



# Elizabeth Fry

Born 1780 – Died 1845



‘LADIES, I CANNOT POSSIBLY LET YOU VISIT THE prisoners,’ said the governor of Newgate prison. He stared sternly at the two women in front of him and then began to walk towards the door. However, Elizabeth Fry and her sister-in-law, Anna Buxton, did not move.

It was 1813 and Newgate was London’s main prison. Newgate was a tall, grey stone building in the centre of the city. Along the front of the prison cells were iron gratings through which prisoners could talk to their friends. Calling to passers-by for help, prisoners thrust out long wooden spoons to collect the money they so desperately needed to live or to pay their fines. Criminals, people with mental illness and those with unpaid debts were all imprisoned together, often without enough food, clothing or medical care.

Fry stepped forward. ‘We only want to visit the women. Our





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friends have told us that they are suffering in this cold weather and we have brought some warm clothes.”

The governor sighed. These Quakers are such a nuisance, he thought to himself. Why aren't they at home with their families instead of bothering me?

‘It's a waste of time you coming here. Most of the women are drunk out of their minds. They are dirty, dishonest and violent. If you visit them, they will only attack you. I never go to the women's cells. My advice is that you don't go either.’

‘Sir, what you are saying may be true. But God has called us to help those in need. The women in your prison may be criminals but surely you would not stop them from receiving some warm clothes at this time of year?’

Finally the governor realised that he was not going to win the argument. He knew that Mrs Fry was a rich lady who had many important friends. He certainly did not want her to go away and complain about him.

‘Well, if you insist on going into the prison then I beg you to leave your watches and purses. Those women will steal anything you take in with you. You won't even know that they've done it!’

‘Thank you for your warning,’ replied Fry. ‘But we will go as we are.’

Along narrow corridors, the two women were led through the prison by the turnkey who carefully locked and unlocked each door that blocked their way. Finally they stopped in front of a thick wooden door that led into the cells where the women prisoners were kept.





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'I won't be going any further,' the turnkey said as he opened the door. 'I'll wait for you here.' Mrs Fry and Anna Buxton walked into the prison cells and the door slammed shut behind them.

At first the two women stood and looked around, unsure of what to do or say. The noise of the prisoners and the smell of unwashed bodies were overpowering. The whole place stank. There were no toilets for the three hundred women who lived in this part of the prison. Instead they had to use buckets that stood in the corner of one of their rooms.

The women prisoners of Newgate Prison lived, cooked, washed and slept in just four rooms. There were no beds for them to sleep on. Instead they slept on the floor. Those who had a little money could pay for clean straw to lie on. Most of the prisoners had no blankets and simply covered themselves with a few dirty rags. The worse thing about being in prison was that there was nothing to do to fill the long hours, months and years. Many of the women turned to drink to try and forget the horror of their lives. Others simply went mad and ran around screaming uncontrollably.

Slowly and calmly Mrs Fry and Anna Buxton walked around the cells and began to talk to the prisoners. Some of them were drunk. They were singing loudly and trying to dance. Other women were too busy arguing with each other to notice the visitors.

Amongst the women prisoners were a large number of children. Some were walking around aimlessly. Others sat silently rocking to and fro. When Fry saw the children, many of them without proper clothes, she thought of her own family. Her children had plenty to eat and a warm place to sleep at night.





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‘What future is there for these children?’ she asked Anna. ‘It must be terrible to be locked up with nothing to do all day.’

Anna Buxton began to give out the clothes to the poorest prisoners. However, there was clearly not enough to go around. One of the women began to weep.

‘Please help us,’ another woman pleaded as she reached out to grab Fry’s arm.

For a moment Fry was afraid that the governor’s warning was about to come true. A large crowd of women was pressing in upon them; everyone wanted a piece of clothing.

Suddenly someone in the crowd shouted, ‘Stand back! Show some respect!’ At once the women stopped their pushing and began to step back.

‘We will return and bring more clothes,’ Fry promised.

On their way out of Newgate Prison, the two Quaker women went to see the governor again.

‘Thank you for letting us visit the prisoners,’ Anna Buxton said.

The governor stared in surprise. The women looked exactly the same as when they had gone in. No one had torn their clothes. Even the white bonnets on their heads were untouched.

‘And we still have our watches,’ Fry pointed out.

Anna Buxton and Elizabeth Fry continued to visit Newgate. As they were about to leave for the last time, Anna Buxton began to pray out loud for the prisoners. When she had finished, Fry also began to pray.

