

The History of The British Polio Fellowship



Background

During the 1930s, disabled people were shunned or, at best, tolerated by society. They were not expected to socialise, marry or work and were essentially treated as victims – passively receiving the charity that so called ‘able-bodied’ people chose to give them.

In this atmosphere, two people with polio met in 1938. Patricia Carey was diagnosed aged eight, Frederic Morena aged 42. Frustrated by society’s approach to disabled people they decided to challenge attitudes and start an organisation “for people with disabilities, by people with disabilities”. The British Polio Fellowship was born.*

Since that time, we have built a national organisation which has greatly changed the lives of many people with polio.

Here are some milestones from our history. For more information, we recommend you read a

fascinating account of our past, “Something to lean on” compiled by Barry North.

* Initially known as the "Infantile Paralysis Fellowship" we later change our name to reflect the fact that everyone could be affected by polio not just children.



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Publications:

📖 “Something to lean on”
by Barry North

The 1930s

1939 Patricia Carey and Frederic Morena have a great idea – as they found it easier to deal with the social effects of their situation by finding friends in a similar position, maybe others would feel the same. The Fellowship is born.

The first meeting attracts 30 people. Waldo Eager CBE is appointed as the first chairman, and just over £5 is raised. Subscriptions are set at 12.5p for people with polio, and 25p for non-disabled associates.

With membership growing, the first copy of the Bulletin is produced. 60 people attend a meeting at the Lyons Corner House in London. A larger event follows: almost 400 people come to the Tea House in Kensington Gardens.

The 1940s

The war years

The Chairman – Roby Spence – writes a letter to Ernest Bevan MP, then Employment Secretary, and points out that people with polio have functioning brains as well as problems with their limbs, so why can't they work? Bevan replies that the Government will henceforth adopt a strategy of employing people with disabilities.

As bombs fall, and travelling to meetings becomes harder, The Bulletin becomes a lifeline for members and a pen pals' circle is started.

1945 The Fellowship arranges a Victory Rally, including a party in Lambeth Palace, a sight-seeing tour of London and a West End show.

1945 Member Michael Flanders successfully mounts a campaign which changes legislation so that cinemas become wheelchair-accessible.

A London-based Christmas party, attended by people from around the country, sparks the idea that the Fellowship should be local as well as national. From this moment, branches are established throughout the UK. The first branch is in Reading.

1947 The Constitution is formally adopted, and the Fellowship moves in to its first office in Tavistock Place, London. There are now 2,000 members.

The 1950s

1950 The Fellowship produces a film, "A Life To Be Lived"; a dramatic account of a man who contracts polio and has a prolonged rehabilitation procedure. The film includes a short history of the Fellowship, and there is an appeal at the end.

The first of Fellowship's holiday home - The Lantern Hotel – opens.

1951 The first Youth Conference takes place in Hampshire.

1952 The Fellowship creates The National Polio Fund which raises sufficient money to sponsor valuable research.

The first national welfare conference takes place. Members from 30 branches attend.

1953 As the number of branches increases, regions are formed.

1955 The polio vaccine is deemed successful and exported to the UK.

1956 Our Newcastle branch opens a hostel; a place where people with polio can live and work.

1959 Some 9 million Christmas cards and 80,000 advent calendars are produced by the Fellowship to both raise funds and employ members.

The 1960s

Early 1960s The cosmetic calliper becomes available – people with polio can now wear everyday shoes, rather than thick soles.

1960 Frederic Morena is the subject of “This is Your Life”. Patricia Carey flies in from Zimbabwe to appear on the show.

Frederic dies at the end of this year.

The first visitor moves in to the Fellowship’s caravans in Portsmouth. The caravans are adapted for people who use respirators.

1963 The Fellowship’s Burnham-on-Sea bungalow opens.

1968 The first National Sports Day takes place on a rainy day in Birmingham.

End of the 60s The population of many developed counties begins to be almost fully immune to the polio virus. The Fellowship decides to change course, and concentrate on helping people with polio to live fulfilled lives.

The 1970s

- 1970s** The Government introduces the Mobility Allowance, and a leasing scheme for four-wheeled cars.
- 1973** The National Sports Day and Swimming Gala take place on the same day, at Stoke Mandeville Sports Stadium. The Sportsman is David Foden, and the Sportswoman is Madeleine Henry.

The 1980s

- 1983** The first National Indoor Games is held at Birmingham University, an annual event which continues to this day.
- 1985** The Fellowship donates £100,000 towards the cost of opening a new unit at St.Thomas's – The Lane Fox Unit. This provides therapy for people with Post Polio Syndrome.

The 1990s

- 1998** The Fellowship produces a video about Post Polio Syndrome.

The 2000s

2005 The British Polio Fellowship became incorporated as a company limited by guarantee.

The City Bridge Trust awards the Fellowship a three year contract to improve outreach within the Greater London Area.

Sadly the Lantern Hotel in Worthing is closed due to mounting losses but its consequent sale secured the Fellowship's financial security for the foreseeable future.

2006 The Fellowship is awarded £250,000 by the National Lottery to fund a community welfare project for three years.

2007 The Fellowship now has 8,000 members.

Lifetime Membership of the Fellowship continues to cost £25.

The European Polio Union is formed with the Fellowship chosen to co-ordinate events.

The Burnham Bungalow undergoes a kitchen refurbishment funded by the Clothworker's Trust.

A new look is created for the Fellowship, and the first Members' Handbook is produced.

The 2010s

- 2013** The first Post-Polio Syndrome Day was celebrated and became an annual event.
- 2014** The British Polio Fellowship marked its 75th anniversary with events across the country.
- 2016** Robin Luff and Frances Quinn launched the much-respected publication Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS) Management Guide for Healthcare Professionals.
- 2017** The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) introduced a training module to educate GPs on PPS.
- 2018** This was the start of a difficult financial period for the Fellowship when regretfully, a compulsory membership fee had to be introduced.
- The Central Office team reduced to six people and membership fell, but member services were largely unaffected by the changes.

The 2020s

2020 The COVID pandemic resulted in a national lockdown. Fellowship staff worked from home and continued to support members.

National Lottery funding was secured for emergency Covid relief efforts.

2021 The continued COVID lockdown forced a decision to cancel the National Indoor Games (the first time in the Fellowship's history).

2022 Kripen Dhrona was appointed Chief Executive Officer.

The Board introduced a new 10-year strategy to guide the Fellowship in to the next decade.

The Board introduced a new membership policy to make membership fees voluntary.