

Florence Nightingale (1820–1910)

A national heroine, known for her pioneering role in nursing.



Born	12 May 1820 Florence, Grand Duchy of Tuscany
Died	13 August 1910 (aged 90) Mayfair, London, England, UK
Nationality	British
Known for	Pioneering modern nursing
Awards	Royal Red Cross (1883) Lady of Grace of the Order of St John (1904) Order of Merit (1907)
Scientific career	
Fields	Hospital hygiene and sanitation, statistics
Institutions	Selimiye Barracks, Scutari King's College London

Florence Nightingale's story, nursing legacy and her connection to National Trust properties



Florence Nightingale as a child (on her mother's knee) and her sister Parthenope. Watercolour (c.1822) after Alfred Edward Chalon, from the collection at Trelissick, Cornwall

Florence Nightingale was born in the Italian city of Florence in 1820. Her sister Parthenope, the Greek name for the city of Naples, was just one year older than Florence. Their parents were incredibly wealthy and were able to travel around Europe. They owned large estates in the Country and a house near to London.

Florence and her sister were able to have lessons at home, as most children did not go to school. Mr Nightingale wanted his daughter to learn many things, including several languages, geography and history. He taught many of the lessons to them himself.

As Florence grew up she went with her mother to visit the sick and the poor who lived near her home in the country. Florence was a pretty girl and had many offers of marriage. Although she enjoyed travel, loved music and met many interesting people she felt different to other girls. She wrote many diaries and letters explaining how she felt and remained with her parents hoping to find answers.

From a young age she harboured ambitions to become a nurse. She cared for the sick on her family's estates and believed her godly calling in life was to reduce human suffering. Florence's family, however, were not supportive of her ambitions. At the time, nurses did not receive proper training and nursing was not considered a suitable occupation for a woman of Florence's status.

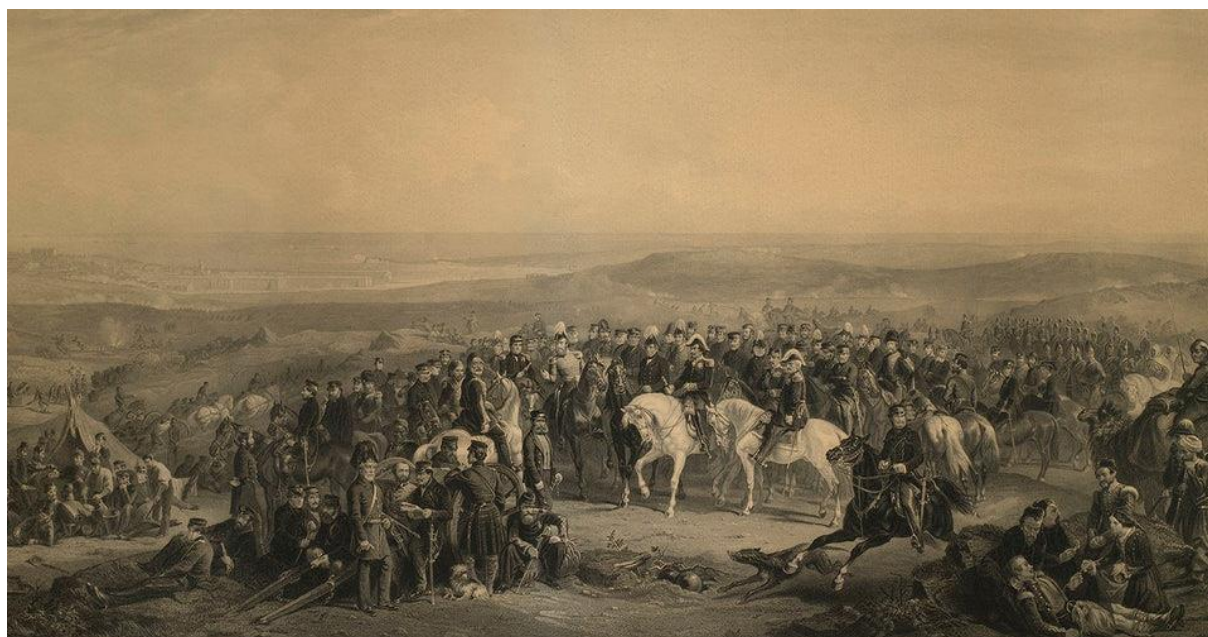
Her mother eventually changed her mind and between 1850 and 1851, Florence received basic nursing training in Kaiserworth, Germany. She was only allowed to attend for short stretches of time, however, and had to keep her education a secret. By 1853, Florence freed herself from her restrictive family and, using her connections, took an unpaid position working in a nursing home for gentlewomen.

