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Introduction

The following chapters are intended to provide background information on Florence Nightingale’s life for teachers. It is recommended that teachers use a child-friendly story book with pupils, such as Emma Fischel’s ‘Florence Nightingale’ which is part of the Famous People Famous Lives series published by Franklin Watts (ISBN 0-7496-3913-X).

There are a number of important points to bear in mind when drawing children’s attention to a famous person in history. For example, those people chosen for study may act as role-models for today’s children. The choice of person can therefore have an effect on the children’s judgement about how certain personalities or types of individual influence people’s lives - warriors, industrialists, artists etc.

It is important therefore, to balance the role of the individual in the context of a timeline - it is better to see Florence Nightingale’s contribution to society as part of change in health care through the ages, rather than as symbolic of the virtues desirable in women and/or nurses. Remember too that Mary Seacole played a similar and equally important role in the Crimean War.

Using pictures and photographs as evidence

Refer to the Primary schemes of work – History Unit 4: why do we remember Florence Nightingale? You could begin by telling the story of
Florence Nightingale (perhaps using Emma Fischel’s book from the Famous People Famous Lives series, which also includes a book on Mary Seacole), placing her work in context with health care in the past. This could be followed by a simple washing-line timeline showing Florence as a child, in the Crimea, and in old age using photographs from this resource booklet alongside excerpts from the story book.

You could build up a profile of Florence, her family, and life using the story of Florence and a selection of photographs from the resource booklet, getting the children to answer questions such as:

- what did she look like?
- what were her distinguishing features?
- where did she live?
- what sort of person was she?
- did she marry?
- what is she remembered for?

Using the illustrations in the resource booklet you could ask children to discuss the following:

- why did people in the past have their portraits drawn/painted?
- what do they think a particular picture/photograph is about?
- where do they think the photograph was taken?
- At what point in her story do they think the picture was drawn/painted or the photograph taken?
- what can the picture/photograph tell us about life at the time?
- Re-enact one or more events in Florence’s life to develop drama and role-play.
The Nightingales move to Hampshire

Florence Nightingale’s father, William Edward Nightingale (always known as WEN), changed his surname from Shore to Nightingale in 1815 upon inheriting property at Lea in Derbyshire. Florence’s mother, Frances Smith (known as Fanny), was one of a family of ten from Essex. The Nightingale family consisted of two girls - Frances Parthenope (named after the Greek name for Naples in Italy where she was born in 1819), she was always known as Parthe; and Florence (named after Florence in Italy where she was born on 12 May 1820), she was always known as Flo. Although Florence was named after the city in which she was born, it was at that time a boy’s name!

In 1821 Mr Nightingale brought his family back from Italy to England, where he built a new house on his inherited estate at Lea. However, Derbyshire proved to be too cold a place in which to spend the whole year. In 1825 Florence’s father bought Embley Park, near Romsey in Hampshire, as a winter retreat. Lea Hurst is now a retirement home and Embley Park a school. Embley Park was described as:

“a good-sized plain square house of the late Georgian period, the situation warm and sheltered, the gardens very large and exceptionally fine. The shooting was good, London was reasonably near,
and Fanny’s two married sisters, Mrs Nicholson at Waverley Abbey near Farnham and Mrs Bonham-Carter at Fair Oak, near Winchester, were within easy reach.”

By the time Florence was five the pattern of the Nightingales’ life was set. The summers were passed at Lea Hurst (Derbyshire), the remainder of the year at Embley Park, and twice a year during the spring and autumn seasons visits were made to London. Three or four times the Nightingale, Nicholson, and Bonham-Carter families holidayed together at Seaview on the Isle of Wight, where the children bathed and sailed. Christmas was generally spent with the Nicholsons at Waverley Abbey, where the children held a ball of their own and put on a play.

Above, Florence and her sister as young children 94M72/F614/10.
Florence’s childhood

Florence was not always a happy child. She did not like strangers, especially children. She was convinced at an early age that she was different to everyone else, and it is said that Florence heard the voice of God calling her to do his work. As a child Florence wrote many letters to her grandmother, aunts, parents and sister. Her unhappiness at being confined to Embley is clear from early letters and notes. Florence and her sister Parthe did not always get on well together as they were very different in temperament and ability:

“Flo led and Parthe followed, but Parthe followed resentfully. She was possessive towards Flo, she adored Flo, wanted Flo’s entire devotion, could not bear Flo to have another friend, but she was bitterly envious of Flo”.

Mrs Nightingale made a practice of sending the children to stay separately with their relatives. The final division, however, was brought about by their father’s plan for their education. A governess taught the girls music and drama, whilst they learned Greek, Latin, German, French, Italian, History and Philosophy from their father. They were expected to work long hours, and eventually Parthe
rebelled, seeking her mother’s company with her guests or in the garden. Florence struggled on alone with her father. Parthe resented the companionship between her father and sister and, in later years, supported her mother against Florence’s plan to become a nurse.

Mrs Frances Nightingale with her daughters Parthenope (Parthe) and Florence (Flo), 94M72/F697/11.
Florence growing up

Up to the age of thirty-three Florence led a protected life at home in a well-to-do Victorian household. She was proposed to by no fewer than 3 suitors: Harry Nicholson, her cousin, was rejected by Florence, which upset the Nicholsons and a coldness developed between the two families thereafter; Richard Monckton Milnes courted Florence for nine years before she eventually rejected him; Sir Harry Verney first proposed to Florence and, after her refusal of him, formed an attachment to her sister - Parthe married Sir Harry at Wellow Church in June 1858. Illustration No 3 shows Florence as a young woman with her pet owl Athena. Florence continued to be bored and frustrated with her life at home and was determined to somehow break free from the monotony of visitors and daily routine.
Sketches of Florence Nightingale drawn by her sister Parthe, 94M72/F697.
Florence and the Crimea

In 1847 the Nightingale family were on a winter’s holiday in Rome where Florence met Sidney Herbert, the man who later, as Foreign Secretary for War, asked her to take a party of nurses to the Crimea.

