

This very special Founders Day, marking the 150th anniversary of the school, I would like to talk about two key themes that are central to the history of the school and still resonate in our lives and our work here today. Firstly, the brave and resilient character of Frances Mary Buss in introducing a formal education system for girls when so many were against her. The second theme is that of the similarities of some of the challenges to the joys that presented themselves in the history of the school, and that are still so relevant for us today.

I will begin by talking about the formative years and how they give an insight into how Frances Mary Buss found her motivation and strength to go on such a journey. Born almost 200 years ago, in 1827, FMB was the eldest child but only daughter in a family of boys. The status of women at the time had sunk low and it was universally accepted that women were significantly inferior to men both physically and intellectually. Early on, she is known to have remarked: *“Why are girls so little thought of? I would have them trained to match their brothers”*. And she set out to do just that.

The educational landscape at the time was such that schools for girls were not commonplace and women were denied the right to education. Wealthy families employed governesses to teach social accomplishments such as drawing, needlework and playing the piano and families who were not very well off were able to send girls to charity schools to learn basic literacy though not many took this up. There were few opportunities for girls from the middle classes - these girls were dependent on the resources of their families.

Frances Mary Buss took on the educational establishment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century battling not only the system but also mind-sets and a great deal of prejudice, in order to begin such a radical reform that would put the education of girls and women on the map.

Frances Mary Buss came from a progressive home – creative, thoughtful and productive, a home filled with books, art and music. She was an interested child and frequently raided her father’s library. Her father, Robert William Buss, was an artist, and one of the earliest illustrators of the work of Charles Dickens.

Frances Mary Buss trained as a teacher and educator in three different ways. From a young age, she worked at a small school her mother had set up in their family home in Camden Street. Moreover, she attended evening classes at Queen’s College in Harley Street (which is still there today) gaining certificates in French, German and Geography. Thirdly, her father and brothers taught her Science and Art, Latin and Arithmetic, giving her confidence and reinforced her belief in the right of women to education.

Once her mother retired from running her small day school in the family’s home, Frances Mary Buss took this over, rapidly reorganising it and expanding it and hence founding her first school, North London Collegiate School – at the age of 23. The school was a great success and 21 years later, in the same family home on 46 Camden Street, Frances Mary Buss opened her second school, the Camden School, our school, enrolling 40 girls. This school was intended for families of more modest incomes and therefore expanding the educational opportunity to more girls and young women of the day.

In the early years of the school the school faced significant challenges centring around the finances and the continuous battle to ensure the school site was fit for purpose. Financially, the school was in a precarious position from the very beginning. Frances Mary Buss was a savvy leader and recognised that the finances available to her would be insufficient to cover the school costs especially as she was trying to heavily subsidise the fees, to create a more affordable education. She needed patronage and support from someone with status. At one of her lowest points towards the end of 1871, when the school was in dire straits, Frances Mary Buss received a letter from the Princess of Wales, soon to become Queen Alexandra who understood what Frances Mary Buss was trying to do and was sympathetic with the mission of expanding women's education. She offered her patronage and financial support and this became a catalyst for other sources of support which began to come in. Most notably the Worshipful Company of Brewers, which contributed money toward building costs and that of Clothworkers, which donated money for the building of the Great Hall, which stood on this very site until it was destroyed in the bombings of WWII.

Frances Mary Buss was aware of the importance of using her network and once commented that she could archive more for the school in an evening of meeting those who could potentially help than sitting for hours at her desk.

Despite the financial challenges, the school was immeasurably popular from its inception and grew from 40 to close to 400 pupils in the first 5 years, with long waiting list.

During the course of its 150 year history, the school had three homes. Conditions in the Camden Street house, where the school began, were not fit for purpose and the school very quickly outgrew its site. The school's second home became a much larger building on the Prince of Wales Road and in 1878, the school relocated much to the relief of its staff and pupils. There was more space, better furniture and equipment and a much-improved environment. There was gym, an art studio, a library and a science lecture room. The school only found its current home in Sandall Road in 1956 after disrupted years of evacuation out of London during the Second World War. Sandall Road, this very site had been badly damaged during the war. Prior to WWII, it was the home of North London Collegiate, which relocated to Edgware. Following much rebuilding and the addition of a new wing, the school moved here and in 1956 was opened with great ceremony by Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Gloucester. Our school building tells a fascinating history, from the Victorian structure with its beautiful baroque style staircase, the stone dressed Edwardian Wing by the Founder's library to the modernist revolutionary mid-century architecture of the later additions. Along with the stained-glass windows, the marble plaques, the photos and most notably, Ms Buss's memorial outside my office, on a daily basis, we see important evidence that remind us of the rich history of the school.

Finally, I will talk about two important aspects of the legacy of Frances Mary Buss that resonate so strongly today.

First it is her committed to social mobility, to creating a ladder for social change. She was determined to have a smaller fee to attend the Camden School making the education more widely accessible. She was committed to facilitating progression and she fought hard to be able to fund scholarships to support students who wished to continue their studies to a higher level. One such scholarship was the Frances Mary Buss Testimonial Scholarship, intended for parents who could not meet the cost of

further education. In 1878, no fewer than 8 students progressed to further education, made possible via the scholarships. Frances Mary Buss also influenced university admissions - in 1878, the University of London had finally agreed to grant women its degrees on exactly the same terms as men. She prepared women for university exams and the Camden School students went on to study at notable institutions such as Girton College, Cambridge, Art schools and Royal College of Music.

This commitment to equality of opportunity remains at the centre of the school ethos today.

Moreover, the impact of Frances Mary Buss' character cannot be overstated in setting the tone and culture of the school: Her resourcefulness, relentless determination, commitment to order and efficiency are a great influence on our school culture today. She nurtured talent in others and created a compassionate and pioneering set of school leaders who continued her plight for an ambitious education for girls and young women. Miss Elford, the first Headteacher of Camden School for Girls, suggested to teachers *"that they should try and influence the children by sympathising with them and trying to help them through their difficulties, showing them how to help themselves and encouraging them."* One of the first pupils of the Camden School remembered the school with gratitude: *"The Camden lived as a school, full of spirit of work and efficiency. The order and the tone were good, and we were well cared for. I am proud to witness what it did for us in the very beginning of the reform movement"*.

The same school spirit is still alive with us today. Understanding and compassion are central to our school culture, ensuring all members of the school community feel valued and included.

To conclude, Frances Mary Buss was a true pioneer, brave, practical and ever determined in the face of adversity. She died on Christmas Eve in 1894, after 50 years of continuous hard work and relentless determination. She was buried in the little churchyard of Theydon Bois in Essex on New Year's Eve.

Frances Mary Buss is known to have said: *'I want, in future, Foundation Day to be always a day of importance in the year'*.

And so it is. 150 years on, we honour that wish.