Slowly the noise in the cell faded. Everyone was looking at the





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Quaker women and listening to their prayers. One of the prisoners began to cry. Other women knelt down on the filthy floor and bowed their heads.

‘Thank you for praying for us,’ a woman said as Fry prepared to leave. ‘Please don’t forget us.’



For a long time, Elizabeth Fry was not able to return to Newgate Prison. The death of relatives, looking after her growing family, and being a Quaker minister took up her strength and her time. From time to time she was ill or unwell because she was pregnant. However, Fry did not forget the women in the prison. Whenever she could, she told other people about the conditions in Newgate.

‘The way we treat criminals is unfair,’ she said to Anna’s brother, Thomas Fowell Buxton. ‘These people may be criminals but we treat them like animals.’

Buxton listened carefully to what his sister-in-law had to say. Together they went to visit other prisons in London to see if conditions were as bad as Newgate. Then in 1816, he helped to form an organisation called The Society for the Reformation of Prison Discipline.

During this time, Elizabeth Fry was also praying for guidance. She was unsure about her life. How should she be serving God? ‘Help me to do your will, even if it is hard,’ she prayed.

Like other Quaker women, Fry sought to help those who were poor and in need. Within a short distance from her home in Plashet, lived a group of Irish labourers and their families. They





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had fled poverty and famine in Ireland, but now they still struggled to earn enough money to feed and clothe their families. Fry visited their homes and tried to help her neighbours by providing clothes, food and medicine. She also gave out Bibles.

Yet despite her busy life, the memories of Newgate prison would not go away. 'Anna, I feel that God is calling me to go back to Newgate. I know that God loves these women but how will they know about his love if no one goes to tell them?'

'Elizabeth, you must give yourself to God. He will open the way for you and show you the right thing to do,' replied her friend.

As Fry thought about Newgate prison she knew that making changes there would not be an easy thing to do. What would people say? Prisoners were despised. She would be criticised if she tried to help them. Then she thought about the smell, dirt and disease in the prison. She would be risking her own health and even her life, if she were to visit regularly. Yet despite these problems, she finally made up her mind.

'I know that God is calling me to work in the prison,' she explained to her husband.

'Are you sure, my dear? It won't be an easy task.'

'God will help me and give me the strength,' she replied.

Mr Fry smiled at his wife. He knew that she had many talents and he had never stopped her from using them.

'You must do what you feel is right. You know that I will support you,' he agreed.





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‘Are you sure you want to go in there alone?’ asked the prison governor, as once again Mrs Fry stood in his office. Anna Buxton was now married and had moved to the country, so Elizabeth Fry had come to the prison on her own.

‘Please don’t worry. If you will give me the permission to visit, I will look after myself.’

Permission was granted and Fry was allowed to spend the afternoon with the women prisoners. The next few hours passed quickly. She began to find out people’s names. Some of the women wanted to tell her their stories. She listened carefully. Finally she took out her Bible and began to read out loud.

Many of the women stopped what they were doing to come and listen.

‘Christ loves us all,’ she told them. ‘He wants to save us from the wrongs we have done.’

‘It’s too late for me,’ one of the women shouted. ‘God would never forgive me.’

Fry turned the pages of her Bible. ‘Listen to this verse,’ she said. ‘God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ For a moment she paused and looked at the woman who had made the remark.

‘It’s never too late to turn to God,’ Fry said. ‘He still loves you, whatever crime you have committed. If you are really sorry for the things you have done wrong, then God will forgive you. He is a merciful God.’





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During the afternoon, Fry noticed the children once again. They looked so thin and pale. Women who had children under the age of seven were allowed to take them to prison. Many women had no choice but to do this as there was no one to give their children a home. There were also the babies who had been born in prison. Some of them seemed to be crying endlessly, whilst others lay quietly in their mother's arms. These babies were too weak to even cry out for food.

'Your children don't deserve this sort of life. What can be done to help them?' she asked.

'What about a school?' someone shouted. Other women murmured their agreement.

'Don't be so silly!' someone else laughed. 'This is Newgate Prison! No one cares about our children.'

'God cares about your children,' Elizabeth Fry answered. 'A school is not impossible. But you will have to make it work. If you want a school then one of you will need to be the teacher.'

Suddenly everyone in the crowd had something to say about setting up a school.

