

**TYNEDALE  
TALKING  
NEWSPAPER  
1982-2022**

**The  
First  
40  
Years**

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## **An introduction by the Chair of Tynedale Talking Newspaper**

The TTN belies its age – at 40 it's still full of energy and ambition – no mid-life resting on laurels for TTN.

If the current teams of volunteers, both readers and engineers, and the TTN support people are anything to go by, there's little surprise that the organisation has lasted 40 years. There's 100% commitment to the principal aim, of providing each week a high-quality recording of key Hexham Courant articles to TTN listeners. There's also devotion, generosity (in giving their time) and, in the face of adversity, both flexibility and creativity. The history of TTN reveals this at all stages of its impressive 40 years.

It's for me a real privilege to be able to contribute to TTN's continuing success and share the real sense of service to people who are blind or have impaired vision.

I wish to thank the author of TTN – The First 40 Years, Anne Galbraith, for all her research and all the interviews she has conducted (and which she enjoyed immensely). Her ability to bring TTN people, past and present, to life in print can only be applauded.

For TTN listeners this is a means of getting to know more about the people behind the TTN who otherwise remain at a distance and never visit, though their voices are welcomed into each home each week. Via the TN Magazine, listeners will be able to enjoy The First 40 Years.

I commend this read to you wholeheartedly.

*Dave Clegg July 2022*

## **Tynedale Talking Newspaper – a History**

“We’ve been together now for forty years” – well, those are the words of a well known song, but it is also the length of time that Tynedale Talking Newspaper has been running – and some of the early stalwarts who founded the talking newspaper are still involved today. Delving into the records and archives about the talking newspaper, there are a number of strong themes that emerge. The commitment of volunteers, the technical skills of the engineers, the willingness to take on new developments, the appreciation of the listeners, the determination to keep the service going despite setbacks – the most recent of which has been finding ways to record during the coronavirus pandemic.

There had been some talk of producing a history of the Talking Newspaper at the twenty five year anniversary, but that did not happen – all the more reason to capture the story now.

### **Early Days**

How did it all begin? Finding where the initial spark came from has not proved easy. The archive contains a note of a meeting of the West Northumberland Voluntary Committee for the Handicapped (WNVCH) on 17 February 1982. A scheme for a talking newspaper was discussed, with details of how recordings would be made and distributed, how the money to launch it and buy the necessary equipment would be raised, and what the level of demand for the service was likely to be. A decision was taken to hold an open meeting of WNVCH, which took place on 29 March 1982. Barry Appleyard, a senior social worker with Northumberland County Council, outlined the project. He set out what he thought the minimum requirements would be in terms of volunteers, and the discussions that would need to take place with the Hexham Courant.

It was resolved to hold a meeting on 19 April of that same year, the main business of which would be to form a committee. Brian Appleyard asked for volunteers for the main posts. Mrs June Horne (herself visually impaired) was persuaded to be the Chairman, with Ken Sim becoming the first Secretary, Peter Nielson volunteered to be Treasurer, Robert Robertson would be in charge of fund raising activities and Mark Benjamin would be the technical adviser. The name, Tynedale Talking Newspaper was agreed there and then and it was resolved that there would be four teams initially. The use of the recording facilities of Hexham Hospital Radio was offered by Ken Sim to help with getting the venture off the ground.



By January 1983, the first Registrar for readers, Lesley Crowther, was appointed and there was a schedule of recording dates for the teams, now six in number. They were Odds and Ends, Lions, Hospital Radio Team, Ladies' Circle, Rotary and Tangent. The equipment they were using was still quite basic.

By April of 1983, the committee had expanded to include representatives from all the teams. For the first time, there is a note about the teams complaining that finishing copying cassettes at midnight was very unsociable. This prompted a decision that as soon as funds were available, a Slave copier would be connected to the existing machine, thus reducing the time spent copying by half.



### **The Recording Locations**

Hexham Hospital and the Queen's Hall Library were both early venues for recording but it is clear that from 1983, the recordings were being made for a short time at "The Other Place" in Tanners Yard and later from a venue in Market Street. In 1988 a more "permanent" move was made to use a room at Matthew Charlton's, the local builders' merchants, in their roofing department. Why Matthew Charlton's, you may ask? Well, Mike Harrison, the manager of the roofing department just happened to be the husband of one of the volunteer readers! There are several reminders in the minutes asking team leaders to make sure they cleared up all their mess at the end of a recording session, as they were using offices of Charlton's staff.

In 1990, the location of the recordings changed to a garret room in the Queen's Hall Library, where it was possible to store equipment. The Lions team made storage arrangements there for all the equipment, but one Rotarian recording session was thwarted when fire broke out in the equipment. The arrangements at the Queen's Hall Library lasted until 2002, when the space was wanted for the library, and so the next move was to the West End Methodist Hall, where TTN remained until the outbreak of coronavirus. In person recordings became impossible because of the lock down regime that was imposed in March 2020. This resulted in the then chairman, Tony Newton working with the engineers to find new methods to make the recordings remotely – by Zoom.

Moving to recording by Zoom required volunteer listeners to be comfortable with using it, and the engineers were as helpful as ever in offering support and advice about it. However, some people felt unable to commit, and as a result, the normal teams could not operate effectively. It was decided to ask half a dozen team leaders to set up a team of four from a list of willing volunteers, whose email addresses and telephone numbers were provided.

At first, the zoom recordings depended on the Courant sending its pages as pdf documents, and the stories could be selected by the team leader, allocated to individual readers and appropriate pdfs sent to each of them. As lockdown eased, readers were able to access their own copy of the Courant, and the preparation task became much easier. The engineer would send out the link for the zoom recording and the team would assemble remotely at the appointed hour. The process left the engineers with rather more work than was previously the case. There had to be a very clear protocol about sanitising sticks and putting them in quarantine for a period to avoid any possibility of sending coronavirus to the listeners.