In 1851 Florence served a short 3 month apprenticeship at a nursing institution which she had previously visited, run by a Protestant pastor at Kaiserworth in Germany, despite the disapproval of her mother and sister. It soon became clear to her family that Florence was determined to make nursing her chosen career. In 1853 they consented to her appointment as superintendent of a small nursing home in Harley Street, London, known as an ‘Establishment for Gentlewomen in Illness’. Florence’s father gave her an allowance of £500 a year to assist her in her independent lifestyle. Her permanent association with Embley was at an end and it was never to be her home again. A year later, in 1854, she left for the Crimea.

When Florence and her team of 38 nurses arrived at the main British Army hospital at Scutari, near Constantinople, they found forbidding barracks housing 10,000 sick men, with dirt and filth throughout the hospital. Patients were lying in the corridors as well as in the wards,
many of them suffering from typhoid fever and cholera, as well as from battle wounds.

Above, the Burial Ground at Scutari, from ‘Scutari and its Hospitals’, published in 1855. 94M72/F602.

When it rained, water poured in through the roof; the food was uneatable; the water allowance was only one pint per day; the buildings were vermin-infested; the atmosphere in the hospital so foul that to visit the wards brought on diarrhoea. Florence and her nurses scrubbed the hospital clean, washed the sheets, blankets, and towels, cleaned the hospital’s kitchens, and prepared better, wholesome food for the patients. Most important of all, she got army engineers to repair the hospital’s drains and improve its supply of drinking water. By the spring of 1855 Florence was physically exhausted from the working conditions in the Crimea but as a result of her efforts the survival rate at Scutari rose sharply.
Above, sketches of Florence Nightingale with wounded soldiers in a ward at the Barrack Hospital Scutari, 94M72/F614.
Florence after the Crimea

On her return to England in 1856, Florence devoted her life to the training of nurses and started the Florence Nightingale Training School and Home for Nurses at St. Thomas’s Hospital, which opened in 1860, with the aid of a fund of £50,000 subscribed by a grateful public. In that same year her book ‘Notes on Nursing’ was published followed by other influential books and articles. The example set by Florence in starting a training school for nurses was eventually followed by other hospitals and the standard of nursing care improved immeasurably, to the benefit of patients, doctors, and surgeons alike.
Above, Florence Nightingale on her return from the Crimea, August 1856, 94M72/F697/7.

London became Florence’s base upon her return to England and, in 1865, she settled down in a new home in South Street, Mayfair, where she lived for 45 years until her death in 1910. Florence made a number of visits to Embley in 1869, 1870, 1871, and 1872. On one of her visits to Hampshire she was able to use her influence in the siting of the present Royal Hampshire County Hospital at Winchester on its airy hilltop instead of a proposed site low down in the town.

Florence also tried to influence the redesign of a new military hospital at Netley in Hampshire, but without much success. Queen Victoria laid the foundation stone for the The Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley on 19 May 1856, and work was completed in 1863 at a cost of £350,000. It had 138 wards and beds for over 1000 patients. From 1865 ships carrying wounded troops could dock at a pier on nearby
Southampton Water, and in 1901 a railway, was built to bring the wounded to and from Netley.

Above, a steam train bringing wounded soldiers to the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, c1900. 92M91/2/4. Hospital ships had previously brought wounded troops to a pier close to the hospital.

Above, wounded soldiers from the Boer War in South Africa in the surgical corridor at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, c1900. 92M91/2/4

Florence saw the plans for the hospital when she returned from the Crimea and immediately wrote a report condemning the plans and
suggesting alternatives. Her main complaint was about the lack of windows in the wards and the very long corridor which ran in front of the wards, which she thought would become ‘a permanent receptacle for contaminated effluvia’. However, apart from some changes to the windows little was done to meet Florence’s criticisms of the planned hospital.

The success of using nurses during the Crimean War led to The Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, being established as a training centre for the new Nursing Service. Netley became the largest military hospital of its time, and was full to capacity during the First World War. The hospital was handed over to the Americans during the Second World War.

Photograph of Miss Helen Campbell Norman, Lady Superintendent of Nurses at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, c1900. 92M91/2/4
Florence’s last visit to Embley Park was in the summer of 1891 at the age of 71, and in 1896 the house was sold. Florence was confined to bed for much of her old age, largely as a result of the illness she suffered in the Crimea. She was awarded the Royal Red Cross in 1883 by Queen Victoria, and became the first woman to receive the Order of Merit in 1907.

Above, Florence Nightingale in old age c.1910, 94M72/F697/9

Florence died at her London home on 13 August 1910, and she was buried in Wellow churchyard in Hampshire, near her parents home Embley Park. She had not wanted the full State funeral she justly deserved. Large crowds gathered in the narrow lanes as her coffin was carried to her grave by six sergeants from the Guards.
Photographs of Florence Nightingale’s funeral, 1910, 97M81/23/23
Following her death many monuments and plaques were put up in London and elsewhere to the memory of Florence Nightingale, the Lady with the Lamp. People continued to remember Florence’s achievements long after her death and many commemorative events took place in the years after.

Above, the cover from a commemorative programme of 1937 showing Florence Nightingale receiving wounded soldiers at Scutari, from a painting by Jeremy Barratt, 94M72/F614/24.
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