'Think about it and when I return tomorrow let me know what you have decided,' Fry said.

As Fry travelled home in her coach, she knew that the task ahead was too great for just one person. I need to get more people involved, she thought to herself. So the next day she invited a young Quaker woman, Mary Sanderson, to go with her.







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At first, Mary Sanderson was horrified as she walked into the women's cells. In the yard, half-naked women were fighting to get a place at the public railings so that they could beg. Those who had managed to find a space were shouting at the passers-by and cursing those who would not give. Standing behind Fry, the young woman felt as if she was walking into a den of wild animals.

Fry lent towards her friend. 'Don't be afraid,' she said. 'No one is going to hurt you.'

When the prisoners saw the two Quaker women, the noise in the cell began to die down.

'We've chosen a teacher,' the women informed Fry as they pushed a shy, young woman towards her.

'I'm Mary Connor, Ma'm,' the woman gave a quick curtsy. Mary Connor had recently been sent to prison for stealing a watch.

'Well, all we need now is a room,' Fry smiled.

Once again Elizabeth Fry visited the prison governor. 'If you provide activities for the prisoners, you will find it easier to manage the prison,' she said.

The governor still did not understand the need for a school but Fry was very good at making people do what she wanted. He gave the women a room and within a short time the school had begun.

Mary Connor worked hard as the teacher and was eventually rewarded for all her efforts. She was given a free pardon and allowed to leave the prison fifteen months later. However, during her stay in Newgate she had caught tuberculosis. Mary Connor died from the disease soon after gaining her freedom.





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The school was a great success. Every morning the mothers tried to clean and tidy their children before they went into the school room. Finally the children had something to do with their time. However, Fry noticed there was always a group of women crowded around the school room door.

‘We are trying to listen to the teacher,’ they explained. ‘We want to learn too. Can’t you do something for us?’

Fry already had some ideas, but she needed more volunteers to come and help. With a group of eleven other women she formed the Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners in Newgate. These women were committed to helping Mrs Fry and also to raising the money that was needed to improve the prison conditions.

However, there was still one major problem that needed to be overcome. The prison authorities would have to give permission for any further changes that Fry wanted to make. For this to happen, the behaviour of the imprisoned women would need to improve.

Fry called a meeting to discuss the possibility of setting up a school for the women. The prison sheriffs and the governor all agreed to come.

‘I propose that the prison governor appoints a woman officer to look after women prisoners and that a school is set up to teach needlework and knitting,’ said Fry. The women nodded their approval. ‘But in order to do this, there has to be changes in the way that everyone behaves,’ Fry continued. ‘Begging, swearing and quarrelling will have to stop. You will have to choose your own monitors to help run the sewing classes. Every morning at nine





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o'clock, the Bible will be read before the sewing classes begin.'

The women had to vote on the changes that were being suggested. Everyone put up their hands to show their support. They then voted to choose the monitors who would help set up the sewing classes.

After the meeting, the prison officials were so impressed that they immediately sent workmen to prepare a room where the women could work. Within a short time the school had begun and the women prisoners were making clothes and knitting stockings. They were able to sell their work and earn some money.

Through the work of Elizabeth Fry and her friends, the lives of the women prisoners in Newgate began to improve and so did their behaviour. The prison cells became quieter and calmer. People tried not to swear at each other. The women began to share the use of the fireplace. Mothers stopped hitting their children so much. Now every woman had enough clothes to wear.

The governor was astonished at the changes. 'Thank you Mrs Fry for all you have done to improve conditions for the women,' he said. 'Please continue and I will do all I can to help.'



Something was wrong in the prison. Women were crying. Furniture had been broken. The cells looked a mess.

'What is the matter with the women today?' Fry asked.

'This happens every time we send a group of prisoners to the prison ships,' the governor said.

Earlier that day, a group of women prisoners had been taken to





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Deptford where a ship was waiting to take them to Australia. Being sent to Australia was a terrible sentence for these women. They knew that they would probably never be able to return to England. For some of them, this meant leaving their husbands and children. When they arrived in this distant land, the prisoners would be treated as slaves and made to work either for the government or for the settlers. Transportation was a sentence given to prisoners by the courts that robbed them of hope and led to deep despair.

‘The women got very upset last night,’ the governor continued to explain. ‘We always have a riot at such times.’

