

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Mark Mitchels – Elizabeth Garrett Anderson – Doctor and Mayor of Aldeburgh

Mark Mitchels enthusiastically told the story of an exceptional woman, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, at the March meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall.

Elizabeth was born in London in 1836. Her father, Newson Garrett, was a successful businessman who in 1840 bought a company that traded in barley and coal at Snape and moved his family back to his native Suffolk and settled in Aldeburgh. The business thrived as it produced malt for brewing which could be sent to London in the fleet of boats that Newson steadily acquired. Later, Newson bought a brick works and eventually built the Snape Maltings, now renowned as a concert venue.

Elizabeth enjoyed a very free childhood. She did not have much formal education until the age of 13 when she was sent to a girls' boarding school at Blackheath. The curriculum was largely concerned with the skills and accomplishments of a young woman in Victorian society. However, she had to speak French all of the time which would ultimately be helpful for her.

Elizabeth Garrett's life was changed when she met Elizabeth Blackwell in 1858 and became convinced that she should become a doctor. In 1849 Elizabeth Blackwell became the world's first qualified doctor in New York. She achieved this in the face of ferocious opposition. In 1858 she came to Britain on a lecture tour. The British press was very hostile. They asked how was it possible for a woman who had her hands constantly in gore to have the feelings of other women. Elizabeth Garrett and her father had a fierce row over the tour. Remarkably, Newson came to accept his daughter's argument and arranged for her to attend a lecture. He also gave his support for her ambitions to become a doctor despite the lurid stories about women in the medical profession. Elizabeth went to the Middlesex Hospital as a nurse and worked in surgery and managed to attend lectures for trainee doctors at the school of medicine. She did very well in the internal exams of the college but, as a woman, she was barred from taking the external exams which would accredit her as qualified doctor. With her father's help, Elizabeth did manage to enter the Society of Apothecaries and in 1865 gained a certificate to become a doctor. She later acquired the title MD through the Sorbonne in Paris. Unfortunately, no one would employ her. Again, her father's support was crucial to her future. He bought her a house in Upper Berkeley Square and she set up her own practice. She also opened the Marylebone Dispensary to provide care for the poorest of women and divided her time between the two institutions.

In 1871 Elizabeth married James Skelton Anderson, the heir to the Cunard shipping line. Her life became busier. In 1872 she opened the New Hospital for Women and Children which specialised in gynaecological care. She was to be its main surgeon for the next 20 years. She gave birth to her first child, Louise in 1873 but tragically lost her second daughter to meningitis in 1875. Her third child, Alan, was born in 1877. During this period she opened a medical school for the training of women doctors and overcame severe opposition to gain entry for her students into the University of London so that their training could be accredited. By 1892 when she retired to Aldeburgh, there were over 100 qualified women doctors in Britain. Her amazing career did not end with retirement. In 1896 she was elected as President of the BMA for the East Anglia region. This would have been unthinkable a few decades before. She became the first woman mayor in Britain in 1908 when she elected as Mayor of Aldeburgh. She was very vocal in support of the Suffragette movement. She died in 1917. Mark Mitchels expressed his disappointment that such a remarkable woman is not commemorated in Suffolk. Her life is an inspiration to all as a model for how to overcome the seemingly impossible.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 25 April at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Jamie Blake will give a talk entitled *Alan Bloom – Founder of Bloom's of Bressingham*. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy