

Founder's Day Address 2018

Today we celebrate the one hundred and forty seventh anniversary of the foundation of this school by Frances Mary Buss. We are also delighted that our building project is nearly complete, and that our new entrance stretches out to welcome our school community. We have been in this part of our buildings for just over sixty years, and the beautiful extensions could not have been completed without exceptionally hard work from parents, students, friends, staff and alumni of the school. We owe special thanks to CASCA for their magnificent 60 4 60 campaign. Miss Buss, like us, relied on generosity from donors and charitable institutions to establish this historic site for her first school, and our situation is no different; we are grateful to the local authority as well as our remarkable community for making its continued improvement possible.

2018 has already been eventful. Students here marked the passing of the 1918 Representation of the People Act by writing messages of thanks to the Suffragettes. One student wrote: 'Thank you for fighting for our rights! Without your bravery, we may still not have had the vote today!' And another – 'This is inspirational! Though it was quite late, we women are grateful!' Another pointed out 'Unfortunately, some cultures still do not practise equality for women and girls.'

Today we send a message of thanks to Miss Buss for all she achieved, and we acknowledge the part she played in gaining women's right to vote. No vote means no voice, no influence, and my theme today concerns our Founder's influence on us, and our own ability to influence events now and in the future.

Strictly speaking, Miss Buss was not a suffragette. That word was invented after her death, by a Daily Mail journalist in 1903, as a term of ridicule, to be pronounced Suffrage GET. The movement embraced the word and made it their own. But Miss Buss was certainly a suffragist. She joined the Kensington Society, a group of women who met to discuss issues of importance to women and girls. In 1865 they formed a committee to draft a petition asking for women to be given the vote. Miss Buss signed the petition, which was taken to the House of Commons in June 1866 by Elizabeth Garrett and Emily Davies, and presented to parliament by the Liberal philosopher and MP John Stuart Mill. The story goes that, when Elizabeth and Emily arrived at Westminster Hall they did not wish to be seen with the large, bulky scroll, and so they hid it behind a stall belonging to a woman selling apples, where John Stuart Mill later found it. The wording on the petition was as follows:

Your Petitioners humbly pray your honorable House to consider (the expediency of) providing for the representation of all Householders, without distinction of sex, who possess such property or rental qualification as your honorable House may determine.

One thousand five hundred women's signatures followed.

The petition was not successful, though the Reform Act of 1867 did give the right to vote to more men. More petitions followed, until the brilliant success of the Suffragettes in 1918.

What, and who, influenced Frances Mary Buss? How did she reach the conclusion that it was right to sign this document in 1866, when she was thirty nine? I believe she may have been influenced by the Chartists, who were active in her teenage years and early twenties and who campaigned for voting reform. They organized a huge demonstration in 1848.

On 10th April of that year, when Miss Buss was just 21 years old, a mass meeting took place on Kennington Common in south London. Many thousands of people, both men and women, gathered

to sign a petition demanding male suffrage – the right to vote for the people in government. They had travelled from across the country, and gathered millions of signatures in support of their campaign. A Chartist MP, Fergus O'Connor, had even been elected to parliament to speak up in their cause.

Such a large gathering of campaigners terrified cabinet ministers, who did not want the huge crowd near parliament. The bridges over the river Thames were blocked, and only a small group was allowed to present the petition and eventually the people on Kennington Common dispersed in the pouring rain. They were not to be successful for a number of years.

Though the principal Chartist demand was for all men to get the vote, there were many vocal women Chartists who argued that they, too, should have the right. One such woman was Susannah Inge, who wrote this in 1842:

'Woman..is excluded from everything connected with public life.. her province being only to make a pudding, prepare a dinner, clean the house, tend to her children. Shall we sit still and tamely submit to a slavery against which our cheeks glow with shame and our hearts burn with indignation? No! perish the thought...we must assist those who place women on an equality with themselves in gaining their rights.'

We don't know whether Frances Mary Buss signed the 1848 Chartist petition in her twenty-first year, or read the words of Susannah Inge, but she must have been aware of the 1848 Chartist rally, and it seems likely that her thinking about politics and justice was influenced by this powerful political event in London, and that she knew of the women activists who were part of the Chartist movement and who were arguing for votes for women.

I am sometimes asked about words we say or sing during this commemoration of our foundation as a school. What influenced its creation? Much of it concerns Miss Buss, but when we sing 'Jerusalem' we make a special link to the campaign for women's suffrage.

This is because, on 13th March 1918, a month after the vote had been won, thousands of supporters of women's suffrage went to the Royal Albert Hall for a celebratory concert and rally. Everyone joined in the singing of 'Jerusalem'.

Suffragettes had held many meetings at the Albert Hall during the campaign for the vote, and now it was full of a sense of triumph. Hubert Parry, a staunch supporter of women's suffrage, had recently set Blake's Jerusalem to music, and his great friend Millicent Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, asked for it to be sung that day, and for it to become the Women Voters' hymn. Parry readily agreed, saying: 'I wish indeed it might become the Women Voters' hymn...people seem to enjoy singing it. And having the vote ought to diffuse a good deal of joy too. So they would combine happily.' Ever since, it has been described as the Suffragettes' song.

As we sing 'Jerusalem' today we should think of it as a reminder that we should not be complacent, we should still be influenced by Blake's voice, telling us not to cease from 'mental fight' even today. It is an appropriate song and poem to be associated with the campaign for the vote. Sometimes seen as a expression of unthinking patriotism, it is, in fact, anything but that. William Blake, the poet who wrote 'Jerusalem', was a radical and a revolutionary, and highly critical of organised religion. His striking reference to 'dark Satanic mills' reflects his concern with the impact of industry on ordinary people, and when he wrote those words in 1804 he was also vowing to continue his own quest for a peaceful and more compassionate England. Seen like this, the poem certainly seems to reflect the energy of the Suffragettes.

Our Year 10 students may also reflect on a recent visit from teachers working in modern day Jerusalem, a divided city in which life can be a struggle, and feel that Blake's words speak of the difficulties experienced there as well as in the fight for true democracy.

Frances Mary Buss looked out at the world and found ways to change it; she looked at her own school and built it up both physically and educationally, drawing on goodwill from her friends and supporters.

In our own school community this year we, too, have been influenced by world events and movements as we look beyond the school gate, and have transformed our buildings and the education we offer.

What, or who influences our students today? Their response to International Women's Day tells us that they think a great deal about the world outside Camden. Asked what they would like to see changing for women and girls around the world, they mentioned education for all, equal pay and good sanitation. Our Head Girl Team chose to raise money for the Beauty Bank as their charity, whose aim is to provide toiletries for people suffering from hygiene poverty, whether because they are homeless, or simply too poor to afford items such as toothpaste and tampons. But Camden students aren't always serious, of course – one of the most popular series of books Camden girls are reading at the moment is called 'Geek Girl' by Holly Smale. The narrator, Harriet, describes herself as a geek, but she's also a model. She sends selfies to her friend when she visits Paris for a fashion shoot, but she also lists a series of facts that she has researched – there are one thousand seven hundred and eighty four bakeries in Paris, and more dogs than children, over 300 000, in fact. When things go wrong, it's usually because Harriet has been spending time uncovering interesting information instead of concentrating on her modelling career. Geek girl can be light and funny, but also serious and fascinated by the world around her.

In our daily work as a school, we are still influenced by Miss Buss's dedication to education, and by her contribution to the fight for the vote. If Miss Buss were here today, she would no doubt be bewildered by the absence of a school uniform, the sight and sound of students chatting as they walk between lessons and by events such as the election of our head student teams. But in fact that example of democracy in our school is the direct descendant of her own belief in votes for all, and if she met our students she would find that they are people who will use their votes very wisely. She would find that her own spirit still inspires us, but that her original influence has grown and developed over the intervening years as educational thinking has changed. In our commemoration today, we feel her influence, and alongside it the views, ideas, energy and enthusiasm of our current students, able to laugh and socialise, but also profoundly fascinated by the world. Miss Buss would have been proud of you all. Thank you.