

Clean, Clean, Clean!

'Every nurse ought to wash her hands very frequently...'

Florence Nightingale

At the moment, everyone is washing their hands all the time to try to stop the spread of a new illness called Covid 19. Using plenty of soap and water helps wash away the invisible germs that cause the illness.

The famous nurse, Florence Nightingale, was a big believer in soap and water to stop illnesses from spreading. She thought they were carried by miasmas, bad smelling gases in the air, which was how people thought diseases spread two hundred years ago. Even though this was not correct, her solution to miasmas was to clean, clean, clean. By good chance, this stopped the spread of germs anyway.

Florence Nightingale was born on 12th May 1820. She suddenly became famous in 1855 when newspapers across Britain ran stories about her nursing wounded British soldiers in a military hospital far away in Turkey. At this time, the British army was fighting the Crimean War (1853–56) alongside France and Turkey – and against their enemy, the Russians.



[Florence Nightingale checking her patients, reproduced with thanks to the Wellcome Trust]

When Florence arrived at Scutari Hospital in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in November 1854 with her team of 38 nurses, they set to work at once, scrubbing and cleaning the filthy hospital. The floors were covered in a layer of poo and the soldiers arrived from the battlefields wearing filthy clothes and bandages, their wounds crawling with maggots and their bodies with lice. The nurses used soap and water to wash the soldiers' bodies. They sent sheets and bandages to a laundry that Florence set up nearby. Florence was convinced that all the cleaning would help stop the soldiers in her care from dying of their wounds.

Sadly, this was not the case. Over the winter of 1854-55, thousands more men died in Scutari Hospital and the other military hospitals of the Crimea. Prime Minister Lord Palmerston decided to send a Sanitary Commission to find out what was going on. Led by two doctors and an engineer, the men arrived in March 1855 and soon discovered some unpleasant facts. Unknown to Florence or the army doctors in Scutari, the military hospital had been built on top of a huge sewer – and it was blocked by a dead horse and several dead dogs. Filthy water was seeping from the sewer into tanks of water used for washing, cooking and cleaning. No wonder so many soldiers were dying in hospital.

Immediately, the leaders of the Sanitary Commission gave orders for soldiers to start a huge clean-up operation. They removed dead animals from the sewer and the water pipes. They replaced rotten floorboards, added new windows and repainted the walls. During the spring of 1855, far more soldiers started to recover from wounds and illnesses and return to health.



[Florence in one of the wards at Scutari Hospital in 1856. Florence is talking to a doctor by the doorway. [reproduced thanks to Wellcome Trust/Wikimedia Commons]

After the war ended, Florence returned to her life in Britain but she never forgot the soldiers that died in the hospital. She devoted her life to persuading people to investigate

the living conditions of soldiers in the army, as well as the overcrowded living conditions of many ordinary people in Britain at this time. One project Florence returned to over and over again was how to make hospitals safer, both in wartime and at home in Britain. She advised the architects who were designing the soon-to-be opened St Thomas's Hospital in London and other hospitals around the world. Very recently, in memory of Florence, the new vast hospitals that have been built for people with Covid 19 in the past few weeks have been named Nightingale Hospitals.

In my book, *Florence Nightingale: Social reformer and pioneer of nursing*, you can read about Florence Nightingale – about her privileged but overprotected childhood, her love of pets, including her little owl called Athena, and how she coped with the Crimean War and the awful illness she contracted while she was there. The book is packed with photos of Florence and her family, as well as some of the objects she owned during her lifetime. These images help to bring to life her story – not just her childhood and her time in the Crimean War but also the forty years afterwards when she did so much more work. This included setting up a training school for nurses, reforming workhouse hospitals, establishing district nursing, designing hospitals, writing books and letters to get all manner of things done, always surrounded by her pet cats for company.