Founder's Day Address 2017 Draft 2

On the morning of 15th January, 1971, 2000 people gathered in Westminster Abbey to give thanks for the foundation of the Camden School for Girls one hundred years earlier. Eight hundred of those were Camden girls, easily identifiable by their green school uniform. Other guests included staff, parents, ex-students and 80 girls from the North London. The headteacher at the time, Carol Handley, noted that very few schools had the opportunity to hold such a service in the Abbey, and she thanked the Chair of Governors, the Venerable Canon Edward Carpenter, for securing such a remarkable venue.

No-one who attended the centenary service would have guessed that, ten years later, by 1981, the school would have faced the real danger that it might cease to exist altogether, and that it would need to respond to that danger by changing, completely and utterly.

In my address today I will explain how Miss Buss overcame great obstacles to the establishment of her school in the 1870s. I will compare this with its radical alteration and transformation one hundred years later in the 1970s, and describe the unique character that enabled it to survive.

The centenary service in Westminster Abbey was eagerly anticipated. Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Gloucester, the school's Patron, was present, fifteen years after she declared this hall open in 1956. The address, given by the Reverend Joseph McCulloch, recognized advances in women's education:

'There is now no field of knowledge or branch of learning closed to woman…. This is an

astonishing achievement, considering how meagre female education was at the time when Frances Mary Buss .. founded her school for girls, and offered them the freedom of the kingdom of the mind.'

Frances Mary Buss opened the doors of Camden School for Girls for the first time on 16th January 1871, in a narrow Victorian terraced house at 46 Camden Street. Forty girls arrived in a range of winter clothing, with muffled necks and long, thick, ankle length petticoats and dresses. The house was heated by open fires, there was little sanitation and the classrooms were tiny.

Miss Buss set out to create a school for the daughters of lower middle class parents – clerks, shopworkers, civil servants, clergymen. The fees were four guineas a year, far lower than the fees for the North London. This was a radical vision at the time. Most people, even some women, did not support education for girls, those who did felt it should be only for the daughters of wealthier families, and that it should consist of painting crockery, making confectionery and weaving hair. We must therefore admire the parents of these 40 girls, and see them as pioneers just as much as Miss Buss, since they sacrificed both money and help in the home so that their daughters could go to school. And perhaps most worthy of our respect were the girls themselves, barely literate, with little or no understanding of the voyage on which they were about to embark.

1871 was a desperately hard year for Miss Buss. The fees did not cover her costs. Her own family did not support her in the foundation of a new school for less advantaged girls. Miss Buss went to everyone she knew to try to raise money, but even close friends and supporters advised her to close the school by the end of the year. Miss Buss, always self-reliant, redoubled her efforts, and, at last,

on 15th November 1871 she received a letter from the Princess of Wales, later Queen Alexandra. She gave strong support for the education of girls of the lower middle class. The Princess of Wales placed the schools under her patronage, and sent 50 guineas. Once people heard that royal support had been given, more money followed and finally, in 1875, Queen Victoria herself recognised Miss Buss's achievement and agreed that they could become Public Endowed Schools.

This school faced other difficulties in its first decade. The girls were often very ill, and, in 1874 the first headmistress, Miss Elford, notes that two girls died in one term, one from scarlet fever and one from consumption. The students found standards of schoolwork, discipline, punctuality and attendance very challenging. Nevertheless, the school expanded from 40 girls to 211, and then 331, and by 1878 Camden was in far bigger premises in Prince of Wales Road. Finally, in 1879, the Prince and Princess of Wales attended prize giving for both Miss Buss's schools here in the Sandall Road site and this royal endorsement gave Miss Buss's vision complete legitimacy.

In 1879, the Camden was regarded as the Lower School. More able girls might graduate from here to the academically demanding North London Collegiate. Yet the school was still a pioneer, educating girls for work as typists, clerks, teachers and nurses instead of limiting their aspirations. Miss Buss herself would have recognised that her students were growing up in a remarkable intellectual climate in the 1870s. Charles Darwin had published 'On the Origin of the Species' in 1859, John Stuart Mill published 'The Subjection of Women' in 1869, arguing for women's rights. Karl Marx had published the first volume of Das Kapital in the same year, making a case for the rights of working people, and these texts were surely known to Miss Buss. I believe she hoped that one day her own girls would be able to read and discuss these works, fully entering that 'kingdom of the mind' of which we heard earlier. But in the 1870s, she had to be content with providing a

fairly basic school education at the Camden.

By contrast, in 1971, the Camden girls who strode into Westminster Abbey had the highest of expectations. They attended a selective grammar school which was popular and successful. The battle to get university education for women had been won long ago. They looked forward to interesting and well-paid careers, and their school had its own sixth form. They also had a year of celebrations to anticipate, which included a debate about life in 1971 attended by Jeremy Thorpe, leader of the Liberal Party at that time, Katherine Whitehorn, a respected journalist, and Julia Cleverdon, a Camden old girl now internationally recognised for her charity work. In addition, sixth form students put on a production of Ionesco's avant-garde political allegory 'Rhinoceros'. The school's musicians held a concert with a specially commissioned work by Patric Standford setting the poetry of John Clare, the Northamptonshire peasant poet, to music. A special exhibition of students' art was on display for two weeks. An oration was given by Mrs N.K.Treneman, the Principal of St Anne's College, Oxford; the only female member of The Royal Commission on the Constitution, considering the establishment of Welsh and Scottish devolved administrations. This remarkable list of cultural activities, political speakers and celebrations of educational values tells us that the school, in 1971, was vibrant, self-confident and outward-looking. The school community had no idea what uncertainty lay ahead.

