

# A Window Through Time: Florence Nightingale's Hampshire Roots and Legacy

**Intro:** Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

**Julie:** In the Barter Memorial Chapel at Winchester Hospital is a lamp<sup>1</sup> linked to a pioneer in nursing, nicknamed The Lady with the Lamp. Welcome to new episode of Hampshire HistBites. This week, I am joined by a local Winchester artist, Sophie Hacker, and we will explore the life of Florence Nightingale and Sophie's artistic process of creating a stained-glass window, which celebrates the life of Florence Nightingale. As the 12th of May is not only Florence's birthday, but also International Nurses Day, we want to say thank you to all the nurses out there, and we dedicate this episode to you.

Sophie, can you tell me a bit about your background and your connection with Florence?

**Sophie:** I'm an artist and about nine years ago, I started working in stained-glass and made my first window for a little church in North Baddesley, and through a very unexpected course of events I was approached to make a window to celebrate the bicentenary of Nightingale's birth, which was last year, as you may be aware. Well, other things happened last year, things like COVID and national lockdowns and the closure of churches. So, the window didn't go in for her bicentenary, sadly, but it did go in in October and we're hoping very much that at some point this year we'll have a little party to celebrate.

**Julie:** It's quite sad that it didn't happen in May last year on, as you say, 200 years after her birth. You were approached to make this stained-glass window: how did you go about researching her life to create this window? What is your artist's perspective?

**Sophie:** That was the fascinating thing, actually, because I'm a child of the sixties and when I was at school, all I remember about Florence Nightingale was a little Ladybird book I had that had her carrying a lamp. And I just had this vision of her as being a bit of a soporific, not very interesting person who was a bit flighty. Florence Nightingale? Yeah, she was a lovely nurse.

Well, how wrong was I? She's an amazing, amazing woman. And the first thing I did, actually, was I went down to London to St. Thomas's Hospital, which she helped design, and in the basement there, there's a beautiful, amazingly brilliant museum dedicated to her life and work.

And I fell across this museum almost by accident, was going past on a bus, realised it was there, hopped off the bus, rushed into the museum. And it was really enlightening. I found out all sorts of things about the impact she had, not just on nursing, but on so many aspects of social care and health and drainage and the most extraordinary interest she had.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many different lamps associated with Florence Nightingale, one of which being the lamp in the Barter Memorial Chapel at Winchester Hospital, though this lamp is not currently on public display. The best place to see one of the lamps is at the Florence Nightingale Museum in the grounds of St Thomas' Hospital in London. The Museum is closed due to Covid restrictions but plans to reopen on the first full weekend of each month from June 2021, government guidelines permitting. For more information see [www.florence-nightingale.co.uk](http://www.florence-nightingale.co.uk)

She had a brilliant mind. She was the first woman fellow of the Royal Society of Statisticians and her understanding of statistics was one of the things that enabled her to understand what were the root causes of such an incredibly high death rate in the Crimean War, which wasn't necessarily soldiers being injured. It was soldiers dying from disease and lack of hygiene once they actually were sent to the hospitals. So what she was able to do with her brilliant mind really has changed the world.

**Julie:** Yeah, absolutely, because even now, during the pandemic we are living through, her discoveries, they are so important today: washing hands, hygiene, sanitation. We're still very reliant on her work. So, when you researched about Florence, what can you tell me about her upbringing, her childhood? And I understand that her childhood home is in Romsey?

**Sophie:** Nightingale came from a very privileged family. There's a lot of money involved. Her early life was split between the house at Romsey and Lea Hurst in Derbyshire and her parents took her on amazing tours around Europe. Did you know she was called Florence because she was born in Florence?

And when she was growing up, there was quite an expectation that she would conform to what a 'proper young lady' should do, which was fundamentally: embroider, play piano, paint, and get married. And I'm not saying for one moment that she wasn't perfectly capable of embroidering, playing the piano and painting, but she made a decision not to marry because she realised that marriage actually prevents women from reaching their full potential.

Anyway, her family were very keen for her to go down a certain path that wasn't necessarily about having a significant career. Education was freely available to her. She had a fantastic education, classical education and really great. But she wanted to work and, God forbid, she wanted to work as a nurse! But nurses at her time were gin-soaked ladies of... not exactly ill repute, but certainly very little respect.

