

# Elizabeth Blackwell

Elizabeth Blackwell journeyed from her Bristol birthplace to New York, Cincinnati, Paris and London, where – in her quest to become the first woman doctor – she found a true home at Barts Hospital.



**D**edicated, determined and devoted to her chosen calling, Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman to become a 'Barts man' when, in 1859, she was registered as the first fully qualified female medical practitioner in England.

Hers was an extraordinary transatlantic life that began in Bristol, where she was born in February 1821, the third daughter in a family of nine brothers and sisters. Her travels started at the age of 11, when her father's sugar refinery was burned down during anti-slavery riots and the Blackwell family embarked on a new life in America, first in New York, then in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Hard times continued, however, as Elizabeth's father died shortly after they arrived in Cincinnati, leaving his family unprovided for. Elizabeth became a private tutor, before she and her sisters took over running a girls' school in Kentucky in 1842.

## A great moral struggle

Three years later, a dying friend whom she helped nurse suggested she study medicine. Elizabeth wrote: "The idea of winning a doctor's degree gradually assumed the aspect of a great moral struggle and the moral fight posed an immense attraction for me." At that time, a 'female physician' was equated with being an 'abortionist'.

Turning her ambition into reality was far from easy, and she was turned down by more than 12 medical schools.

Acceptance finally came from Geneva University Medical College in New York State, which held a student referendum on whether to admit her. In January 1849, she graduated with an MD (*Medicinae Doctor*) diploma – the first woman to do so. But, despite becoming something of a local celebrity, Elizabeth decided to return to Europe.

## Unlimited admission

After initially failing to obtain a medical post in England, she opted for an appointment at La Maternité in Paris. Life there was strict; she endured poor food and monastic conditions, while her hopes of a surgical career were ended when she lost the sight in one eye from purulent ophthalmitis, contracted when tending a baby.

Meanwhile, a cousin wrote to London teaching hospitals on her behalf. The warmest response was from Barts and its renowned dean, Sir James Paget, and she accepted the offer of a place there.

"I received an unlimited card of admission; and, during the year and a half that I daily walked the hospital, spending the chief part of each day in the

wards, I found doctors, students and nurses constantly and invariably friendly and helpful," recalled Elizabeth.

In October 1850, Sir James's wife recorded her impression of Elizabeth: "Well, we have our 'lady doctor' here at last and she has actually attended two of Sir James's lectures, taking her seat with perfect composure. The young men have behaved extremely well, and she really appears likely to go on her way quite unmolested. (...) It is evident her motives for the pursuit of so strange a vocation are pure and good. So let us hope that she will become useful in her generation."

## An alliance of pioneers

Elizabeth forged an alliance with Florence Nightingale, like her a woman 'chafing against the restrictions that crippled her active energies'. The two female pioneers talked medicine for hours and Elizabeth praised her colleague's contribution: "To her, chiefly, I owed the awakening to the fact that sanitation is the supreme goal of medicine, its foundation and its crown."

Painful though it was to leave Barts, lack of family and funds in England led Elizabeth back to the US in 1851. Although encouraged by the fact that her sister Emily was now also training to be a doctor, Elizabeth struggled for years to establish a practice or find work, until eventually the sisters opened a successful dispensary together.

In 1858, Elizabeth again returned to England to seek medical work, and her name was entered on the Medical Register of 1 January 1859. She spoke often of the kindness and friendship she encountered at Barts. "I gladly recall the generous action of St Bartholomew's in aiding my entrance into the humane profession."

Sadly, ill-health forced her to leave London shortly after accepting the Chair of Gynaecology at the newly-established London School of Medicine for Women in 1869.

When Elizabeth died at Hastings in May 1910, her death marked the end of a truly remarkable personal journey – one that laid the foundations for the career paths followed by many other women since then.

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Second year preclinical students at Barts in 1948 – including the first female students since Elizabeth Blackwell.

