

WOMEN WHO MADE BRITAIN

ELIZABETH FRY

Elizabeth Fry was born Elizabeth Gurney in 1780 in Norwich. The family were Quakers and fairly well off financially. She had 10 siblings and was known as Betsy in the family. As a child she was shy but could be obstinate. She was not confident and thought she was the least pretty of her sisters. She wanted to be liked and was afraid of doing the wrong thing.

Elizabeth was also afraid of the dark, afraid of guns and afraid of swimming. She disliked learning but was very imaginative. She loved Nature and collected unusual objects eg. she had a special cabinet in which she kept her collection of shells.

She adored her Mother and worried about losing her. This became a reality when her Mother died when Elizabeth was 12 years old.

In her teenage years she rebelled against the restrictions of her Quaker upbringing

(although she never lost her faith).She began to wear brightly coloured clothes ,recording that she attended the Goat Lane Meeting House wearing purple boots with scarlet laces when she was 18 years old. Generally in her youth she struggled to conform to the demands of the Quaker way of life, loving to sing, dance, go to the theatre etc. In 1797 in her diary she talks about helping others and overcoming her faults, aware that "my inclinations lead me to be an idle, flirting, worldly, feeling girl."

At some stage she started to tow the line, moderating her dress and her behaviour gradually.

It is thought that one motivation was largely the distancing from her family who disapproved. She was close to her family and did not like upsetting them. Today we would probably say that she was a teenage rebel just trying to find her own identity.

In 1800 Elizabeth married Joseph Fry and they had 11 children. On her marriage she left Norwich to live in East Ham, London(known as Plashet at the time).By 1812 she had given birth to eight of her children(deserving a medal for that alone in my book!).

Three years later having been alerted by a family friend to the appalling conditions in Newgate, she visited the Prison herself for the first time and what she witnessed there was so shocking (dirty, unsanitary and overcrowded)it inspired what became her life's work and marked her out as an influential woman in British History.

At one point she spent a night in the prison, experiencing at first hand the degradation endured by the occupants.

She became determined to take action to improve the conditions of the women and children there.She identified six areas with this in mind;

- 1* To segregate the sexes
- 2* Female wardens only for female prisoners
- 3* Provision of education
- 4* Employment
- 5* Religious Instruction
- 6* Hygiene

Elizabeth realised that she would need help to achieve these reforms and in 1817,with twelve other women,she founded the Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners in Newgate.Regional prisons were inspired by this to initiate reform and the Association was

later renamed the British Ladies' Society for promoting the Reformation of Prisons.

They aimed to provide clothing, instruction in self care and preparation for full employment. Elizabeth believed strongly that self respect was the key to facilitate reform but she did not preach, criticise or patronise the women. Her methods were practical and informative. She was a canny woman who knew her limitations and enlisted the help of the better educated prisoners to spread the word.

The group lobbied the authorities including Parliament. Elizabeth had "friends in high places" and used these connections to further her cause. Queen Victoria met her several times and donated to her charitable causes. Her brother-in-law was elected as MP for Weymouth in 1818 and promoted her reforming suggestions. She was invited to speak in the

House of Commons. Not all were sympathetic, in particular her objection to capital punishment (flogging and hanging being very frequent at the time, sometimes for not that serious an offence). Lord Sidmouth, the then Home Secretary, rejected Elizabeth's views of the prison system. He thought she was a dangerous woman.

Sir Robert Peel succeeded Lord Sidmouth and he was more open to reform, introducing a series of reforms including in 1823 The Penal Reform Act. The Act included regular visits by prison chaplains, jailers were paid instead of relying on fees from prisoners and only women wardens were put in charge of women prisoners.

The Act did not apply to debtors prisons and local town jails. So Elizabeth and her brother, Joseph, set off on a tour of the country in order to gather evidence needed to extend the legislation.

Elizabeth did not confine herself to helping prisoners. She worked to improve the convict ship system and for 25 years she visited every ship before it sailed, offering what comfort she could. She tried to overturn capital sentences for several women but with little success. She extended her caring to half-way houses and established a night shelter in London in 1820. She campaigned for the homeless and for changes in mental asylums. She started a training school for nurses in Guy's Hospital. Florence Nightingale was a distant relative and was influenced by Fry's work. Some of Fry's nurses went out to the Crimea with FN.

Elizabeth Fry died in 1845. Although Quakers do not have a funeral service, over a thousand people stood in silence as she was buried at the Society of Friends' graveyard at Barking.

The Lord Mayor of London wished to commemorate her work. An institute for ex-prisoners was founded - the Elizabeth Fry Refuge. In 1925 it was reconstituted as a charitable organisation and became a hostel for women on probation, officially approved by the Home Office in 1949. It moved to Reading in 1962 where the work continues today. The charity owns and manages the hostel and receives a grant from the Ministry of Justice for providing the Approved Premises and fundraises to provide vital additional services to the women they support. It is regulated by the Charity Commission and governed by the applicable laws of England and Wales.

From 2002 until 2016, Elizabeth's image was on our £5 bank note.

WHY SHOULD ELIZABETH FRY BE INCLUDED IN "A HISTORY OF BRITAIN IN 21 WOMEN"?

She was fortunate to have been born into a wealthy family but recognised the divide between the "haves" and "have nots". She wanted to narrow the gap through education, information and practical help. She aimed to make a real difference to the lives of women and children, to give them the tools to help themselves and gain self respect. To show

them that they were worthy and could achieve more.

She did not choose a particularly sympathetic group, not just women but criminals and lunatics! She may have been the first person in history to believe in the concept of rehabilitation as opposed to punishment/deterrence. An argument that is still relevant today.

She recognised her weaknesses and played to her strengths, not deterred by the prevailing attitude to the female sex at the time. Women were not supposed to be outspoken, political etc and had very few rights outside the roles of daughter, wife and mother.

She was determined, not afraid to take risks; a persuasive charismatic woman who never wavered in her belief that all human life deserved to be treated humanely. She seems to me to be quite the opposite of the "patronising Lady Bountiful dispensing alms to the poor". She wanted to inspire a belief in them that they could improve their lot in life by giving them the practical skills to do it. The more I learned about her life the more my admiration for Elizabeth Fry grew. Girl Power at its best!

Please vote for this remarkable, compassionate, courageous woman whose legacy continues to this day.

Brenda Baldry