Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910)

For thousands of years the medical professions were reserved almost exclusively for men. Since the 17th century it had become more difficult for women to be involved in medicine. The wise women of the Middle Ages disappeared and midwifery steadily became a job for doctors. As is often the case, it was one or two determined individuals who were prepared to force openings for themselves and then for others, one of these was Elizabeth Blackwell.

Who was Elizabeth Blackwell?
Elizabeth Blackwell was an American teacher who taught herself basic science and then trained through private instruction at the Charleston Medical School in New York. She was awarded the M.D. degree in 1849 from Geneva Medical College in New York, and was the first woman to become a modern doctor.

How did she become well known?
Once qualified she still faced opposition and was barred from working at the New York City Hospitals, so in 1857 she set up her own practice, staffed entirely by women. The success of this practice proved that a woman could run an efficient medical service. In 1869 Blackwell moved to London to found the London School of Medicine for Women. Elizabeth Blackwell became a doctor through her own efforts and expertise. Despite the resistance of fellow male students and doctors, she graduated at the very top of her class.

What was her legacy to medicine?
Elizabeth Blackwell set a precedent for women doctors in the modern world. On a visit to England in 1859 she met Elizabeth Garrett who went on to become the first woman doctor in Britain and also a pioneer of women's medicine in Europe.

Questions

1. What did Elizabeth Blackwell achieve in 1849 and why was this achievement significant?

2. What did Elizabeth Blackwell set up in 1857 and why?

3. Who did Elizabeth Blackwell meet in 1859 and what were the results of this meeting?