

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Georgette Vale, Elizabeth Fry

At the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall, Georgette Vale in the character of Elizabeth Fry welcomed her audience to tea. She gave a fascinating account of Elizabeth's life. Georgette explained that Elizabeth Fry was born in Magdalen Street Norwich in 1780. Soon after, the family moved initially to Bramerton and later to Earlham Hall. Elizabeth had what she described as 'a pleasurable childhood' but she was an anxious child as she was afraid of the dark and quite fearful of other people.

Elizabeth Fry was a Quaker and this had a profound affect upon her life and work. She believed that all people were equal before God. Words were 'the coins to exchange thoughts' and so she liked plain speech. She adopted a similar attitude to dress. She wore plain colours but the clothes could be made of fine fabrics.

In 1799 Elizabeth married a fellow Quaker, Joseph Fry whom she regarded as her 'rock.' His uncle was a renowned confectionery maker but Joseph was a tea importer. Quakers were barred from any profession which required the swearing of an oath. They thought that it was unnecessary to attest to honesty and truthfulness because that was how they behaved. Elizabeth's parents came from families involved in banking. Her father was a member of the Gurney's who owned a bank in Norwich and her mother was a Barclay.

Elizabeth's involvement with social conditions began while she was still living at Earlham as she began a school for local children so that they could learn to read the Bible. When married, she went to live at Plashet House, East Ham, on the edge of modern day East London. Here she founded a girls' school. However, Elizabeth Fry is most famous for her work in reform of prisons. In 1813 she made her first visit to Newgate Prison. She firmly believed that inhumanity would not reform criminals and that flogging made people more hardened in their behaviour. While people were kept in filthy, overcrowded conditions they would not see the 'goodness of the Lord.' Pregnancies and family financial problems prevented Elizabeth taking a more active role until 1817 when her work began in earnest. She talked to the women in prison and found clothes for children held with their mothers. She started a school in the gaol. This gradually attracted the women as they realised that some basic literacy, combined with useful work skills, such as knitting and sewing, would improve their future lives. She also pressed for more humane treatment of prisoners being transported to Australia.

In 1818 Elizabeth was invited to appear before a Commons Committee investigating prisons. She was the first woman to speak to a parliamentary committee. They were impressed by her practical recommendations. The Gaol Act which followed in 1823 provided for the payment of prison officers, allowed visits by chaplains, introduced the supervision of women by female warders, and prohibited the use of manacles and chains. Elizabeth was also involved in the abolition of slavery and improvements in the training of nurses. She promoted night shelters for the homeless. Elizabeth was helped in her work by engaging with royalty. In particular, she was supported by the future Queen Victoria. However, this created a dilemma for her as she regarded all people as equals and found it difficult to be deferential. Similarly, she was criticized for courting fame by mixing with royalty and for neglecting her own family.

Ill health took its toll on Elizabeth Fry. She gave birth to 11 children, 10 of whom were born in 16 years. Her youngest son was born on the same day as her first grandson when she was aged 42. She suffered bouts of depression. Her work in prisons affected her emotionally, especially when she witnessed executions. She died in 1845 aged 65.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on 27 September when a short AGM will be followed by Peter Driver giving a talk on the Suffolk connections to the Battle of Waterloo. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy