

2019

Emily Davies (1830 – 1921)

In 2019 Professor Susan J. Smith, Mistress of Girton College, gives a talk on the life of (Sarah) Emily Davies 1830 - 1921.

Born in Southampton, to a middle class family, Emily Davies had a somewhat itinerant childhood (her father being a Parish priest and writer). She moved to Gateshead when she was nine, and spent much of her early twenties caring for two of her siblings and carrying out family duties. She resented being denied the proper education afforded to her brothers and found life at home quite dull. By the time, in the late 1850s, she met the unconventional, charismatic Barbara Bodichon in Algiers, and like-minded feminists at Langham Place in London, her sister and one brother had died, a second brother following soon after. Her remaining sibling, Llewelyn, lived in London, and in 1862, a year after the death of her father, Emily and her mother, Mary Hopkinson, moved to the capital.

Freed of most family responsibilities,¹ and fired up by the campaigns for women's advancement that her new circle embraced, Emily Davies began to channel her own considerable energies into an unstoppable movement to secure women's participation in public, political and professional life. Key to that, for Emily, was access to excellent inclusive degree level education, and to the examinations and qualifications that go with it.

For years, she lived and breathed that vision, which is set out in her most influential work, *The Higher Education of Women* (1866). Emily's iron will and uncompromising drive soon turned theory into practice, in the shape of Girton College Cambridge, which - as The College for Women - opened its doors 150 years ago, on 16th October 1869 in Hitchin. Its distinctive, and at the time unique, feature was that it promised women the same level of instruction and examination in the same subjects as men, with the expectation that, in the end, they would achieve the unthinkable - a full university degree.

In this special ceremony at the close of our Foundation Week, our tribute is to Emily Davies' immeasurable gifts to Girton. However, these are by no means her sole contributions to the advancement, empowerment and education of women as Hazel Mills' and Hannah Westall's associated exhibition shows.

*'The great difficulty is to begin at all'*²

Emily's immersion in the foundation of The College for Women was total. She embraced it all, and delegated little. Her first priority was to establish a base, and open the doors - a goal she achieved within three years of alighting on the idea. She thus inspired our first fundraising campaign, convening the first college (executive) committee in 1867 and assembling a cohort of early benefactors whose leadership we recognise today.

Falling well short of an ambitious initial target (of £30k), she forged on undeterred - a familiar trope in this College - writing to Marian Bradley on 1 March 1869 with the words: 'The great difficulty is to begin at all, and we can only



Photograph Archive Ref:
Emily Davies by Rudolf
Lehmann, 1880.
GCPH 11/33/53

¹ Though she cared for her mother for many more years, reporting frequently on her health in letters to friends, and retiring as Mistress in 1875 partly to meet her needs.

² Emily Davies to Marian Bradley, 1.3.1869. In Murphy, A. B. and Raftery, D. (eds) Emily Davies. Collected Letters 1861-1875. University of Virginia Press, p. 308

get over that by doing it'. So they went ahead with five students instead of the hoped-for 25 in a rented house in Hitchin while Emily employed all means possible to underwrite loans, secure donations and make a start on the first building at Girton.

In this, Emily may have been spurred on by a letter written in 1867 by Marian Lewes (George Eliot) objecting to a small beginning, and arguing that her Great Scheme demanded no less than A Great Campaign - a truth to which we still subscribe. At any rate, Emily succeeded in building (what we now call) Old Wing by 1873, but it too was just the start. She was determined to create enough student accommodation to open her special door to women's higher education as widely as possible.³ She oversaw two major phases of work (in 1875-87 and 1899-1902) with the aim of accommodating at least 200 students. What would she think if she knew we were tilting towards five times that total today?

Her drive to add rooms was impressive, and when in 1910 a group of over 1300 individual subscribers and a few key organisations donated money to the 'Emily Davies Jubilee Fund' - organised by a small committee to recognise Emily's service to women over the past 50 years - the thought was that (although Emily was free to dispose of the gift as she wished) it would add to the next round of student accommodation at Girton. Around the time it was presented, a tablet bearing the words 'Emily Davies Court' was placed over the old front door - the original entrance which we have recently returned to more regular use.

There is a slight wrinkle to this story, because initially the College Council proved cautious and Emily was quite put out. But after some wrangling Girton accepted the Jubilee Fund gift of £735 together with £1000 each from Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and the Countess of Carlisle, as well as a pledge for the same amount from Emily herself, to provide the nucleus of a building fund for the future.

Central to this story are the scale of Emily's ambition, the determination with which she pursued her vision, and her tenacious passion for an 'East Wing', without which she felt the College could never be complete. This all inspired Girton to go on, in the 1930s, to build another substantial extension, in the shape of New Wing, hyphen and a new Library, thanks to which the College was indeed - for a while - complete.

*'I think we must give more scholarships'*⁴

Emily Davies was determined to place women on an equal footing with men in the world of higher education. She wanted to go beyond 'Lectures for Ladies', and would not compromise on quality - the very thought of that set her teeth on edge. For this vision of inclusive excellence to prevail, Emily knew from the start - as we have known ever since - that many students would need financial support. So she sought to help them meet the cost of College fees. Scholarships were key: Emily was keenly aware of their value, knew they had to come in meaningful numbers and amounts, and went all out to create them.

