

## A Lasting Legacy.

In January 1837 the 17 year old daughter of a rich local aristocratic family found herself plunged into a medical crisis. A flu epidemic had broken out laying low most of the servants and many local people. Her immediate relatives were away and she, with the help of the cook, looked after 15 servants as well as people in her local village. At the same time she supervised two small children and got up before dawn to study. She wrote to her sister, "I have been nurse, governess, assistant curate and doctor and at all events I have killed no patients though I have cured few."

The house was Embley Park at East Wellow near Romsey and the daughter was used to ministering to the needs of the poor and ill in the village that, as well as flu, was also hit by severe floods. The year before she had helped nurse her sister, Parthenope, who had developed a high fever and terrible cough. It is an indication of the lack of medical knowledge at the time that the local doctor treated her with leeches, bleeding and blisters.

In later life the young girl related that, after this experience, God spoke to her and called her to His service. Her name was Florence Nightingale and she was determined to become a nurse despite the strong opposition from her mother and sister. Nurses at the time had a bad reputation. This is illustrated by the incompetent, negligent, alcoholic Sarah Gamp, the nurse in Dickens Martin Chuzzlewit.

In 1845 Florence said to her family that she planned to work as a nurse at the Salisbury Infirmary under the supervision of Dr Fowler, the superintendent and a family friend. Florence told her cousin that her mother was terrified, "not of the physically revolting parts of a hospital but of things about the surgeons and nurses which you may guess." The prevention of her plan made her all the more determined to press ahead. She was supported by some powerful friends of the family. These included Sidney Herbert who lived at Wilton House and was president of Salisbury Infirmary and Secretary of State for War and Lord Palmerston who lived at Broadlands House in Romsey and was Foreign Secretary and briefly Prime Minister.

After leading her team of nurses in the appalling hospitals of the Crimean War she was able to see clearly what needed to be done to improve things in conditions where more people died of infectious diseases than war wounds. Florence established rigorous training for nurses as well as advising on simple methods to save lives. These included things such as clean drinking water, better sewage disposal, hand washing and thorough cleaning in hospitals and domestic settings. She wrote numerous books on nursing as well as reports for the government that led to important reforms. These were illustrated by comprehensive diagrams and statistics that led to her being made the first female member of the Royal Statistical Society. She also advised on the design of hospitals including Winchester and the new west wing of Salisbury Infirmary.

She was stubborn, opinionated and forthright. In 1910 she was still working and campaigning when she died, aged 90, in her London house. After a service in St Pauls her coffin came down by train to Romsey station and was then taken to the beautiful little church of St Margaret near East Wellow where it was carried to the grave by soldiers from the Crimean War. In the 1980s a film about Florence was made at Breamore House and tradition has it that she once stayed the night at the house of a doctor friend in Church Street in Fordingbridge.

In this current pandemic we have much to be grateful for in the legacy of this amazing local pioneer, Florence Nightingale.

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