Although zoom recording worked very well, there was a desire to get things "back to normal" with round the table recordings being done by established teams. The camaraderie generated by meeting in person had been sorely missed. As soon as volunteers were starting to feel confident about recording as a group with their team around the table, the search was begun to find a new venue which could meet concerns about social distancing. As a result of the exercise to find an appropriate place, the next venue was the Torch Centre in Hexham. The engineers had to get to grips with establishing new recording processes that would meet all best practice to keep recording teams safe.

Some of the processes were changing, so induction and training were necessary to ensure that teams were thoroughly familiar with the new system. The new venue became operational in May 2022.

### **The Recording Teams**

Right from the start, the Hexham Courant was recorded by teams on a Friday evening – initially six teams although later this grew to eight. Each team had a leader and would



usually consist of four readers. At first, the teams were organisation based, such as Rotarians, Lions, Tangent, Hospital Radio, Ladies Circle, and the oddly named Odds and Ends – a group of well-wishers, some of whom were responsible for the foundation of the talking newspaper.

When Hospital Radio ceased to consist of people associated with the Hospital, it was renamed "Not the Hospital Radio Team". However, this rather unwieldy title later got changed to "Friends and neighbours". When this group later disbanded in 1992, the Soroptomists fielded a team, and for a time, so did the Business and Professional Women's Association. Later still, in 1990 along came the Home and Away team, formed as a result of an open evening when a number of new volunteers had come forward. When the Business and Professional Women's team disbanded in 2001, after serving TTN for 16 years, almost immediately a new team, Westenders, was created. The explanation for their name is that all the members of the team came from the west end of Hexham!

The leader of each team would collect the tapes that had been returned from listeners to the Queens Hall library. The leader would also collect copies of the newspaper from the Courant office, which was then cut up to select the appropriate stories which were then distributed among the readers at the recording. The recording was made on a master tape which was then copied on a high speed duplicating machine. Arrangements had been negotiated with the Post Office for the free postage of the recordings to those registered blind or visually handicapped. The recordings were packed into yellow pouches and taken to the Post Office Sorting Office. Although the technology has changed several times over the life of TTN, this basic structure still exists.

Where the team members all came from the same organisation, the members would know each other well, and they treated their reading session almost as a social occasion. The team on duty would assemble originally on a Friday evening, but more recently on Thursdays after the Courant changed its publication date. The team leader would ensure that there was a full team available, and would edit the paper to create a good mix of local and national news, sport and farming, human interest, opinion pieces, family announcements, charity and health news, and in season, an inevitable crop of stories about all the local agricultural shows.

Once assembled with their team engineer, the first task was to empty the returned wallets, prepare the new wallets, and then settle down to record. In more recent times with improvements to all the equipment and technology, a recording session might take a couple of hours. However, in the "bad old days"

when a master tape was made and then had to be copied, it was apparently not unusual for recording teams to be leaving Matthew Charlton's offices at going on midnight!!

As early as March 1984, there was an item in the minutes about the production and content of the recordings. The minute reads as follows; "On the whole, all teams were doing a very good job. June asked members to bear the following points in mind: some of the comments by members between articles could be described as a little offensive; when something amusing happens during a recording, make sure the listeners are aware of what you are laughing at, as it's rather frustrating to hear the teams laughing for no apparent reason".

June Kendrew, the team leader and long standing member of the Tangent team, explains their team name was because they were originally Hexham Ladies Circle members who were "thrown out" at 40, and thus Tangent was formed. She recalls that recording sessions could take hours – no doubt partly accounted for by the practice of taking in a Chinese takeaway meal and bottles of wine! June has recorded in all of the venues used by TTN and remembers that when sessions were held in the Queen's Hall Library, it was necessary to avoid recording when the bell ringers were practising at the Abbey.

Ron Lane was the Tangent engineer, and June remembers him being very strict, particularly if anyone got the giggles, as the editing was a time consuming chore.

On one ghastly occasion, June also recalls the master tape being inadvertently wiped and so they had to read everything all over again. One episode that sticks in her mind is when there was a postal strike in 1988, and June's team were determined to get the recording to the listeners, so the whole team undertook to deliver them. June remembers that she delivered in the Allendale area, and was very well received – she got a cup of tea everywhere she went.

Ron Lane had been involved with TTN right from the start. He used to record music at the start of the tape. His choice was always classical and church music, but when Pete Barrett became their engineer, the music tended to be from albums by Queen.

Where reading teams were formed by well structured organisations, such as the Rotarians, the group all knew



each other and in consequence the teams ran more or less like a well oiled machine. Brian Massey from the Rotarians team reflects: "I have been reading the Hexham Courant for the Tynedale Talking Newspaper for well nigh 20 years as a member of the Hexham Rotary team. For most of that time, we provided the full team comprising an engineer, an administrator who was responsible for emptying and filling all the postal packets, and 4 readers. For many years, Rotarian Graham Blackler was our principal engineer and also accepted responsibility for producing the Team, made easier by the fact that Rotarian Brian Sanderson was always present as our administrator. Every effort was made to ensure that there were always 2 ladies and 2 men reading, hopefully thus providing a good contrast of voices!