Her father eventually relented and was eager to make peace with Florence and her chosen career path. He realised he had been hard on her and gave her the sum of £500 every year so that she could have her own home in London close to where she worked.

'Kingdom of Hell'

In October of 1853 the Crimean War began, fought between the Russian Empire on one side and an alliance of British, French and Turkish Ottomans on the other. Newspapers regularly reported on the poor conditions and lack of medical care for soldiers. In 1854, at the request of the British government, Florence went to Crimea. She led a group of nurses to Scutari, the site of a British hospital now in Istanbul. Her party was not welcomed by officers, however, and she quickly realised how bad conditions were, from insufficient supplies to dirty, overcrowded rooms. She even called the Barrack Hospital the 'Kingdom of Hell.'

An engraving published in 1859 reproduces a history painting of 1856 documenting the Crimean War by Thomas Barker. It depicts a panoramic view of troops at Sebastopol, the largest city on the Crimean Peninsula. Florence made numerous trips to Sebastopol from her base at Scutari. In the engraving, she is identified in text (not visible) as one of the figures on horseback, checking soldiers with the Sanitary Commissioner.



The Allied generals with the officers of their respective staffs before Sebastopol, mixed media engraving, 1859

'Lady with the Lamp'

Under Florence's watch, wards were properly cleaned and standards of care were established. This included attending to dressings and feeding and bathing soldiers regularly. She also recognised the need for psychological care and became known as the 'Lady with the Lamp', checking on patients at night. Florence's work was widely reported in the press at the time, shared through soldiers' letters. She quickly gained fame and was credited with reducing the mortality rate in the Scutari Barracks Hospital to two per cent. Later, it was learned that the death rate was actually much higher than this, but the numbers had been doctored by the government.



Left: Florence in 1855, London Stereoscopic Company (Smallhythe Place, Kent);
 Right: Florence in 1856 on her return from Scutari (Claydon House, Buckinghamshire)

A national heroine

By the time Florence returned home in August 1856 – seriously ill – she was an icon. The Victorians had a vibrant celebrity culture and active print media which was fanned by industrial advances in publishing and the invention of photography. Florence’s persona was particularly popular, with her often being represented as a ‘ministering angel’, mirroring common social impressions of women as selfless guardians and caretakers. Such was Florence’s celebrity status, that her signature is included in an autograph album belonging to Helen Leach, Beatrix Potter’s mother, alongside the likes of the Duke of Wellington, Robert Peel and even King George IV.

Many photographs of Florence were made, shared and collected, and Florence figurines, dolls and models were produced as popular objects. Examples of these are in the collections at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire and Penrhyn Castle, Gwynedd.

The Staffordshire Pottery, known for making figures of famous people in the Victorian era, produced many different ‘Florences.’ These can be found at both Attingham Park, Shropshire and Newark Park, Gloucestershire showing the extent of their popularity.

Florence figurines



Lady with the lamp

Florence is shown sitting on a bench and holding a lamp, an attribute for which she became famous, in this late 19th century plaster model at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire.



A Florence doll

This doll is made from cardboard, flannel, muslin and wood and it dates to the late 19th century. It’s one of 55 historical dolls in the collection at Penryhn Castle, Gwynedd.



Staffordshire figurine

Staffordshire Pottery made many figures of famous people in the Victorian era, including many Florences. This is one of a collection of 128 Staffordshire figures at Newark Park, Gloucestershire.



Ministering Angel

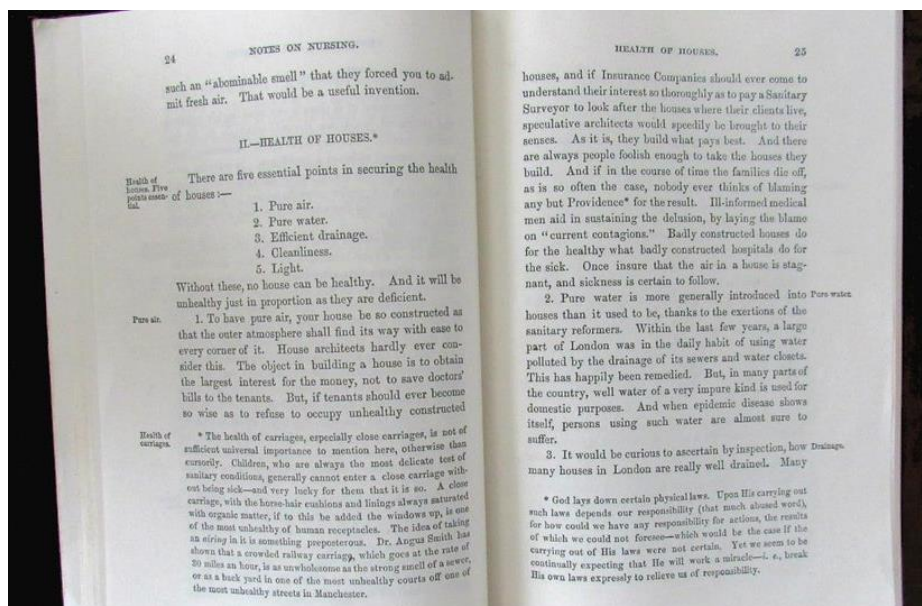
Florence was represented as a 'ministering angel', reflecting social impressions of women as selfless caretakers. In this Staffordshire figure from Newark Park, Florence tends to a wounded soldier.

