The Story of Florence Nightingale

Florence was born on 12th May 1820, in the Italian city of Florence, whilst her parents were on a tour of Europe. They decided to give her the name of the city. It was rare for girls of rich families such as hers, to go to school, as they were not expected to work or have a career. The expectation was for girls to marry into another wealthy family. However, Florence was taught at home by her father and was excellent at mathematics.

By the time Florence was 16 years old, and Queen Victoria had been on the throne for just one year, she became convinced that God wanted her to serve him in a very special way. A few years later she decided that nursing would be the path for her to respond to this belief.

Her parents were horrified because nursing was usually undertaken by girls from poor families. However, in 1851, she went ahead, and after training for just three months as a nurse, she immediately found her skills useful in caring for her then ailing parents.

In 1854 she was asked to gather together a group of nurses who would be willing to travel to care for the wounded soldiers of the Crimean war. The army hospital barracks were in Scutari, on the edge of the Black Sea, near to Istanbul.

Injured soldiers, who were ferried across from the Crimea warzone on the other side of the Black Sea, were not expected to survive, but their conditions were worsened even further by the squalid conditions on board the ships.

Florence was appalled by the state of the The wards were over crowded and men and beds were totally flea-ridden. There was no suitable bed linen and the floors were filthy. The drains were blocked and rats were seen to be scurrying around the wards. Realising that these environmental conditions themselves were causing many men to die from fever and infectious diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, and scurvy, she immediately organised changes. She also provided what we would now consider to be essential basic nursing, by ensuring the men were well fed, and had clean sheets and bandages.

At night, she was a well loved figure as she passed quietly through the darkened wards checking her patients. Because of this, the soldiers soon named her ‘The lady with the lamp’.

After the war, Florence established the Nightingale Training School for Nurses in London. Here, she began to train other nurses and share her method of caring. This method became known as ‘Florence Nightingale’s Environmental Theory.’ It included the view that certain environmental conditions, such as cleanliness of the patient and the hospital, fresh air, clean water and suitable food, are basic requirements in nursing. These practices created many of the principles still followed by the nursing profession today.

It is a sad fact however, that, probably because of the lack of modern antibiotics and anaesthetics at that time, even the major changes introduced by Florence Nightingale and her nurses, did not save everyone. Infectious diseases were still the major causes of death to soldiers in the Crimean War. It was estimated that 16,000 British soldiers died from illness in comparison to 5000 from battle wounds.