

Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale was born on 12 May 1820 to a wealthy couple. As she grew up, she decided she wanted to become a nurse. When Florence told her parents what she wanted, they were not happy.



Being a nurse was not respectable and was not thought to be a proper profession. Eventually, her father gave his permission for her to go to Germany where she gained some nursing experience at the Deaconess Institution Hospital for the poor and sick. When she returned she became the lady superintendent (manager) of a hospital for gentlewomen in Harley Street, London.

When the Crimean war broke out in 1853, the government was not ready for how many soldiers would be injured, and this was one of the reasons why the hospitals were in such a bad state. People in Britain started demanding something was done about them. So the Minister for War, Sidney Herbert, asked Florence Nightingale to arrange and take charge of nurses to send to the war.

Florence was shocked by the conditions in the hospital and began to campaign to improve the quality of nursing in military hospitals. Importantly, she gathered a lot of information about food, death rates, and doctors' training in these hospitals. In October 1856 she met with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and in 1857 she gave evidence to a Sanitary Commission. This helped with the setting up of the Army Medical College in Chatham in 1859.

In 1859, Florence published a book called 'Notes on Nursing' which is still in print today. A public fund was set up to train nurses and it raised £44,000 and she also founded the Nightingale School and Home for Nurses at St Thomas' Hospital in London. The main reason we remember her is that she did a lot of work educating people about the importance of keeping hospitals clean and free from infections, and this work is carried on today in modern hospitals.

Mary Seacole



Mary Seacole (1805-81) was born in Kingston, Jamaica. Her mother ran a boarding house for invalid soldiers where Mary helped to care for the patients.

In 1854 she went to England and told the War Office that she wanted to go to the Crimea as a nurse. She was rejected. Not to be outdone, she made her own way to the Crimea at her own expense. She set up a medical store and hostel, where soldiers could obtain medicine. She also tended to the wounded on the battlefield. She met Florence Nightingale on several occasions but was not invited to join her team of nurses.

When Seacole returned to England, she did not receive a heroine's welcome. She went bankrupt. There was a lot of public sympathy for her and a 4 day music festival was organised for her benefit but it only raised £233. So she published her life story to raise money. She was quite well off when she died, but no one in the medical world had made use of her nursing skills since the end of the Crimean War.