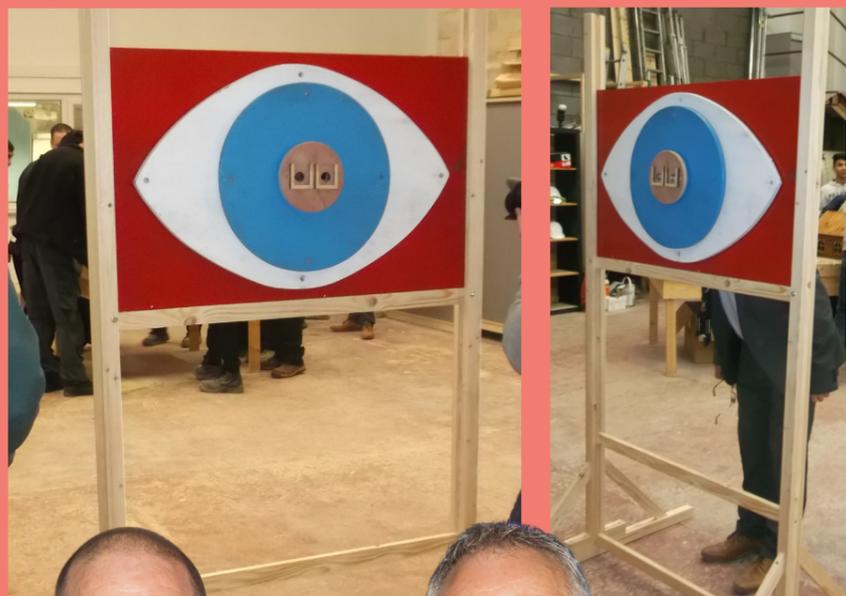


The Power of Making

Chris Davis, Design and Technology Leader at Oastlers School



Oastlers School was established in Bradford in 2013, and is a wonderful place. Named after Richard Oastler (1789–1861), a local man known as the 'Factory King', he was instrumental in the creation of the Factories Act of 1847, which restricted the working hours of young people in textile mills to ten hours per day. The name chosen for the new school was a deliberate statement, as we would be tasked with working with some of the city's most vulnerable young people, whom we refer to as 'learners'.

This clearly defines their role in school and their purpose for being there. Defined as a special school by the DfE, all Oastlers learners have an EHCP with behaviour as their primary need.

From the outset, our philosophy has been to offer our learners the same experiences as their friends or siblings in mainstream settings. We achieve this in a number of ways. We deliver a full curriculum with the same exams you would expect to see in any secondary school at the end of Year 11. Class sizes are limited, and each class has two members of staff, a teacher and an Inclusion Leader.

Initially, the role of the Inclusion Leader was to manage classroom behaviour while the teacher taught, but over the years those lines have blurred. Our Inclusion Leaders have become more than behaviour managers and are central to our success and to the positive atmosphere around school. In addition, our specialist behaviour team is highly skilled at diffusing conflicts and maintaining a sense of calm in the building, along with a welcome sense of fun.



Joining the Team and Building a Curriculum

My role was clearly defined at interview. I had taken along the usual examples you can carry under your arm, a folio of design work collected from over 20 years of teaching experience, and one practical piece nearing completion. That is what we need, hammering and banging. If you can get our learners interested in that, all the paperwork will follow. We had a deal!

The D&T curriculum I created at Oastlers focuses on a bedrock of practical skills. When the school opened its doors in 2013, we only had a Year 7 cohort. The plan was to take a new year group each September, so we filled gradually and calmly. Those Year 7 learners had not experienced any D&T before, so the subject was entirely new to them with no bad experiences to revisit.

Therapeutic Power of Making

Inevitably, there were ad hoc emergency admissions of older learners during that first year. These learners had experienced mainstream secondary schools, with D&T often being a subject they struggled to access, largely due to the information contained within their EHCPs. "What, I can use all the machines?" "Myself?" is an actual quote from a learner from those early days. The Year 7 curriculum was relatively straightforward. We taught them about designing, and how there really was more than one solution to a problem, and how best to identify the most effective one. Once we knew that, we would make and test it. It was those older learners, however, who showed me, probably for the

first time in 20 years, that D&T can be a healing, therapeutic process. Perhaps I had simply been too busy to notice.

Spark of Motivation

Whilst the Year 7 cohort began their D&T journey, the older Year 9 and 10 learners who joined us simply made stuff, some of them for the first time in their school career. Let that sink in for a second. The first thing we made with them was a guitar. The bodies were created on our laser cutter, laminating hollow sections of laser ply between whole sheets to create a sound box. The learners designed their own shape and positioned the sound hole. The neck was a shaped section of softwood with flat toothpicks glued on as frets, correctly positioned. Zither pins allowed the instrument to be tuned properly, although I am not saying how we kept the strings in tension. That is a secret.

Those learners started coming in at break and after lunch. "Aren't you playing football today?" "No, I need to file my frets." Something magical was happening. Young people who had arrived with quite a negative view of the subject needed to file their frets. It mattered to them.

Early GCSE Trailblazers

In the months that followed, those older learners decided they would like to attempt the GCSE. In the first couple of years, the results were understandably modest. The learners had no D&T history and were still encountering new concepts as they completed their coursework. Although the results were modest, they were trailblazers. As the year groups moved through the school and completed

their five year D&T journey, examination outcomes naturally improved. Although we now achieve Level 4s, 5s and 6s in D&T, and are delighted by them, our learners have such complex needs that every result is celebrated as if gold has been struck, because in many cases that is exactly what has happened.

Interbuild Competition

A group of Year 10 learners entered the Interbuild competition run by Bradford Council in 2018 and won. They created a device that simulated colour deficiency for those with perfect colour vision, and cured colour deficiency for those, like me, who struggle. It also simulated conditions such as cataracts and glaucoma, allowing us to better understand the experiences of those affected.

Bradford Manufacturing Week Competitions

Add to this our wins in the Bradford Manufacturing Week competitions in 2021 and 2022. In 2021 the learners designed an automated sanitiser station using parts of a drum kit. In 2022 they developed a device that flattened, sorted and counted empty crisp packets before they were turned into thermal blankets for the homeless. Although I applied for early retirement in August 2024, I am still at Oastlers on a part time basis. Oastlers is a difficult place to leave!

Award Winner

Chris won the AssetTagz Excellence Award for Outstanding Secondary Subject Leadership at the D&T Association Excellence Awards 2025.