HMRC Accessibility Empathy Hub

Changing People’s Perceptions

# WHAT IS BRAILLE?

Braille is a universally accepted system of writing used by and for blind persons. It consists of a code of 63 characters, or “cells,” that are made up of six raised dot patterns, arranged in a rectangle containing two columns of three dots each. The pattern arrangement corresponds to letters of the written alphabet.

# PIONEERS OF BRAILLE

Louis Braille, who was blinded at the age of three, invented the system in 1824 while a student at the Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles (National Institute for Blind Children), Paris.

Before he developed his revolutionary code, various systems mostly using raised print letters were used to help blind people read. For example, Valentin Haüy’s tactile books featured embossed versions of the Roman alphabet. Louis Braille’s code was designed for tactile firecognition – not visual recognition – and finally enabled blind and visually impaired people to also write independently.

When Louis Braille entered the school for the blind in Paris, in 1819, he learned of a system of tangible writing using dots, invented several years earlier by Charles Barbier.

Barbierfi, an officer in Napoleon’s army, had invented a writing system of raised dots to help armies communicate in the dark. War left many soldiers with visual impairments caused by injury and disease. Barbier realised that his “night writing” could help them, and many others with similar impairments, to read. In 1821 he presented it at the National Institute for Blind Youths in Paris. One audience member was a young Louis, who would become the father of tactile type as we know it today.

Louis Braille adapted Barbier’s designs so that each symbol could be fifirecognised with one fingertip. In 1829 he published the first braille alphabet. It was popular with students at the National Institute but was finot officially adopted there until 1854.

Today braille is instantly recognisable as the writing system used by the blind and visually impaired.

# BRAILLE WORKSHEET

Can you write your name in Braille or even try writing a short sentence?

Use the Braille alphabet on the left to help you try it on the boxes below.