

Introduction

what is autism?

'I am different, not less'

Dr Temple Grandin, a US academic who is autistic

In an age where the idea that there is an epidemic of autism is often heard, it can be hard to grasp just how far awareness and understanding has come in a short space of time.

When a group of parents came together in Reading in 1990 to form the organisation that became today's Autism Berkshire, many people knew little about the condition or their views were shaped by the Oscar-winning film *Rain Man*, starring Dustin Hoffman, depicting an autistic savant, which was released in 1988.

A century earlier, many people with what would now be recognised as autism spectrum conditions were fated to spend most of their lives shut away within institutions like the Berkshire County Asylum, which later became Fair Mile Hospital, near Wallingford, held alongside patients with serious psychiatric illnesses. Other people with autism were seen as eccentrics, or shunned for exhibiting 'abnormal' behaviour.

The Victorian pioneer in the study of disabilities, Dr John Langdon Down, had described savant syndrome and other 'developmental' disorders that would today often be recognised as autism in his 1887 book *On Some of the Mental Affections of Childhood and Youth*, but it would take until the 1940s for the first description of "early infantile autism" to appear in a study by Dr Leo Kanner, based on work he had done in the US. He believed the condition to be very rare.

His contemporary, Dr Hans Asperger, described an autistic spectrum of children who struggled with non-verbal communication, had limited understanding

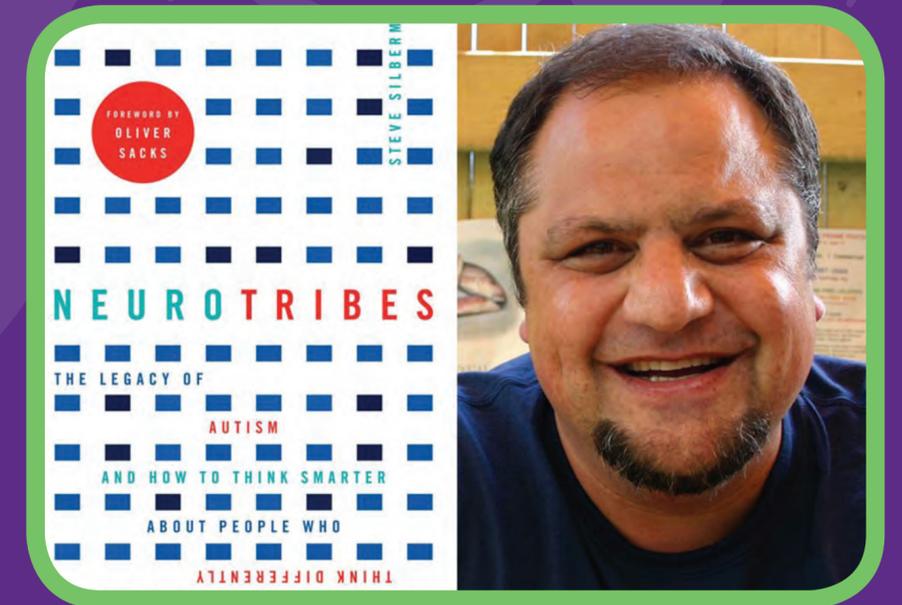
of others' feelings, and were clumsy. His work was neglected for many years, in part as a result of being published in 1944 during the period of Nazi rule in his Austrian homeland.

In the following decades, much medical opinion put autistic conditions in children down to poor parenting, before a US Navy psychologist, Dr Bernard Rimland, whose son had autism, proved there were genetic causes.

Briton Dr Lorna Wing, also a parent of an autistic daughter, built on Asperger's theory that autism is a spectrum disorder and demonstrated that it was much more common than Kanner had believed.

It is now generally accepted that:

- Autism is a lifelong condition affecting social communication.
- It can involve a strong need for routine and predictability.
- Most autistic people have sensory processing difficulties, for example coping with flickering fluorescent lighting, strong smells or background noise.
- Understanding facial expressions and body language is more difficult, and eye contact can be painful to endure.
- It is now generally accepted autism often also has benefits, including accuracy, honesty and dedication.
- As a spectrum disorder, autism's impact ranges from moderate to severe. It affects people with and without learning difficulties. People with autism do not look disabled.
- Autistic social communication is often



misunderstood, and many experience anger from others, with loneliness and anxiety as a result.

As for the epidemic of autism, a series of studies worldwide indicate that incidence has barely increased, if at all, in recent years and that the recent surge in diagnosed cases worldwide can be attributed to improved understanding of autism spectrum conditions and medical knowledge, along with changes in diagnostic methods.

In this exhibition, *Autism in Berkshire: Past and Present*, we examine Victorian attitudes to people seen as 'different' and learn how the education system dealt with children who were regarded as abnormal or difficult, compared with today. You will also hear from some of the professionals working in the field and find out about the experiences of a few of the diverse range of people living with autism in Berkshire and the services and support that are now available to them.

Further reading:

Neurotribes, by Steve Silberman, which traces the development of autism understanding.

A science and technology journalist, he began to research the subject after being told in 2001 that there was an epidemic of autism in California's Silicon Valley, the home of many of the world's leading technology companies.

The book won the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction in 2015.