Elizabeth Fry was not surprised that the women rioted before leaving the prison. Before they left Newgate, they were chained together and herded onto open wagons. Crowds of people followed the carts, others hung out of the windows of the houses along the streets, all trying to catch a glimpse of the women prisoners. The women were jeered and shouted at. Some of the crowd would try to throw vegetables at the carts as they trundled along the cobbled streets. It was a frightening journey which the prisoners dreaded.

‘I think we can help each other,’ Fry said to the prison governor. ‘The women hate having to travel in open carts. If you can provide covered coaches to take them to the docks, I am sure that the riots will stop.’ The prison governor agreed to her suggestion.

The next time a group of women were about to be sent to the prison ships, Fry and her friends visited the prison in the evening before they were due to leave. Together they read the Bible and prayed for the prisoners.

‘The governor has agreed to provide hackney-coaches for you





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to travel in so that the crowds will not abuse you. If you do not riot tonight, I promise you that you will not have to make this journey alone. My friends and I will travel with you.'

The next morning Elizabeth Fry and her friends arrived at the prison. There had been no riot in the night. The time came for the prisoners to say their farewells. Many of those who were to stay in Newgate began to cry. They knew that transportation was a terrible punishment, even worse than being in prison. Some of them took their hard earned money and gave it to their departing friends. 'You will need this when you get to Australia,' they said.

This time the women were not put in chains. Instead they travelled quietly with Mrs Fry and the other Quaker women towards the docks and the waiting ships. 'Whatever hardship you are about to face, remember that God loves you and will never leave you,' she tried to comfort them.



One part of prison life that Elizabeth Fry could not change was the way that men and women were executed. Monday was execution day for murderers. On the Sunday the convicted men and women were taken to the prison chapel. In the centre of the room was a long table on which was placed a coffin. The prisoners were made to sit around the table whilst the minister, dressed in his dark robes and wearing a white wig, took the service.

On the Monday morning these people were then hung outside the grey stone walls of the prison. Huge crowds came to watch these executions, blocking the streets and stopping the carriages.





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Rich people could pay for a seat at one of the windows overlooking the gallows. Other people climbed walls or lamp posts in order to get a better view. But it was not only murderers who were hung. One of the common crimes that resulted in the death penalty was the forging of money.

Fry always visited the women who were waiting to be executed. She found such visits deeply distressing. She did not believe that it was right to execute people for stealing or for forging money.

‘Please can you come quickly, Elizabeth Fricker needs you,’ the turnkey passed the message to Fry as soon as she arrived at Newgate.

Elizabeth Fricker had been condemned to die because it was said that she had helped a thief enter the house where she had been working as a maid.

‘It’s not true,’ the young woman had told Mrs Fry. ‘I didn’t do anything wrong.’

Fry knew that she was telling the truth. The thief had admitted himself, before he was hung, that Elizabeth Fricker had not helped him. But he had refused to tell the authorities the truth about what had happened. Fry was appalled at the injustice of a court that could send an innocent woman to her death. She tried to get a re-trial for Elizabeth but failed in her attempts.

‘Elizabeth Fricker has been condemned to die. The sentence must be carried out,’ she was told.

Now she had only a few more hours to live. Her execution was planned for eight o’clock the following morning. When Fry arrived at her cell, Elizabeth Fricker was walking up and down





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frantically. Her head was in her hands; she was crying and pulling at her hair. Fry reached out and gently took her hands. They were cold and covered in sweat. She was shaking uncontrollably.

‘Thank you for coming,’ a fellow prisoner said. ‘She’s been going mad. We thought that we would have to send for a prison guard to control her.’

Gently, Fry talked to the condemned woman and prayed with her until she was calm again. Mrs Fry had to hide her own feelings in order to comfort the young woman. She was distraught at Elizabeth Fricker’s suffering and the thought that the next day this innocent woman would be hung, along with six men and seven children.

Later that evening, Mrs Fry wrote in her diary. ‘Is it right for man to take the role of the Almighty by taking away another person’s life? Shouldn’t we rather try to reform prisoners or stop them from committing further evil? At least we should be giving people, whatever they have done, an opportunity to repent and to change their lives.’



The work that Elizabeth Fry did in Newgate prison was based on the idea that prisoners should be treated with kindness. She believed that if prisoners were cared for properly, then they could change and live a better life. Her ideas were shocking for many people who thought that prison was simply a punishment and should be as unpleasant as possible.