"Over this period of time, the recorded material has always occupied between 80 - 90 minutes. However, thanks to changes and improvements in technology, the time taken to transpose the recording on to memory sticks has shortened very considerably. Later our engineers were then Sandy Rutherford and Roger Abraham. The reading content was not distributed beforehand but rather each reader chose his/her articles from the 'cut out' Courant on the table. We were of necessity often supported by the appearance of Ed Turnbull or Paul Reed who always very quickly responded to urgent phone calls for 'engineering' help. As a bonding exercise, our Team would invariably stop halfway through the recording for a very brief refreshment break of coffee and chocolate biscuits. Rotarian readers, supplemented by two new Rotarian recruits, have also supported the more recent zoom recording arrangements. All agree that the zoom arrangements have been very successful."

One of the original members of the Rotarians team, Stephen Hart-Jackson, was not only a reader, but also undertook spells as both Secretary and then Chairman and for a time fulfilling both roles. Pete Barrett recalls being the recording engineer when Stephen was one of the readers: "The team had an affable gentleman called Stephen. He was a retired solicitor, perhaps thirty years my senior, and he possessed a certain old-school charm. When we came to read the Family Notices, Stephen opined that the Deaths were in need of a deep lugubrious male voice. After he had concluded these sombre announcements with great solemnity, Stephen would say "There will now be a minute's silence in memory of those recently departed". We then faded all the microphones and recorded 60 seconds of blank tape. My helpful suggestion that listeners could simply press the fast forward button received a raised eyebrow and a stern look over Stephen's spectacles, which was reminiscent of my old headmaster."

The "family" feel of TTN was reinforced regularly in its early days by existing members drawing in others with the right skills. Jim Galley remembers being "recruited" by Pete Barrett. They had both been telephone engineers, and Pete was working away, so no doubt Jim's skills and experience were very useful. When Pete returned, he became a reader and then rejoined the engineering group. Jim was also a colleague and great friend of Ed Turnbull, so no surprise there that Ed was also recruited! Later, Jim recalls that Paul Reed joined the engineering team partly as a result of his mother having been a reader for one of the teams. Jim's recall of this is reinforced by Paul who says: "I moved to Hexham at the end of 2011. At the time Joan Charlton and my mother were readers. I looked in on a recording and ended up being "recruited" for the technical team. My mum and Joan stopped reading a year or so later. At the time, they would be around 88 and 90 respectively."

The Odds and Ends team were delighted when in 2018, the Duchess of Northumberland joined them at one recording session.

Norah Thornthwaite, team leader for the Soroptomists, notes: "We joined TTN in the early nineties not long after the Soroptomists were chartered (March 1991) as we were looking to be involved in a local community project. We started off recording in the "attic" at the Queen's Hall. Most of us were working, so we went there on the Friday evenings and I remember sometimes finishing about 10pm. In those days, I could only take part in the finishing off activities, checking the tapes and packing them into the wallets. Then we had to take them to the main post office on Battle Hill and put them into the outside post box - a bit spooky at times. At the time we had our own engineer, Ann Snowdon. We always appreciated the technical expertise put into the various generations of recording and checking equipment which has continued to the present day. There were technical hitches over the years, but nothing that could not be sorted out. I think we only ever missed two recordings over all the years because of snow."

One remarkable volunteer reader (and subsequent Chairman of TTN) was Ann Ruddick. Ann is believed to have made history in 1997 by becoming Britain's first ever blind reader for a talking newspaper. She had been involved with TTN as a committee member and trustee, and as a listener representative, and was delighted to have been given the opportunity to become a reader with the Odds and Ends team. This was not without its challenges, both technical and practical. In order for Ann to be able to read from a Braille version, the articles had to be scanned into a computer, and then an optical character recognition programme turned it into text. This then had to be printed into



necessary equipment.

Braille and then printed out with a suitable Braille printer. For the trial read, TTN was able to make use of equipment belonging to other organisations, but once it was clear that Ann could read the Braille articles as quickly as any of the other sighted readers, Jim Galley sought a Lottery grant to provide TTN with the

At the actual recording, Ann had to know when the previous reader was coming to a close, so that she could be ready to start reading. She recalled her fellow team member Mary Reed, being very helpful. Mary always read before Ann, and instead of raising her hand to tell the next reader to be ready, Mary would tap Ann's hand.

Ann also recalls how marvellously organised her team leader, Joan Charlton was. Joan was a retired headmistress and came to the recording sessions with the Courant cut up and the items put into individual envelopes for each reader. She was very firm, but also very kind, bringing a home made cake to every recording session with her team. Joan even took requests for specific types of cake!

As a listener representative, Ann came to know and recognise the voices of the readers, and could quickly tell when there was a new voice. She commented that as she listens to the tapes, it is like a friend coming to read to you. She recalled a social event following one of TTN's Annual General Meetings when someone had approached June Kendrick and said "Hello June". June didn't know the blind person, but the listener had recognised her by the sound of her voice.

Ann took over from Jim Galley as Chair of TTN. He had worked with Ann over quite a long period and recognised what a truly remarkable person she was. Ann had been blind from birth, but she was resolutely independent. Jim recalls that she was also technically competent and a very quick learner. When all the complex equipment came to enable her to create a reading in Braille, Jim

would take the articles from the Courant to Ann's home, and there she would do everything needed – putting the paper in the scanner, going on to the computer, knowing how to find the optic scanner on the computer and so on through the whole process. Ann has been equally appreciative of Jim's teaching and encouragement. She described him as being very supportive to her and a great teacher, very easy to follow.

You won't be surprised to read that Ann was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list in 2008 for her work for visually impaired people.

### **Tynedale Talking Magazine**

In September 1996, Ron Lane was the initiator of the idea to produce a regular Tynedale Talking Magazine, to be sent out alongside the weekly newspaper, and for seventeen years that became his special role in the organisation. Ron discussed his initial ideas for the magazine with Ann Ruddick, who was the listener representative at that time. Ann's view was that a magazine should have a varied range of items, especially about the area and Ron was persuaded to widen the range of contributions beyond religious and church matters. Ron quickly organised all the necessary support for the production of the magazine, and the first edition was sent out on December 27, 1996. Almost immediately, there was a very positive response from listeners.

Ron continued to be the driving force behind the magazine for many years, but at the age of 89, he felt the time had come to hand over the reins to someone younger, and David Ratcliff stepped in to Ron's shoes. The magazine continues to be a mix of items picked by the team of readers, some of whom also read for the newspaper. There can be nature articles, history, fiction, poetry, humour, sport – you name it, you might hear it in the magazine.

### **Listeners and Listener Representatives**

A key element of a successful talking newspaper is to have a solid listener base. The early users of the service were likely to have been people known to the Hexham Area Social Services team, but from the beginning, contact was made with organisations for visually handicapped and blind people. The earliest report in the minutes of the number of people receiving the tapes from TTN is August 1983, when it stood at 40. A year later, the number had risen to 62 and at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of TTN, it stood at 160. Current numbers of listeners are somewhat lower, due in no small part to the range of new and different sources from which blind and partially sighted people can access information.

After 5 years of operation, the teams at TTN were keen to take a more rounded view of listener feedback, and a survey was conducted with a range of questions, sent out to 25 listeners. Each received a copy of the recordings from all seven teams that were functioning at that time. Listeners were asked to score the tapes for technical quality, rating them either very good, good, fair or poor. If rating fair or poor, listeners were then asked to comment why – comments related to poor clarity, echo on the tape, team noise and music masking the speaker. The comments that came back on other questions ranged from “too many reports of council meetings”, “Some voices record better than others”, “no music preferred”, and “recordings seem geared to an older audience”. Some of the appreciation felt by listeners was summed up by one who said “I have enjoyed listening to all the seven tapes and wish you luck with the Newspaper”.

The first mention of recruiting a listener representative for the committee was in the minutes for July 1988, when the Registrar at the time, Anne Jobson, was asked for suggestions. At the November meeting that year, one of the committee members, Diane Woodhall suggested that Ann Ruddick might be prepared to act as a listener representative, and it was agreed to contact her. Elsie Dodgson, Ann's near neighbour got in touch with her. This was soon after Ann had moved into the area. She was clearly willing, and she attended her first committee meeting in January 1989. By 1993, Anne was volunteering to try to get a second listeners' representative for the committee, but it was 2000 before Janet Robinson came on board.

Although Ann Ruddick has moved away from the area now, she still receives TTN tapes each week, and still finds time to comment to the engineers if there are issues about quality. Many of the sets of minutes make reference to issues that she has raised to seek to improve the overall listening experience for users. She was always particularly impressed by the engineering skills of Sue Turnbull and was equally very keen to improve the general reading quality. With this in mind, she managed to recruit the actor Edward Kelsey, who played Joe Grundy in the Archers for many years, to come to the North East and give a talk on reading quality. Ann was however realistic, recognising that the readers are amateurs and volunteers. More recently, helpful guidance for readers was produced by Anne Leuchars, a former BBC journalist and regular reader for TTN.

A more recent listener representative, Neville Parker, has been able to contribute very helpful insights, as he also receives recorded material from a number of other sources, and is thus able to compare the quality of TTN recordings.

## The Technology

In the early days, the support of Ken Sim, offering the facilities of Hexham Hospital Radio to help to get TTN off the ground, was clearly invaluable. This would enable a master tape to be recorded but he had no copying equipment. He and Mark Benjamin were tasked with identifying the basic equipment needed to produce a talking newspaper running independently of hospital radio support. A fast copier was identified as being a first priority, costing over £1200. Once the Wollensack copier had been obtained, it was then necessary to train teams in its operation, and at that point, David Horne joined the technical team. Subsequently Mike Harrison also joined them.

In September 1985 a decision was taken that supervision and maintenance of the equipment required oversight of a team of engineers, and at that point a sub committee was formed, including Brian Hunt, Denis Watson, and later Pete Barrett. Given the time needed to research and source equipment, this subcommittee was a welcome addition to the management structure of TTN.

There were some inevitable teething problems with equipment which gave concern as this impacted on the quality of recordings. And very soon, the time taken to copy the recordings meant that a Slave copier was needed. The only problem with a Slave was that if the master copier broke down, there would be no way to copy, so in the event, it was agreed that an additional master copier was required. – so a further £1500 was now needed! More work for the Fundraising Team! Of course, these major items of expenditure feature quite heavily in the early minutes, alongside reports of wide ranging fundraising activities. Often, there is a note to the effect that funds were not currently available, so purchases had to be delayed.

As well as the big ticket items, there was an ongoing need for new tapes, wallets, microphones, batteries, and other peripherals. In a detailed inventory report in May 1987, Mike Harrison estimated that if all the equipment had to be replaced it would cost well over £13,000. What is more, merely providing new equipment was not the only necessary expenditure. Servicing costs and insurance both proved to be expensive. When Ed Turnbull was recruited, he went on a training day with the manufacturer of one of the pieces of equipment, and was thereafter able to service it, thus making a significant saving for TTN.

The recording equipment consisted of three Wollensack tape cassette recorders, a small audio mixing desk, microphones and headphones and

various connecting cables, together with a machine called the “growler”. Its purpose was to erase all the returned cassettes by rubbing them across the top plate of the growler. Pete Barrett, one of the engineers, remembers the grower emitting “a bestial growling sound as the electro magnet inside it gave a jolly good thrashing to the iron oxide inside the tape cassette.”

Inevitably, as equipment aged and replacements were needed, this was sometimes prompted by events such as a fire in the duplicating equipment. This resulted in a successful lottery grant application for new duplicators in 1998. Two new Denon twin deck tape testing machines were also bought at that time, and two of the engineers, Pete Barrett and Ed Turnbull designed and built remote controls for them that automated the testing procedure – just one example from many of the “can do” approach of the engineers over the years.

Recording on cassette tapes continued until 2012, when a more reliable digital system came into operation, not without much work and effort from the engineers. In a note to the committee, Sue Turnbull, the Engineers’ representative wrote in May 2000: “I would like to say that the technical support which the TTN now has, in the form of Ed Turnbull, Pete Barrett and Jim Galley, has transformed the engineer’s job. I remember when the setting up of the old recording equipment relied on either a Ph.D in Electronics or a memory that would do justice to Mastermind. The testing of the tapes too took much concentration, and any distraction often meant either starting again “to be sure” or a bad tape being missed.”

Pete Barrett recalls “It turned out that three (and very soon, four) of our engineers had various skills in software and electronics. So we formed a semi-permanent task-force to design, build and maintain a bespoke digital recording studio to produce TTN programmes on memory sticks. And what fun that was! Plans were drawn and re-drawn, software was designed, prototype circuits were built, fingers were burnt with soldering irons and across Tynedale, studies and garages were converted into laboratories and assembly workshops. Our technical team spoke in the strange tongues of subroutines and silicon chips, but what embraced us all at TTN was a dedication to keep the show on the road.”

Listeners were then supplied with new digital players and received their recordings on memory sticks. The significance of this change is well reflected in a Chairman’s report in 2013 from the then outgoing chairman, Ann Ruddick; “In the mid sixties, I don’t think any of us imagined that those flimsy little reels of tape, encased in their thin plastic casing, would be the mainstay of audio

material for nearly fifty years. Not only did the cassette stand the test of time but many people still treat it as a trusted friend and hesitate to embrace the advanced technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To send out regular recordings on cassette, we learnt to accept that the quality would be variable and the tapes would have a limited life. Then a few years ago, the digital revolution gathered momentum and we were able to produce high quality recordings. Listeners everywhere found they had a wide choice of media – MP3 discs, USB sticks, Daisy discs, SD cards and of course, the computer. Possibilities were endless but here in Tynedale, simplicity of use by the listeners was our main priority”.

“We were fortunate to have amongst our volunteers three very keen technical experts who set about developing the necessary hardware and software to meet our needs. Jim Galley, Ed Turnbull and Peter Barrett have been thanked on a number of occasions for their work in this area, but on behalf of listeners I would like to say a very big thank you to them for enabling us to enjoy listening to the digitally produced Courant each week.”

There is no doubt that the team of Jim, Pete and Ed worked as a very effective team, with their skills and experience complementing each other. Equipment was made to their designs in England and China and could truly be described as bespoke. Their new digital recording system has undergone many refinements and developments in the years since 2012. Paul Reed joined the engineers' team. For some years, things were bowling along smoothly, then along came the pandemic. This was something that presented a new challenge to the engineering team. They had to find a way to get recordings out to listeners in a way that was safe.

In his Annual Report, the then Chairman, Tony Newton wrote: “I won't dwell on Covid other than to say that we spent a long time before lockdown trying to work out how we might keep going. When we realised we couldn't, it seemed a matter of just waiting for lockdown to end. But when it became evident that this 'new normal' was going to carry on for quite a bit longer, it was a matter of working out how we could come up with an alternative way of working. I'd like to note particular thanks to Ed because he's made it



possible to get our recordings on to sticks and off to listeners. I'm pleased to report that our Tynedale Talking magazine also went out with last week's Courant recording, so we really are back to firing on all cylinders as far as our listeners are concerned. And I'd also like to record thanks to all readers and team leaders who stepped up to embrace our attempts at Zoom recordings and make them a success."

Inevitably, Zoom recordings were a new challenge for volunteers and team leaders, as well as for the engineers. Some volunteers did not feel able to cope with the technology, so the old teams couldn't function in quite the same way. However, reading remotely over Zoom has attracted some new readers, and it was a great achievement by the engineers that recordings were being sent out again by June 2020 after a hiatus of less than three months – and were very gratefully received by the listeners. The only other evidence to be found when no recording was sent out was when there had been a fire at the West End Methodist Church in 2002, although the Soroptomists remember an odd occasion when recording did not take place because of snow.

## **The Engineers**

Every team of readers needed to be supported at recording sessions with an engineer. Tracing through the minutes, there are various mentions of team engineers, including the following, but this may not be a definitive list. Brian Hunt, Denis Watson, and later Pete Barrett, Mike Harrison, Ken Sim, Mark Benjamin, David Horne, Ed Turnbull, Paul Reed, Jim Galley, John Rooke, Ron Lane, Ron Stroughair, David Clegg, Ben Boorman, Anne Snowdon, Jane Potts, Brian Hunt, Sue Turnbull, W B Gibbard, John Hemstock, Fiona Atkinson, Cathy Potter and Julie Renwick.

For each recording session, the engineer would set up all the equipment, and once the team members had assembled, there would be a check on voice levels, and a reminder of how all the technology worked. This was often necessary, as with eight teams, it could be many weeks since a reader had been involved, and it was easy to get rusty about the system.

The engineer would also have to play an important part if the reader happened to get their tongue in a twist, as there would have to be a pause and a restart from a suitable point, with the engineer cutting out the "mistake" and restarting the recording. This was also sometimes necessary, particularly in the winter, if one of the readers was attacked by a coughing fit. At the end of the recording session, the engineer would also have to check to make sure that

copying on to all the USB sticks had been safely accomplished. This is now a very different task from the earlier time consuming wiping of cassettes and copying until late at night.

