

Joseph Lister

1827-1912

Joseph Lister was born in West Ham. He was the second of three children born to a rich merchant and amateur scientist.

Lister became a renowned British surgeon who made surgery safer for patients by introducing sterilisation techniques. His greatest contribution to medicine was to promote the use of carbolic acid as an antiseptic. In the past surgeons wore dirty aprons, surgical instruments were unclean and surgeons didn't even wash their hands before carrying out operations! Lister tested what would happen if the surgical instruments and bandages were treated with carbolic acid and he was pleased to see that infection was significantly reduced. He saved many lives. By 1879 Lister's ideas had been accepted by most hospitals in Britain.

Lister also made other contributions to medicine. He was the second man in England to operate on a brain tumor, and he worked out a method of repairing kneecaps with metal wire. He was appointed as Queen Victoria's personal surgeon for many years and was given the title of Lord. Today, Listerine, an antiseptic mouthwash, Health Care Centres and schools have also been named after Lord Lister.

Joseph John Gurney

1788-1847

Joseph John Gurney was the tenth child in the Gurney family. He was a banker and a Quaker, having strong religious connections. His mother died when he was young and he was raised mainly by his sister (Elizabeth Fry) who was eight years older.

In 1817 he joined his sister in an attempt to end capital punishment and to improve the appalling conditions in prisons. At that time people could be executed for over 200 offences, such as stealing clothes or passing a forged banknote.

They travelled all over Great Britain to gather evidence by visiting the prisons and published their findings in a book entitled 'Prisons in Scotland and the North of England'. Some MPs considered Gurney and Fry as dangerous people as they wanted to "remove the dread of punishment from the criminal classes".

Despite having little success with their aims in the beginning, the Home Secretary eventually introduced the Gaols Act 1823, which transformed the way prisons were run.

During trips to North America and the West Indies (1837-1840) Gurney campaigned against slavery. He promoted the 'Friends belief' in world peace in Ireland, Scotland and in Europe. He also continued to promote the abolition of capital punishment.

Gurney lived in the family home, Earlham Hall, in Norwich which was at the time surrounded by greenery.

John William Charles

1944-2002

John was born in Ordnance Road, Canning Town London. He was the second youngest of nine children. His mother came from Silvertown and his father was a merchant seaman from Grenada. John was a footballer who played for West Ham United as a defender.

Nicknamed "Charlo," Charles was the first black player to represent England at Under-18 level and became the first black player to play for a first division West Ham United side, when he made his debut in 1963. His younger brother Clive also played for West Ham and went on to coach the US National Soccer Team.

A later injury prevented Charles from being part of the West Ham teams which won the 1964 FA Cup Final and the 1965 UEFA Cup Winners' Cup Final. John Charles, however, had made 142 appearances for West Ham. He paved the way for other black players to join football clubs.

His family members have visited Maryland Primary School to talk to the children about his life.

John Travers Cornwell VC

1900-1916

John was often known as 'Jack' or 'Boy Cornwell'.

He was born into a working class family in Leyton and his family later moved to East ham. In 1915, at the age of 15, he gave up his delivery job and joined the Royal Navy without his father's permission.

Despite his young age he was given the job of sight-setter (look-out) on the HMS Chester, the first ship to engage the Germans in the Battle of Jutland. Despite being wounded in the ensuing fighting (all the other men on that ship were killed), he did not seek immediate medical help. Instead he just stood his post awaiting further orders until the end of the action.

Unfortunately he died, aged 16, a few days later on the morning of 2 June 1916, before his mother could arrive at the hospital in Grimsby.

John 'Jack' Travers Cornwell was awarded the Victoria Cross (VC). He was one of the youngest-ever recipients of Britain's highest award for gallantry. His story caught the nation's imagination and 'Jack' became a much celebrated hero.

Elizabeth Fry

1780-1845

Elizabeth was the older sister of Joseph John Gurney. She married Joseph Fry and later became a Quaker minister and English prison reformer. She had strong religious connections. Elizabeth was known as the 'angel of the prisons' and campaigned for better conditions for female prisoners. At the time children could be locked up in prisons just because their mums were!

John Howard (1726-90) was England's first prison reformer, but Elizabeth was the first woman to campaign for better prisons. It was unusual for a woman to lead a campaign. Elizabeth's mother believed rich people should help others, through charity work. She took her children to visit poor families, bringing food and clothes to them.

Elizabeth worked hard to change legislation and make the treatment of prisoners more humane. Since 2001, she has been depicted on the Bank of England £5 note.

During her work, Elizabeth also met Queen Victoria. She visited the king of France and the King of Prussia, to talk about better prisons. She even started a school for nurses at Guys hospital.

She died in Ramsgate on the 12th of October 1845.