Rich and important people came to see what was happening in Newgate prison. Everyone was talking about the changes in the





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way the women prisoners were behaving. Parliament also wanted to know more about Elizabeth Fry's ideas. In 1818, she went to inform a committee of politicians about the conditions in the country's prisons and to suggest ways of improving them. In 1823, parliament agreed to make some of the changes that Fry wanted to see.

Elizabeth Fry spent the rest of her life travelling around Britain and Europe, trying to improve the way that prisoners were looked after. Even Kings and Queens listened to her advice. In a report about prisons in France, she wrote this warning, 'When you build a prison, you had better build it with the thought in your mind, that you and your children may occupy the cells.'







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## At a Glance: Elizabeth Fry

Elizabeth Fry became famous for her work as a prison reformer. Born in 1780 as a teenager she dedicated her life to serving God.

She lived at a time when there was a lot of injustice in the prison system. Men, women and even children were sent to prison for the smallest of crimes. The death sentence could be given for over 200 crimes, including shop lifting. Conditions in prisons were harsh. They were often overcrowded. Disease spread easily. Those prisoners without money were given very little to eat. Often they did not have enough clothes or blankets to keep warm.

Fry first visited Newgate Prison in 1813 and was horrified by what she saw. After a break, she returned in 1817 in order to help women prisoners and to start a school for children. In order to improve the conditions in the prison she formed an organisation called The Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners in Newgate.

In 1818, she was asked to speak to a parliamentary committee about the conditions in prison. She was the first woman to do this. Fry campaigned for changes in the law to improve conditions and to reduce the use of the death penalty. She also helped to improve conditions for women travelling to Australia on prison ships. Elizabeth Fry visited prisons across Britain and Europe and set up groups of women who could continue her work.

As well as working with prisoners, Elizabeth Fry was a Quaker minister. She set up societies for visiting the poor, libraries for coastguards and a training school for nurses. Elizabeth Fry was also the mother to eleven children.





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### Fact Files: Prison reform

1. Prison reform is the attempt to improve conditions within prison.
2. The aim of prison reform is to provide a justice system that treats people fairly and leads to a safer society.
3. John Howard is considered the founding father of prison reform. He visited prisons across Europe in the 1770s and 1780s.
4. In Britain during the 1800s, prison reform was led by the Quakers, and in particular Elizabeth Fry.
5. One of the first organisations to work for prison reform was The Howard League for Penal Reform. It was formed in 1866.
6. Today prison reform still goes on. In British prisons problems include:
  - Overcrowding.
  - The large number of prisoners who have mental health problems and who are not receiving proper treatment.
  - The failure to stop people leaving prisons and then committing crimes again.

### Faith in action

Today many people have no sympathy for criminals. When Elizabeth Fry was alive, there was even less concern. So why did she become involved with prison reform?

1. Early Quakers were put in prison because of their beliefs and suffered because of the terrible conditions. As a result Quakers took an active interest in improving prison life.





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2. She also believed that God is a God of mercy and forgiveness. Therefore people who have committed crimes should not just be punished, but rather they should be helped to change their lives. She believed that whatever the crime, criminals were still human beings. Jesus had died for everyone and so the offer of God's forgiveness and new life (the gospel) should also be shared with people in prison.

3. Fry followed the teachings of Jesus. He taught that when we give food to the hungry, clothe the naked, look after the sick and visit those in prison, we are serving Christ himself (see Matthew 25:31-46).

## Talk about it

There were plenty of people who disagreed with Fry's idea that prisons should be a place of reform. They disapproved of the way she tried to improve conditions. Today people still argue about the role of prisons in society. What do you think?

Why do we send people to prisons? Is sending people to prison the best way to deal with criminals? Are prisons simply a place of punishment? How can we help people who commit crimes, change the way they act? What about the victims of crime? How can society best help them?

## Make your voice heard

Elizabeth Fry was appalled that people could be imprisoned when they had only committed minor crimes. At this time, people who





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owed money were thrown into prison. With no way of paying their debts they could remain in prison for years. She also found people in prison who were innocent. Some of these innocent people received the death penalty. Fry campaigned on their behalf.

Today people throughout the world, continue to speak out for those who have been wrongly imprisoned, who are being kept in prison without the chance of a fair trial, and against the torture of prisoners. Find out about the work of an organisation such as Amnesty International or Prisoners of Conscience. We can help people who have been wrongly imprisoned by praying for them and by supporting campaigns for their release.