The engineers are recorded as having fairly regular get-togethers, no doubt partly social, but also to compare notes about glitches with the equipment, or considering suggestions for how things might be done differently. No doubt all of them would agree that as the recording processes have changed, so too has their role, hopefully for the better!

## Local Hero

Although Ed Turnbull might blush, he has been described in the Hexham Courant as a Local Hero, in their Bouquet of the week page during lockdown. The article comments:

“The dedicated work of a charity volunteer has been praised after successfully restarting its services during the coronavirus lockdown. The Hexham Courant launched its bouquet of the week appeal in April to recognise the work of special citizens across the Tyne Valley. This week’s recipient is Ed Turnbull, recording and sound engineer at the Tynedale Talking Newspaper, who has played a key role in the resumption of the service”.

“Because of lockdown, recording wasn’t a possibility as volunteers were unable to meet at its weekly base at Hexham’s West End Methodist Church to do the recording. But, with thanks to digital assistance from the Hexham Courant, the Tynedale Talking Newspaper has returned to the airwaves. And chairman of the talking newspaper Tony Newton said Ed, who has worked on the newspaper for more than 25 years, is the “lynchpin” in the whole process”.

“The reason Ed deserves this bouquet is not just what he’s done to make sure we got back in the saddle again after our Covid-enforced shutdown, but the work that he’s put into the Tynedale Talking Newspaper over many years, working tirelessly on the many pieces of the jigsaw needed to ensure that our audio version of the Courant reaches our listeners, Tony said. Look at any given



piece of that jigsaw and you’ll see Ed’s name on it. “As chairman, I’ve worked with Ed for a few years now and he’s just one of those people who is a delight to work with because he’s a problem solver and he gets stuff done.”

Team leader and reader, Anne Galbraith, also heaped praise on Ed's work. "We record by Zoom and when we say goodbye at the end of the recording, Ed's work is just beginning," she said. "Not only is he a great hero of getting it up and running again, but he is a great hero because he has been doing this for many years. His focus on the listeners is tremendous. He is always thinking; what is the best way to do things for our listeners?"

## **Funding TTN**

Once TTN was launched in 1982, it was funded originally with grants and fundraising by the committee. However, there was a need to maintain the funds to pay for servicing and repair of equipment, provision of cassettes, and other general running costs. Over the years local organisations have been generous in their support, and volunteers and committee members have also contributed to the fundraising efforts, including sponsorship from runners in the Great North Run and a sponsored walk by a partially sighted listener with guide dog.



*An autumn fair was an early fundraising initiative, with very tasty looking teas being served by the Tangent team.*

At a later stage, when expensive equipment was needed, concerts were organised by Pete Barrett with two local choirs, the Prudhoe Gleemen and the Hexham Orpheus Choir performing in Trinity Methodist Church. There have been examples of funds being raised by holding a Gardeners' Question Time, a photographic exhibition, an Antiques Road Show, and for a number of years, there was a summer garden party hosted by Mr and Mrs Fewster. In 1985, the then Chair, Stephen Hart Jackson wrote about the success of this event "despite the Clerk of the Weather who, before the end of the evening, called time. I am told on reliable authority that next year the necessary steps are being taken to placate the Clerk of the Weather."

Lottery grants have been sought when expensive replacement or new equipment has been needed, and local trusts have been generous too. A big step was starting to hold an annual Flag Day, probably from about 1988. This was later timed to coincide with the Hexham Book Fair when there was likely to be a bigger footfall in the town. Joan Galley played a leading role in getting volunteers to act as collectors, and in a number of years this would have been a significant task, as there were two collecting days, one of them usually in the cold, wet and wind in November.

Ann Ruddick recalled taking part as a collector at Flag Days, along with her dog. The presence of the dog was a sure fire way to attract people to contribute, and also to open up conversations, especially where it was someone whose relative benefitted from receiving the talking newspaper.

Davina Dwyer took over organising the flag day for several years. She says: "My involvement with the TTN began when Janet Davies asked me to be a collector in 2007. Janet and I knew each other from singing with The Hexham Orpheus Choir and we had both served on the Choir Committee. By the following year I was the official fundraiser.

"We tried every year to get a licence to collect from the Council for the nearest Saturday to the first bank holiday in May. This meant that the date was inevitably near the beginning of May, although one or two of the days fell at the end of April. If we were lucky there would be a Farmers Market or the Abbey would have a Plant Sale. Anything that brought people into the town centre was a bonus.

"We seem to have been blessed with fine weather on all but one of the days I organised, although, if not raining, it could sometimes be quite chilly! I always tried to meet the first collectors at the Queen's Hall by 8.30 - 8.45am.

"Once the process had started, the other collectors all knew in advance where they had to be and at what time, so from then on, my job was just to check that everyone had turned up and to provide some cover if they hadn't.

"Occasionally someone might be a few minutes late but I can remember only one person not turning up at all. (She forgot!) John, my husband was always around and happy to stand in at a moment's notice. On one occasion, the one year we had very unpleasant weather, he covered so that the official collector could go somewhere and warm up with a coffee. He would sit in the car, listening to the radio, until he was needed. On two occasions during the 12

years I was organising things, he used the radio so much it drained the car battery and we had to get the AA out!

"Because I tended to be dashing around at hourly intervals, I tended to grab something to eat whenever it was possible, so it was a day for comfort food, sausage rolls, pasties, cakes and the like.

