

As we gather to celebrate Founder's Day, we reflect on the life and work of Frances Mary Buss, an extraordinary woman whose remarkable revolution reshaped the landscape of education and opportunity for women and girls. The theme of this Founder's Day speech, 154 years on but still just as relevant in today's world, is doing what's right in amongst the noise and opposition from others.

Despite her ground breaking achievements, Frances Mary Buss never sought the spotlight. Indeed, Frances Mary Buss was known to be an introvert. She was quiet. She did not enjoy public speaking; she was not a fan of large gatherings and she was not one for loud declarations. But her determination was unmatched. The clarity of her vision was unshakable. Her work ethic unparalleled. Her resolve unwavering even during the darkest moments of the school's history. She was an individual who was not going to be steered off course. And yet she had to navigate a highly volatile world. A male dominated world of loud voices and strong ideas about women and their place in society. A hostile world of bullies, worse still a world of bigoted ideas and prejudice at every turn. Frances Mary Buss didn't fight with noise and she refused to replicate the arrogance and forceful tactics of those around her. Her fight was one of resolve and unapologetic persistence. In a world that often seems dominated by bluster, this year's theme is a celebration of how Frances Mary Buss cut through the noise and remained steadfast in her commitment to her vision.

To truly understand the magnitude of the change Frances Mary Buss brought about, we must first consider the world she was born into. In 1823, when Frances was born, women were widely regarded as intellectually inferior to men, and their rights were severely restricted. Women could not vote and they could not own nor inherit property. They were discouraged from working and if they did, their wages were a small fraction to that of men. Women were prepared for marriage and domestic duties. They had no voice, no standing and no influence in society. It is no surprise, then, that educational opportunities for women and girls were few and far between.

Frances Mary Buss grew up in a society that reinforced these inequalities, shaped by deeply entrenched beliefs and low expectations for women. And yet, with unwavering resolve, she rejected this reality. She refused to accept that this would be her future, or the future of other women in the years to come. She set about creating a monumental revolution, establishing her first school, North London Collegiate, at the age of just 23. As Headmistress, she ran the school on the principles of order and aspiration, creating an educational model that would be used as a blueprint by many others Headteachers in years to come. She was a true pioneer from the beginning.

But Frances Mary Buss' vision did not stop there. Having already set up one school, she embarked on an even more ambitious project: to create a school for girls that would be accessible to families of limited means—not just the wealthy or elite, but ordinary families. This vision became a reality with the opening of Camden School for Girls in 1871, 154 years ago. Camden School for Girls was a groundbreaking institution that marked the birth of a true educational revolution.

And so the journey began. And not only was Frances Mary Buss determined to widen access to education, she also sought to offer girls an education equal to that of their brothers. Yet this idea was met with fierce resistance. Many believed girls were better suited to more gentle pursuits, such as embroidery, leisurely walks and lessons in etiquette. The very notion of educating young women in the same way as young men was seen as a threat across various segments of society.

Church leaders argued that educating women went against biblical teachings, while influential scientists warned that it could harm women's fertility. Medical professionals claimed it could damage their health, and even other Headmistresses at the time believed that a curriculum focused on gentle walks and artistic endeavours was all girls could handle. Parents, too, voiced their opposition—outraged at the suggestion of teaching math and science to girls, writing angry letters claiming that this sort of learning would damage a girl's brain. Such outrageous claims would be enough to put anyone off.

But Frances Mary Buss was undeterred. Quietly, and without engaging in unnecessary debate, she stuck to her plans and introduced a full range of subjects at Camden School for Girls from the very start. Latin and Classics would be taught here from the very beginning, mathematics and science were fully embraced and all taught in fully equipped classrooms and laboratories. Gymnastics was taught in a purpose-built gym. The Music and Drawing rooms at the school were well equipped and from the beginning the quality of music and art education at the school was extraordinarily high. She was committed to the highest standard of education for young women and even imported specially made desks from Switzerland which were meant to be excellent as desks for learning.

Despite facing relentless opposition, she refused to lower her standards for young women. Girls would have an education to match their brothers, and so they did with remarkable results. In 1878, for the first time in history, young women from Camden School for Girls sat entrance examinations for Girton College at the University of Cambridge, and in 1878, eight female students advanced to study at the university. Eminent female pioneers were to follow. Camden School for Girls began to produce trailblazers such as Edith Humphrey, born in 1875 – first woman to obtain a doctorate in chemistry. Lillian Lindsey, born in 1871, the first female dentist. Eva Germaine Rimington Taylor, born in 1879, an eminent geographer and the first woman obtain a chair of geography, a prestigious academic position at Birkbeck university. For the first time in history women were on the map. They were leading, challenging and fighting the good fight for equality and for a fairer society.

