Founder’s Day 2026 – Headteacher’s Address

Frances Mary Buss was born in 1823 into a world that had already decided what women could and could not be. Life for women in the nineteenth century was not simply different from our own; it was a turning point. In earlier centuries it was usual for women to play an active role in the family business. As the Industrial Revolution reshaped Britain, men increasingly left home for factories and offices, and women were pushed ever more firmly into the domestic sphere. Opportunities narrowed. Education for girls was limited, often informal, and rarely rigorous. Universities were closed to women. The professions were barred. Ambition, for a woman, was considered improper.

Frances Mary Buss looked at this reality and refused to accept it. From a young age, she was dissatisfied with the role of women in society. She saw not weakness, but wasted potential; not inability, but injustice. At a time when women were expected to remain silent and compliant, she chose to speak. At a time when they were expected to conform, she chose to challenge. She believed, quite simply and quite radically, that girls deserved a first-class education — an education equal in seriousness, depth and ambition to that offered to boys.

And so she said no. No to the constraints of her age. No to the assumption that girls should settle for less. No to the idea that ambition was unbecoming. One hundred and fifty-five years ago, when Camden School for Girls first opened its doors, it stood as a bold act of defiance and hope.

Today, as we gather for Founder's Day, our theme is that same courageous refusal — the power of standing up against convention, and the transformative power of saying no.

So what, then, did education for women in the 1800s truly look like? For most girls, it did not exist at all. In 1840, around 60% of women in Britain were illiterate - the majority of girls were not taught to read nor write. Schooling was neither universal nor expected. Learning, if it came, was often down to chance — a privilege of wealth rather than a right.

In more affluent households, a governess might be employed: a young woman living within the family home, teaching children of varying ages together. The curriculum was narrow and basic. A little painting, some music, perhaps a modern foreign language. Considerable attention was given to the art of polite conversation and what were considered lady-like manners - being agreeable, likeable and compliant was the order of the day.

Exercise consisted of a gentle “turn”, effectively a very short walk, about a drawing room — or, if the weather and circumstances allowed, a supervised stroll in the garden. Anything too vigorous was discouraged. It was widely believed that physical exertion might endanger a young woman’s health and even her fertility. Similarly, some experts argued that too much intellectual strain, too much thinking, could be equally harmful. Education was not designed to stretch the mind, but to polish the surface — to produce refinement, accomplishment and, ultimately, a suitable marriage.

Frances Mary Buss rejected that vision entirely. She said no to the ornamental. She knew young women were capable of far more. From the very beginning, Camden School for Girls offered a robust and ambitious curriculum: English Literature, Mathematics, Science, Latin, History, Geography — subjects serious in content and demanding in expectation, not so very different from those studied here today. She insisted, too, on physical education. Strength and health of women and girls mattered. Despite the restrictive clothing of the time and the outrageous claims by so called experts, sport and exercise formed part of school life for students at Camden School for Girls from the very beginning and where we have the art studio today was a fully equipped school gymnasium. It was said that one of Frances Mary Buss' students, Sophie Bryant who later became a mathematician and educator, was one of the very first women to own and ride a bike.

Frances Mary Buss' attitude to what women were capable of was radical. Many claimed it was dangerous. Some newspapers mocked Frances Mary Buss; others warned that such education would make girls unfit for their supposedly "proper" role. The establishment felt threatened. She faced ridicule and resistance from those determined to preserve the lower status of women in society. During some of her darkest days, even her supporters told her that her ambition for women was unrealistic. Yet she remained undeterred — unwavering in her belief that young women should learn as their brothers did, think as deeply, compete as fiercely, and grow as strong both intellectually and physically.

To dare to speak so boldly in the nineteenth century was unusual. To act upon those convictions was extraordinary. But Frances Mary Buss was not interested in what was usual. She was interested in what was right - and she would not settle for less on behalf of her students or her staff.

In the nineteenth century, women simply did not go to university. They were not permitted to. Higher education was considered the preserve of men, and few questioned that assumption. Frances Mary Buss did not agree. She insisted that this could not possibly be right. If girls were given a rigorous education and the proper preparation, she argued, they were entirely capable of succeeding at university and excelling in their studies.

She was right.