"People were generally very good natured and supportive. The count was usually very swiftly concluded and would take a group of us about an hour. It was always good to beat the previous year's record, or the all time record! When we'd finished I would take the cash to Down to Earth, who very kindly would convert it into a cheque for me to pay into the TTN account at the bank. This was obviously much easier for us and Down to Earth got all the change, which they needed. I have very happy memories of all the days, of people's generosity and good will. Long may it continue."

Davina and others involved in collecting on the day record how this event was such a useful way to broaden the news of the service, as well as sometimes hearing touching stories of people whose family had used it. Tony Newton recalls that on one occasion "a family stuffed more than £50 into one of our tins, saying how much their recently deceased visually impaired daughter had valued the service: hugs and tears all round, with our collector - who was a new volunteer reader - realising just how important was her couple of hours reading once every two months. Another collector was given money by two social carers, who explained just how highly anticipated was the arrival of our weekly memory sticks to their care home."

As TTN gained formal charity status in 1994, the proceedings of its committee and officers became regulated under the rules of the Charities Act. Not least, this requires the organisation to have proper financial procedures, undertaken by the Treasurer. As part of that role, the Treasurer also applies to local grant making charities when specific items of expenditure are needed, for example for replacement equipment. The range of trusts and organisations which have supported TTN is very wide, and the organisation also benefits from donations sent in from time to time from grateful listeners.

At the start of TTN, almost everyone involved seemed to play a part in the fundraising. Eventually, it was decided that a fundraising committee was needed, and early members included Robert Robertson, Margot Robson, Lesley Crowther, Stephen Hart Jackson, Henry Buckley Jane Hart, Sylvia Heady, Mrs Beaumont, Dot Humble and Joan Galley.

By the early 1990's, the balance sheet at the end of each year was looking quite healthy, with donations from local councils and various groups and organisations, and the flag day playing a major part in funding TTN. Sufficient equipment had been purchased to allow the Secretary's Report in 1993 to record that "the weekly recording could be carried out without the late night or early morning sessions which used to be a feature" From this time, there is less emphasis in the minutes on cake stalls and concerts as fundraising events.

From 2000, the main effort for fundraising has focused on flag days, which not only raise funds but also bring the talking newspaper to wider attention. Analysis each year shows which collecting spots work best. The success of these days relies on each of the reading teams providing volunteers as collectors and the public being prepared to put cash in the collecting tins. It will be interesting to see how this will change as many people don't carry much cash nowadays. New technology will no doubt have to come to the aid of TTN, in the form of contactless payment machines, an idea likely to be brought into use.

TTN received a couple of unexpected boosts to its funds in more recent times, when the closure of other talking newspapers took place, and their trustees sent their remaining funds to help fill the coffers at TTN. These funds were very gratefully received, but it was acknowledged by the committee of TTN that the demise of other local talking newspapers showed how fragile these organisations could be.

### **Theme Tune and Logo**

At one of its very first meetings of TTN, in May 1982, Bob Robertson reported to the committee that he had bought some headed notepaper bearing the TTN logo which he had designed, so the logo was off to an early flying start. The question whether to have a theme tune for recordings rumbled on for much longer.

There are a few desultory references to use of music in early minutes, and it is clear from the recall of several long standing readers that engineers would often play music of their own choice at the beginning of the recording. In 1993, the minutes record that the amount of music being played would be reviewed. At Ann Ruddick's suggestion, the then Chair John Rooke agreed to investigate having a "theme tune". By 1995, there is a note that "Waters of Tyne" was being used, but the tape had gone missing. By 1996, Jim Galley was to investigate the possibility of a piano medley of local tunes by a local pianist. The matter was to be checked with the Performing Rights Society to clear up the question of copyright. By the end of that year, it was agreed that music at

the start of the tape should be only 10 to 20 seconds long, and a source of music out of copyright had been identified.

Subsequent minutes are silent on the question of the use of music. Suffice to say, the recordings of the newspaper no longer feature music, although there are occasional pieces on the Tynedale Talking Magazine and on recordings of the Northumbrian.

## **The Website**

In January 2013, the minutes record that Ed Turnbull had created an “interim” website, which would then be further discussed by Pete Barrett, Jim Galley and Ed. They set out their aspirations for the site – it should be visually impaired friendly, be low cost, have its own domain name which would be picked up effectively by search engines, and allow users to send messages. Pete Barrett agreed to develop the site. By April 2013, the website was up and running and Pete ran it.

When the time came for a refresh of the site, Alan Ross took over as webmaster. He described his approach to the new site, indicating that he was keen to make the website a front door to information about TTN for new and current listeners, volunteers and anyone interested in it. He also wanted to give it a more modern look while maintaining accessibility for people with impaired vision.

He created an initial design, with text boxes that changed the background colour to high contrast yellow with black text when the mouse is hovered over it. Sections were created for News - with a live link to TTN's Facebook; background about the Volunteer teams and restricted access to technical and other information for volunteer engineers and readers. There is also a section under 'About TTN' for archive and historical information about TTN, including Pete Barrett's excellent light-hearted account of TTN's history in both text and audio formats.

Alan got some excellent feedback and suggestions from Anne Ruddick, Neville Parkin and others. In particular he hadn't thought about screen readers, used by many people with impaired vision to navigate websites and how they describe elements on the web page. Once these were incorporated the new website was launched at the end of April 2021, using [www.TTNweb.uk](http://www.TTNweb.uk), the new address.

## **A New Era**

When national lockdowns for Covid first came into force, it was envisaged that this situation would not last long. However, when it became clear that we would have to learn to live with the coronavirus, the Chair, Tony Newton, and Ed Turnbull, the engineer, began to look at alternative ways in which the teams could still record the Courant. It was seen as more important than ever to get the paper out to our listeners, many of whom were vulnerable and subject to more severe lockdown arrangements.