In 1973, a terrible disaster struck the school. On June 13th, lessons took place as usual in this hall. A teacher remarked afterwards that she heard a sound like gravel falling during her drama class. She noticed a crack in the ceiling, and asked a girl to go upstairs and look at the hall from an upstairs window. The girl thought she saw a bulge, but couldn’t be sure. There was a meeting with parents in the evening. All went well. This hall, built in 1956, was the pride and joy of the school. But at

10.22 that evening, there was a rumble like the sound of a train approaching, and then an ear-splitting crash. The entire roof of the hall had plummeted to the floor. Photos show only the walls intact, with nothing but sky above where we are seated today. Twisted metal rods point upwards, and the floor is covered in a sea of rubble. Luckily, absolutely no-one was hurt. During the days after the collapse the school felt profound shock, but had to start raising money to part-fund the repairs and also to build 'temporary' accommodation to use instead of the hall. That temporary structure is the building we now call the studio, still in place nearly 44 years after the collapse of the roof. The disaster became well-known to architects and engineers, and led to a complete re-design of roofs, which are now exceptionally safe.

The early 1970s were years of turbulence in education. Young people thought that traditional schooling gave them too little voice, and was often harsh and repressive. It didn't help them understand important personal issues. On May 17th, 1972, hundreds of students played truant from school to attend a demonstration in London. A few girls from this school went along. The banners read 'We want schools, not prisons'. Demands included an end to caning and all forms of corporal punishment, the abolition of school uniform, more school councils and more sex education. In this school, there was already an active school council, and no corporal punishment, but the list of uniform requirements was extremely lengthy, including rules about skirts, underwear, hats and shoes. Students thought that the uniform suppressed individuality and tied students and teachers up in a long list of regulation. So, in the early 1970s, consultations were held with parents and students, and agreement was finally reached that the old, well-known, green school uniform, that had been introduced in the early thirties, was to be abolished completely. And so the school took a step towards its transformation into the school we know today.

As the centenary celebrations of 1971 drew to a close, discussions were already taking place about making fundamental changes to this school, changes which might lead to its closure. Should the school should remain a grammar or become a comprehensive? Should it amalgamate with another school? Should it become mixed? Just when the school's survival for 100 years seemed to make it secure and permanent, discussions took place over several years about changes which would have seen an end to this school as we know it today.

During 1972 to 1975, Mrs Handley, the headteacher, chaired debates about the future of the Camden, a grammar school that was much loved by generations of girls. A group of parents called Save Camden School was established, with the aim of keeping Camden selective. But nationally, and especially in London, many people viewed selection as being problematic and unfair. The school was part of the Inner London Education Authority's education system, and their remit was to secure excellent education for all students. So another group of Camden parents formed a different group called The Middle Way. Their aim was to make Camden into a small, pioneering comprehensive. Many shared a strong desire to remain on this historic site, to retain Voluntary Aided status and to continue as a small girls' school. Others favoured joining up with North London Collegiate, selling the site and moving out of London.

In 1972, staff voted to change the Camden into a small all-girls comprehensive. Students also voted to become a comprehensive, but they wanted the school to become mixed. These votes could not decide the matter, however, as the ILEA was determined to amalgamate this school with another, proposing joining with Haverstock on their site, with Parliament Hill, with William Ellis, or with both Parliament Hill and William Ellis, or with St Marylebone. In these proposals, Camden School

for Girls would no longer exist. Debate, worry and difference of opinion continued throughout the early 70s. In 1975 the decision was finally made that the Camden would be allowed to retain its own unique character and identity and become a small, all-girls' comprehensive, taking in its first non-selected intake in 1976 so that it would be fully comprehensive in all years by 1981.

So we see that the 1870s and the 1970s were decades in which this school transformed itself. A school of forty girls shivering in an ill-equipped Victorian terrace in January 1871 became an institution of several hundred girls, proud to attend a prize-giving with the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1879. The grammar school of 1971, its girls in their green school uniform making often lengthy journeys to school, changed into a comprehensive by 1981, with students who reflected the diversity of the local area and who wore their own clothes. This school, with its unique identity, its resilience and its founder's legacy could not be destroyed by those who opposed education for girls in the nineteenth century. And the school community held onto its history as a medium sized girls' school for the local community in the 1970s by adapting supremely well to the comprehensive ethos. And so we have remained true to our Founder's vision, and our students, who come from Camden, but also from all corners of the world, have indeed entered into that kingdom of the mind and made it very much their own.