Within a decade of Camden School for Girls opening in 1871, Frances Mary Buss was already sending some of the first young women to university in the United Kingdom - to Girton College at the University of Cambridge, to Royal Holloway College, and to the University of St Andrews. She found sources of funding to support the young women financially and she ensured that students who were applying were prepared thoroughly for entrance examinations and interviews.

Their success did not stop there. In 1895, a Camden girl became the first woman in Great Britain to gain a degree in dental surgery from the University of Edinburgh. In 1901, another Camden student earned a PhD from the University of Zurich. Many more went on to study at the Royal Academy of Arts and the Royal College of Music.

These young women were pioneers, studying at university in environments that were almost entirely male. They stepped into lecture halls where few women had ever been before, and where their presence was often questioned.

Frances Mary Buss served them not only by providing a school that prepared them academically, but also by helping to cultivate the strength, confidence and determination they would need to face the challenges and prejudices that undoubtedly awaited them.

Frances Mary Buss had set up Camden School for Girls to provide access to education for girls from a wide range of backgrounds. Not all of her students were destined for university. Equally as thoroughly, she prepared her students for the world of work. She prepared her students for roles that had previously been undertaken almost exclusively by men - positions in the Civil Service, in accountancy firms, and in legal offices. Camden School for Girls quickly developed a reputation not only for academic excellence but also for producing young women who were practical, capable, highly industrious and deeply committed to whatever work they undertook.

And yet the barriers they encountered were significant.

In 1888, Camden students who entered the Civil Service to work at the Inland Revenue were officially described as “lady typewriters”. They worked separately from their male colleagues, often segregated behind a small hatch in the wall, and sometimes placed in basement rooms where other workers were not permitted to enter. Women were paid only a fraction of the wages of men. They had no pension. And many doubted that they could do the work at all.

The attitudes of the time were stark. In the Victorian era, as factories spread across the country, the role of factory inspector became vital to ensuring safe working conditions. Yet in his annual report of 1879, the Chief Inspector of Factories wrote: “I doubt very much whether the office of factory inspector is one suitable for women,” arguing that the duties were incompatible with what he called the “gentle, home-loving character” of women.

Frances Mary Buss said no to such assumptions. She very much proved this Chief Inspector wrong.

She instilled in her students a strength of character that enabled them not only to enter these professions but to challenge the attitudes they encountered there. Camden students went on to work as factory inspectors, typists, telegraphists, clerks and accountants. They did not merely succeed in these roles; they helped to reshape them — campaigning for fairer pay, better working conditions and an end to the segregation that they themselves had experienced.

Frances Mary Buss said no, and she inspired others to do the same. She inspired many other pioneers, trailblazers and activists.

One such activist was the suffragette Gladys Keevil. Gladys was a student at Camden School for Girls from 1895 to 1899, at a time when Britain was still decades away from granting women the right to vote. She felt passionately about equality. After leaving school, she became a regular speaker at public meetings organised by the Women’s

Social and Political Union (WSPU). She spoke frequently at demonstrations and took an active role in campaigning for women's rights.

In February 1908, she was among those arrested for taking part in a demonstration outside the House of Commons, alongside Emmeline Pankhurst and eleven other suffragettes. When arrested, Gladys and the other women were given a choice: they could either pay a fine and promise good behaviour, or spend six weeks in Holloway Prison.

All of them, including Gladys, chose prison.

This was their way of saying no.

Frances Mary Buss died in 1894, decades before women would be granted the right to vote. Yet in her lifetime she achieved an extraordinary amount, at a time when attitudes towards women were not only restrictive but often openly hostile. She formed her convictions early, standing firmly against the expectations of her age, and made it her life's work to take a clear and unrelenting stand.

She said no to a lack of education. No to a lack of opportunity. And no to the preconceived limitations imposed upon women.

In doing so, she accomplished what many believed impossible, often in the face of determined opposition. She helped pave the way for women to receive a rigorous education, to secure pathways into university and employment, and to develop the confidence to stand up for what is right.

It is 2026 and women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions across all sectors of the workplace in the UK. The expectation of women to stay quiet and compliant is stubbornly holding on. But you must remember that your voice matters. Your opinion matters. You must make yourself heard and make yourself seen and if you don't agree with something, you need to make a stand and you need to say no. Act as a revolutionary, face opposition when you believe that something is not right and embrace the part of you which will forever be a Camden student, a strong and determined individual who is not afraid to just … say … no.

Thank you very much.