

HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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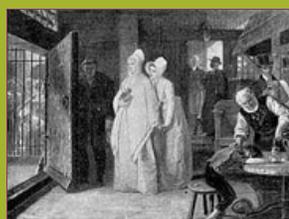
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1817 Elizabeth Fry

Angel of the prisons



Elizabeth Gurney Fry (1780-1845) is best known for her achievements in the reform of the British prison system. For a woman to undertake this kind of work was completely new and Fry became known as 'the angel of the prisons'.

Betsy Gurney grew up in a well-off Quaker community in Norfolk in the east of England. The Quakers had strong ideals about equality and peace. They numbered among the early opponents of the slave trade and were very active in a wide range of philanthropic projects. When Betsy was only twelve years old her mother died and this had a significant impact on the young girl, casting a shadow over her youth. Nonetheless she showed an early commitment to doing 'good works' and at the age of 17 she set up and ran a primary school for poor children in her own home. Following her marriage to Joseph Fry in 1800 she gave birth to eleven children. Even so she continued her work in the community, such as taking care of sick and lonely neighbours.

Elizabeth Fry first entered Newgate prison in London in 1813. (The prison was closed and demolished in the early 20th century). She was shocked by the inhuman circumstances in which women and children were imprisoned. The reports of her conversations with the women in Newgate prison are impressive records of what she encountered and of her determination to improve their conditions. In order to further her campaign, she invited influential people to come and visit the prison to see the poor living conditions for themselves. In particular, Fry opposed solitary imprisonment, which was a standard punishment at the time. She argued it was a practice that was bad for the health and mental sanity of the prisoners. Fry became the first prison reformer to focus on the moral improvement of prisoners through personal contact, conversations, education and work.

To accomplish this work, she introduced another innovation: voluntary committees of women to arrange prison visits and to organise support following the discharge of the prisoners back into the community. This became the forerunner of professional probation services.

The reforms advocated by Elizabeth Fry had three core ingredients:

- Male and female prisoners had to be accommodated separately and guards had to be of the same gender as the prisoners. This has since become standard international practice..
- Arrangements for regular visits to female prisoners were established and, in addition, the volunteers had to take care of education, paid work and support after their clients left prison.
- Prisoners were to have opportunities for education and paid work.

Fry visited many prisons across the UK. Her methods were so effective that in 1823 much of her approach was incorporated into British prison law. She was consulted by Queen Victoria and Parliament, and became a source of inspiration for nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale. She also took her work onto the international stage, for example to the Netherlands.

Thanks to the pioneering social work of Elizabeth Fry, treatment of prisoners became more humane and this has been recognised in a number of ways. In 2002 she was honoured for her work by being depicted on the British five pound note, and in the United States, the School of Social Work at Stanford University is located in a building named after her.

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-  Young, A. F., & Ashton, E. T. (1956), *British social work in the nineteenth century*. London: Routledge: chapter 9 on the penal services

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Additional information

-  Richards, L. (1916), *Elizabeth Fry, the angel of the prisons*. New York: Appleton and company.

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- [Bank of England comment on Elizabeth Fry on 5 pound banknote](#)

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