The lack of public support for Frances Mary Buss' mission was none as apparent as in the early days of the school's life. These early years of Camden School for Girls were marked by significant struggles, with the first year in particular proving the most difficult. It was that very first year which brought the darkest days and were a true test of Frances Mary Buss' character and resolve. Camden School for Girls was extraordinary from the beginning. The low fees families had to pay made it highly popular but also impossible to run. At the time, the government did not fund schools and fees were the only way to cover costs. Unfortunately, only a year after opening, the school began to run out of money. Many people began to offer their advice to Frances Mary Buss, whether she liked it or not. Many told her the school needs to close. Many told her running such a school was impossible. Schools cannot run on such small fees. Schools should not be available to ordinary people. Even her supporters began to express doubts. You can see why these were dark days indeed, when even family and friends are losing faith.

But Frances Mary Buss did not have doubts. Yet again, she cut through the noise and with remarkable force of spirit, set about raising funds. She wrote countless letters, attend drinks receptions and campaigned tirelessly, seeking additional support for Camden School for Girls. The process was slow with little result. Instead, she

encountered apathy, opposition and sometimes even open hostility. To add to her frustration, she learned a neighbouring boy's school managed to raise ten times the amount she needed and did this overnight.

It is good fortune indeed that Frances Mary Buss refused to give up as on a cold December morning, help arrived from the most unexpected source: a letter from Princess Alexandra, the Princess of Wales, pledging her full support for the school and recognizing the urgent need to improve education for girls. This royal endorsement led to a wave of donations, and with additional support from the Brewers' Company and the Clothworkers' Company, Frances Mary Buss was able to secure the school's finances. Thanks to her quiet perseverance, patience, and unwavering resolve, Camden School for Girls survived—and 154 years later, we continue to benefit from the strength of her character at the peak of her struggle.

Another key aspect of Frances Mary Buss's approach to challenging the establishment was her ability to unite people. She had always promoted collaboration over rivalry. She was a strong advocate for other women and created communities which were to be a source of support and encouragement. Firstly, she trained a number of her former students to become highly skilled teachers who would then come back and teach at Camden School for Girls. (a tradition we still maintain to this day).

Secondly, she appreciated the great struggles and often isolation which other female Headteachers experienced. Just over 150 years ago, Frances Mary Buss founded the Association of Headmistresses with the vision of bringing women leaders together to address the challenges facing girls' schools. She chaired the group and provided an important forum for the Headmistresses to get together and share ideas and promote the agenda for girls education. In 1874, she hosted the first conference for Headmistresses at her home, Myra Lodge in Primrose Hill, attended by nine prominent Headmistresses, including those from Grey Coat Hospital School, Chelsea High School, and Ladies' Cheltenham College. What started as a small association grew into what is now called ASCL (the Association of School and College Leaders). This is one of the most influential educational organisations today, with over 25,000 members, all of whom are school leaders who continue to gather annually and further promote the education agenda and the challenges faced by school leaders today. This all began with Frances Mary Buss. She knew how to gather her people. She knew how to find strength in numbers. She started a movement and one which continues to be the voice of school leaders to this day.

You all play an integral part in the ongoing story of this school's foundation. Something which began with Frances Mary Buss continues with you today. As you sit in this hall—the beating heart of Camden School for Girls—you are surrounded by the legacy of exceptional hard work, inner strength and eternal optimism. This history is your history. This revolution is your revolution, as we continue to challenge prejudice, strive for excellence, and push the boundaries of what is possible. Each of you carries within you the resolve and determination that Frances Mary Buss embodied. You are extraordinary in your own right, and you will, in your own unique way, cut through the noise and leave an enduring mark on the world.



*Frances Mary Buss (1827–1894), Founder, The Camden School*

*The artist, Ida Southwell Perrin, in the earlier period of her professional career, was a portrait painter and it was at that time (1896) that this picture was painted – two years after the death of Frances Mary Buss.*



*Sandall Road, 1910*



*Queen Alexandra (1 December 1844 – 20 November 1925)*

*Portrait by W. & D. Downey, 1902*



*Edith Humphrey*  
*First woman to obtain*  
*a doctorate in chemistry*



*Eva Germaine Rimington Taylor*  
*First woman to hold an academic chair of*  
*geography*



*Lilian Lindsey*  
*First female dentist*



*The first meeting of the Association of*  
*Headmistresses (now ASCL) took place in*  
*Myra Lodge, the home of Frances Mary*  
*Buss, in Primrose Hill on December 22,*  
*1874*