And thus Zoom recordings were born. The result was that many things had to be done in totally different ways. Not least, many volunteer readers did not feel confident to record in this way, and thus the teams could not function in the way they had always worked. It was decided that there should be team leaders who would pull together a recording team from a list of those willing to use the new system. The Courant cooperated by sending the newspaper each week in PDF form. This was not without its problems, not least that it depended on one employee remembering to send the PDFs – which on one occasion just didn't happen. Anne Galbraith was team leader that week. She contacted her team members and was able to assemble a team of readers who all had a copy of the newspaper or could obtain one – so all was well in the end.

Later, when lockdown rules were relaxed, the system of using PDFs was discontinued, as most readers had ready access to a copy of the newspaper. Zoom recordings also allowed the TTN Magazine and the Northumbrian to continue to be recorded.

This new process did place additional work on the engineers and there had to be elaborate systems in place to ensure that wallets and sticks were adequately quarantined. A large purchase of additional wallets and sticks was made. Some new equipment was also required. Fortunately, the funds of the organisation could meet these unexpected expenses, and as ever, TTN was well supported by trusts and other donors.

As the restrictions around lockdowns and mask wearing were relaxed, thoughts turned to getting back to recording in sessions where the former teams could be back together round a table, meeting colleagues face to face again. The search for a new recording venue resulted in an arrangement with the Hexham Torch Centre, and in April 2022, training on new processes began.

May's opening recording sessions at the TORCH Centre were beset with technical difficulties which were exasperating the engineers. Tinkering was not



providing the results they were satisfied with. A total redesign with the latest recording hardware was considered the best and only option. Falling back immediately on the tried and tested Zoom processes, there was most importantly no break in service to TTN listeners.

Again TTN team leaders and readers responded immediately and flexibly to modifications to the recording rota. The

current redesign and reconstruction of equipment are being undertaken by the tireless team of Ed Turnbull, Paul Reed and Peter Barrett. After much testing of new options, and only after positive trial reviews from a group of listeners, TTN can look forward to a full resumption of normal team recording in September 2022, back in the TORCH Centre. Meanwhile, TTN has continued to be delivered to its listeners with high quality recordings and without a break in its weekly

service to listeners.



After being in continuous production for 40 years, a decision was taken by the Committee to commission this history of the organisation, and to hold a celebration event in Bardon Mill Village Hall, inviting as many former volunteers as could be contacted, and our listeners too. No such occasion could take place without a cake and candles – made in the shape of the letters:

*A fortieth anniversary celebration*

# TTN

## **Some Key Players at TTN**

Initially TTN was formed as a sub-group of Tynedale Committee for the Disabled. This constitutional arrangement continued until 1993, when under the new Charities Act, it became advisable for TTN to seek to become a charity in its own right. Key to the success of the organisation has been the enthusiastic commitment of volunteers, whether as readers, engineers, technical support, fundraisers, and administrators, too many to mention individually. What is also evident is the willingness of committed people to take on demanding roles, whether that be Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Fundraiser, Registrar, or Engineer. Set out below is a record of some of these important contributors over the 40 year history of TTN.

### **Chairmen of TTN**

June Horne 1982 – 1984 (Assisted by Sheila Harding)

Stephen Hart Jackson 1984 – 1986

Henry Buckley 1986 – 1988

Bunty Holliday 1988 – 1989

John Rooke 1989 - 1996

Jim Galley 1996 – 2003

Anne Ruddick 2003 – 2013

Alex Evison 2013 – 2016

Tony Newton 2016 – 2021

Dave Clegg 2021 -

### **Secretary**

Ken Sim 1982

Sheila Harding 1982 – 1984

Stephen Hart Jackson 1984 – 1988

Jane Hart 1988 – 1994

Susanne Ellingham 1994 – 2004

Janet Davies 2004 – 2011

Jean Wilks 2011- 2020

Lorraine Oliver 2020 -

### **Treasurers**

Peter Neilson 1982 – 1993

Kenneth Taylor 1993 – 2002

Sue Turnbull 2002 – 2007

Ken Webster 2007 – 2012

Jim Galley 2012 - 2018

Mike Broadhurst 2018 -

## **Fundraisers**

Bob Robertson 1982 – (Assisted by Margot Robson)

1987 Fundraising subcommittee formed: Henry Buckley, Margot Robson, Bob Robertson, Jane Hart and Sylvia Heady.

Dot Humble, Fundraising Secretary 1991 – 1996

John Rooke 1996 – 1999

Joan Galley 1999 – 2007

Davina Dwyer 2007 - 2021

## **Technical Advisers and Support**

Mark Benjamin 1982 – 1984

David Horne 1983 – 1985

Technical Committee formed 1985: Mike Harrison, David Horne, Brian Hunt, Dennis Watson. David Horne was replaced by Peter Barrett in 1986. Ed Turnbull joined in 1997.

Paul Reed, engineer's representative 2013 – 2022

Sue Turnbull, engineers' representative ending 2012

## **Registrars**

Lesley Crowther 1983

Anne Jobson 1983 – 2001

Mary Morrison 2001 – 2004

Ed Turnbull 2004 -

## **Listener Representatives**

Anne Ruddick 1989 – 2018

Janet Robinson 2000 - 2017

Roger Milton 2016 – 2017

Isobel Johnson 2017 – 2021

Neville Parkin 2018 –

Alison Blackburn 2022 -

**If you would like to know more about Tynedale Talking Newspaper, open its website: [www.ttnweb.uk](http://www.ttnweb.uk)**