Campaign for better healthcare

Florence did not enjoy her fame and was reluctant to be in the spotlight. Instead, she used her influence to campaign for better healthcare in England and to encourage public respect for nursing. Her efforts were high-profile, and she even met with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to champion the need for reform.

The Nightingale Fund, set up in 1855, raised money to open the Nightingale School of Nursing at St. Thomas's Hospital, London, in 1860. St. Thomas's is still an important hospital in the NHS landscape of today, and Nightingale's nursing school taught skills that went on to form the basis of modern nursing as we know it.

In 1859, she published the book 'Notes on Nursing: What It Is and What It Is Not', held in the collection at Claydon House. This canonical work of nursing brought care principles into households across the country. In 1883, she was celebrated with dedicated Red Cross medals that show the long-term importance of her work.



A copy of 'Notes on Nursing: What It Is and What It Is Not' by Florence Nightingale at Claydon House, Buckinghamshire. It was first published in 1859 by Harrison of Pall Mall

Florence's connection to Claydon House

Florence Nightingale has a special relationship with Claydon House. Her sister, Parthenope, married the English politician and soldier, Sir Harry Verney, of Claydon House, Buckinghamshire in 1857. Florence visited them regularly and was later given rooms by Harry to work on her nursing books and hold important meetings.



She spent many years at Claydon, especially during the summer. Her bedroom in the house has been preserved and remains as it was then. Many of Florence's things remain with the Verney family, including an orange Florence was given by a soldier in the Crimea and a lock of her hair.

Florence Nightingale and Sir Harry Verney in 1880 in the grounds of Claydon, Buckinghamshire



From country houses to hospitals

Clandon Park Hospital, 1915-1918

Many National Trust places were repurposed as hospitals during the First and Second World Wars, adopting the inspired approach to medical care that Florence pioneered in the Crimea.

Clandon Park, Surrey, was used as an Auxiliary Medical Hospital during the First World War. It was transformed from the Onslows' family home to a fully functioning military hospital, complete with an operating theatre.



A series of photographic postcards from 1915-18 document how Clandon Park, Surrey was transformed into an Auxiliary Medical Hospital during the First World War. This postcard shows the Marble Hall converted into a hospital ward.

Live-in nurses trained by the Red Cross treated over 5000 soldiers at Clandon Park. This photograph shows one of the nurses in the garden.



In April 2015 a fire at Clandon Park caused significant damage, effectively leaving the house a shell. Amongst the objects rescued from the fire were photographs documenting Clandon's role as a hospital. In this photographic postcard from Sawyer's Photo series, patients gather on the porch.

Dunham Massey, Cheshire, 1917-1919



Wounded soldiers convalescing in the garden at Stamford Military Hospital (Dunham Massey) during the First World War.

During the First World War, Dunham Massey became the Stamford Military Hospital, opening its doors to wounded soldiers between 1917 and 1919. Dunham's Saloon was transformed into a hospital ward known as 'Bagdad' (sic), the Billiard Room became a nurses' station, and Lord Onslow's dressing room became the operating theatre as it had reliable natural light and a running water supply.



Kingston Lacy, Dorset

Kingston Lacy in Dorset was used as an American Hospital in the Second World War. Daphne Banks (1898–1967) – sister of Henry Banks, the last owner of Kingston Lacy – volunteered as an ambulance driver and caregiver.

< Photo of Daphne Banks standing next to ambulance 1940

Mount Stewart, County Down

The Red Cross silver medal (far right) features the profile portrait of Florence Nightingale. The Red Cross medal, which is awarded for long and efficient service, is one of the four medals shown here belonging to Edith, Lady Londonderry (1878–1959), wife of the seventh Marquess of Mount Stewart.



The essential status of the Red Cross – greatly influenced by Florence – is seen in armbands, ribbons, aprons, medals and letters held across our places. Florence’s legacy still shines brightly, just like her lamp. Four hospitals in Istanbul are named after her, various care facilities in Derby pay tribute to her, and the hospital that opened in London’s ExCeL centre in response to the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic was named NHS Nightingale. With the ongoing relevance of her nursing career now especially poignant, Florence Nightingale is not to be forgotten.