advised to institutionalise their  
15 child and have another in order to forget him or her. Parents  
16 who refused to do this were told they did not have the right to a  
17 free education for their child if their IQ was below 50. Such  
18 children were described as ‘ineducable’, which means  
19 incapable of learning.

## 20 **Return to inclusion**

21 Some parents would not accept this and fought for recognition  
22 of their children as humans with the same rights as others –

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<sup>19</sup> Maggie Potts and Rebecca Fido, *A Fit Person to be Removed: Personal Accounts of Life a Mental Deficiency Institution*. Plymouth, 1991. P45

1 just as Wedgwood had argued in the 1900s. This was a hard  
2 thing to do a time when doctors and other medical  
3 professionals were often regarded as unchallengeable experts.  
4 These parents set up support groups, schools, youth clubs and  
5 community hubs. Gradually, with the support of some influential  
6 celebrities, attitudes did begin to change.

7 From the 1950s laws changed to make it easier for people with  
8 learning disabilities to live in communities and not separate  
9 institutions, although many did continue to do so. Words that  
10 had become common insults, such as 'idiot' and 'imbecile' were  
11 discouraged.



12

13 *Front page of 1960s Observer newspaper reporting on a hospital in Greece..*

14 In the 1960s a series of terrible scandals in hospitals which  
15 housed people with learning disabilities shocked the public.

16 Newspaper reporters found many cases in which people had  
17 been stolen from, threatened, verbally abused and beaten. In

18 1981 a team of documentary film makers were invited to two

19 hospitals and filmed a young person tied to a pillar, one locked

1 in an isolation room and forgotten about and others left without  
2 water or shade in a locked outdoor pen on a hot day<sup>20</sup>.

3 Around the same time a series of government reports emerged  
4 which made it clear viewing people with learning disabilities as  
5 ill and needing treatment in hospitals was now discouraged.

6 Instead, the reports argued, people with learning disabilities  
7 had the right to live normal lives in normal communities and –  
8 like everyone else – should only have to live in a hospital if they  
9 had a medical condition that needed treatment they could not  
10 get in their own homes.

11 The return to life in the community has undoubtedly improved  
12 the lives of many people who now have freedom everyone  
13 enjoys. Many people with learning disabilities now live in their  
14 own homes, have fulfilling lives and make their own decisions.<sup>21</sup>



15

16

*An athlete with Down Syndrome competing at the Special Olympics.*

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<sup>20</sup> Simon Jarrett. *Those They Called Idiots. The idea of the disabled mind from 1700 to the present day.* Reaktion Books. 2020. P280

<sup>21</sup> See Saba Salman (ed) *Made Possible – Stories of Success by people with learning disabilities in their own words.* Unbound. 2020.

# 1 **How included are people with learning disabilities today?**

2 This does not mean all is well.

3 Old attitudes about capability, value and eugenics lurk in the  
4 background.

5 People with learning disabilities have a shockingly lower life  
6 expectancy than those without. Far too few work in meaningful  
7 paid employment and many experience prejudice and  
8 discrimination every day. There are still many examples of  
9 people with learning disabilities being taken advantage of  
10 through crimes such as abuse and theft.

11 During the Covid 19 pandemic of 2020-21 the death rate of  
12 people with learning disabilities was up to six times that of  
13 those without. Conditions such as Downs Syndrome associated  
14 with learning disabilities are considered acceptable reasons to  
15 end pregnancies. Foetuses with these conditions are far more  
16 likely to be terminated than those without.

17 Fewer and fewer people with these conditions are born each  
18 year.

19 There is a long way go and this is not a journey with an  
20 inevitable happy ending.

21 There is always the possibility attitudes might become even  
22 more exclusive again. Not long ago influential people were

1 arguing for the elimination of people with learning disabilities  
2 altogether.

3 In Germany a government tried to do this.

4 Human rights apply to everyone. Everyone is human.

5 We are in this together.

6 If we fail to include everyone then all of us fail.

7

8 *To both my children, Bessie and Rose. Different. Perfectly*  
9 *human.*