Two of the first five students (Isabella Townsend and Sarah Woodhead) were supported by scholarships funded by six individual women, and as time went on Emily secured further scholarships from philanthropic individuals and from organisations such as the Clothworkers Company and the Gilchrist Educational Trust. She had a role in establishing (and possibly in resourcing) a Students' Aid Fund in the early 1880s which loaned money to one or two students each year. She also applauded a College that went into debt to extend its scholarship scheme: 'It was an audacious policy and it answered'.⁵

Scholarships were then (as they are now) awarded strictly in order of exam performance. Nevertheless, Emily was inclined to persuade wealthy students with scholarships to pay their own way, releasing funds for other fine

³ Delamont, S. (2007) Davies, (Sarah) Emily Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnd/32741>)

⁴ Emily Davies to Barbara Bodichon, 8. 8. 1881

⁵ Letter to Barbara Bodichon 7.7.1870, Collected Letters p. 338, referring to Marlborough College

scholars who might otherwise have to decline. She was also sympathetic to donors - such as Lady Stanley⁶ and the Clothworkers company - whose support was effectively means-tested. Finally, she understood that illness could be as much a constraint as poverty, and was clear that neither should stand in the way of a fine education. On the other hand, despite her desperation to grow the College, her thirst for funds never compromised her quest for excellence, and she expressed no regret in turning wealthy applicants away if they failed the entrance requirement.

By way of neat irony, it seems possible that the £1000 that Emily pledged for buildings was in the end fulfilled posthumously by way of a gift from her niece and principal legatee, Margaret Llewellyn Davies. This sum was applied to an entrance scholarship which Margaret thought in accordance with the wishes of her aunt, 'who always desired that as many as possible should have the advantage of residence at Girton'.⁷ Perhaps that is why our current bursary fund, established in 1998 with a generous gift to support able students from non-privileged backgrounds was named after Emily Davies, as was the general purpose undergraduate bursary fund established in October 2000.

*'It has taken all of us to get so far'*⁸

The impression from Emily's correspondence and from other records in our archive is that, for at least four decades, she determinedly and selflessly poured practically every waking moment into the founding and advancement of our College.⁹ Inspired and embraced by like-minded women, including members of the Langham Place Group and the Kensington Society, she was never, of course, alone. Visionary men - including Emily's close friend Henry Tomkinson - were also involved. Most critically, Emily had as a touchstone Barbara Bodichon, the principal financial benefactor of the early years of the College who acted as a foil for the myriad ideas inspiring her great scheme.

Emily and Barbara stand together today as the principal founders of Girton College, notwithstanding their own debate over who first had the idea and when.¹⁰ Food for thought, however, is Barbara's own concession that 'I certainly could not have carried out the plan as Miss Davies has done'¹¹, and Barbara's biographer, Pam Hirsch's acknowledgement that *only* Emily had 'the patience and tenacity to attend to the minutest nuts and bolts of business, essential in any long and difficult campaign'.¹² Nothing really deterred her: 'I never thought' she wrote to Barbara Bodichon in 1872 'of departing in peace till the college is incorporated in its own buildings and able to pay its way'.¹³

Emily may not have been a leader who inspired by the force of her personality,¹⁴ but without her very particular visionary contribution - her conviction, tenacity, application and determination - it is hard to imagine that Girton College would have become the pioneering, path breaking institution whose 150th Anniversary we are celebrating today.

That is perhaps why I have always so much enjoyed the line in Jessica Swale's widely-performed play 'Blue Stockings' that says of Girton: 'People like us don't get buffeted by the wind, we change its course'. Those words

⁶ Emily held (and acted on) the view that Lady Stanley's Scholarship was meant 'for one who could not come without it', according to a letter to Barbara Bodichon dated 1.7.1874, Collected Letters p. 430

⁷ GCAR 2/6/17/4 pt. Letter from Margaret Llewellyn Davies, 23 February 1922.

⁸ Letter to Barbara Bodichon 2.7.75, Collected Letters p. 465

⁹ She was a driving force in the College from conception in 1866, through a short term as Mistress from 1872-1875, until 1904, when she resigned as honorary secretary - though even then she continued to be a College member and advocate.

¹⁰ Barbara thought the idea stemmed from Emily's visit in August 1867, but Emily writes in a letter dated 1.14.1883 that 'The idea of starting a new College suggested itself to me on October 6th 1866, after a meeting of schoolmistresses at Manchester'.

¹¹ Letter to Helen Taylor 1.8.1869, cited in Hirsch, P. (1998), p. 253

¹² Hirsch, Pam (1998) Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. Chatto and Windus, p. 46

¹³ Letter to Barbara Bodichon 15.1.72, Collected Letters, p. 365

¹⁴ Hirsch op cit., p. 46

are given to a student but I feel sure they are based on the force that was Emily Davies. I am therefore torn between ending on that note, or another - a comment that captures not only Emily's possibly under-rated warmth and generosity of spirit, but also her wry insistence, undiminished with the passage time, on rallying us to the cause:

*'It has taken all of us to get so far. And it wants us all still'*¹⁵



The first five students at Hitchin, Michaelmas 1869 (archive reference: GCPH 7/2/1/1)

The Mistress drew on the following sources:

- Murphy, A. B. and Raftery, D. (eds) Emily Davies. *Collected Letters 1861-1875*. University of Virginia Press
- Delamont, S. (2007) *Davies, (Sarah) Emily*. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnd/32741>)
- Girton College Archives
- Hirsch, Pam (1998) *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*. Chatto and Windus

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¹⁵ Letter to Barbara Bodichon 2.7.75, *Collected Letters* p. 465