And she, I'm saying all this in inverted commas, but she really had a vision, and it was this vision that I was really drawn to. And if you were to go down to this museum, in the first of the series of little pods that they have there, it talks about a moment in her life when she was just coming up to her 16th birthday, when she had a very powerful, spiritual experience, she was sitting under a tree reading, probably her Bible, and she talks about this in her diary.

She heard the voice of God calling her to his service. And she wrote about it in her diary, not just when it happened, but at many subsequent occasions. It was this event that I realised that was so seminal in what happened thereafter. So that's what I settled on as the inspiration for the window.

Then the challenge was to bring into the design, something that spoke very much of what she achieved thereafter. So, if you've seen the window, you'll notice that there's something missing in a window that's dedicated to Florence Nightingale and that's the lamp. I didn't include the lamp, mainly because she really hated the phrase, 'The Lady with the Lamp'. And when she got back to England to discover that actually she was a national hero. She was as famous as Queen Victoria and she learned that people were calling her 'The Lady with the Lamp', she wasn't keen at all. So out of respect to her, I omitted the lamp.

**Julie:** I did not know that she didn't like that. How did she get that nickname?

**Sophie:** She was an extremely conscientious nurse, obviously. And one of the ways that she kept an eye on how all the soldiers were doing was that she would make night rounds. She didn't, in fact, carry the lamp. She had a young orderly who carried the lamp for her 'cause she had in one hand a notebook and in the other hand, a pencil, and the orderly who carried the lamp was able to literally shed light on the soldiers. She would be able to make notes about how each one was doing. And on occasion, this is a really lovely element, of course, if you're wounded and really suffering with fever or whatever it might be, you won't really be able to write. So sometimes she also wrote on the soldiers' behalf to their families and their loved ones. Those letters were sent on the soldier's behalf, but in Nightingale's own handwriting. I'd love to see some of those letters.

**Julie:** Oh, it's absolutely amazing because letters, they have such incredible meaning. So, she helped in other ways as well. What is the connection with Florence and Winchester Hospital?

**Sophie:** Well, part of the fruits of her research and her experiences at the Crimea helped her to understand what was really needed for healing, certainly in hospitals.

And she developed this very specific type of pavilion ward, but you see, particularly if you go to the old building of St Thomas's, as it goes onto the banks of the Thames, it's like big wards sticking out from the main building. The idea of those wards is that you would then have windows on both sides, lots of fresh air - how much we're all being told at the moment, if you have to be in a room with other people, get lots of fresh air in as a way to minimise transmission of disease. So, she got involved in hospital design because of what she learnt and particularly about good sanitation when she got to the Crimea.

So, hospital design became something that she was able to achieve, not just for St. Thomas', but in loads and loads of hospitals around the UK and, actually, further afield across the world. And one of them was Winchester Hospital. We have, of course, got a Nightingale ward here. It was her local hospital from where she lived just outside Romsey. So, it was very important in the design of my window that I included a little vignette of Winchester Hospital as a token of thanks to that aspect of her work.

**Julie:** As you said, last year in 2020, it was 200 years since her birth, and you made a window.

Can you tell me a bit more about how you went about all the details in it, the various elements in the window, what they represent and how they link to Florence? And for the listeners, we are going to put a photo on the blog post and links so you can look at the amazing window.

**Sophie:** Well, I was helped in trying to sift through the things that really had to be included by an academic called Lynn MacDonald, who is a professor in Canada. She has written 16 volumes about the life of Florence Nightingale.

So, I was able to check things out with her about, certainly, all the connections that she had with Romsey because you think, well, why would the window go into Romsey Abbey apart from the fact that she grew up three miles away? But she had a very, very close link with Romsey, she used to walk there on the sunny days, perhaps with her sister. She would shop there. She had friends there. She was very interested in what the local plumbing was like, things like that.

She lived at home until she was 30 when she went to the Crimea. That's something that we forget about in modern life, don't we, that actually young women of her era, they would stay at home until they got married. And she didn't get married, so she stayed at home. Anyway, I wanted to find images that would offer highlights of the things that really mattered to her. So, when you look at the window everything in it has a meaning. There's nothing there by accident.

She was sitting under a tree when this moment happened in her life and the tree is still there. I was able to go to the gardens of Embley Park and sit on the bench that she sat on under the tree that she was sitting under when this moment happened. And it was a real light bulb moment for me because the design just completely fell into my imagination.

When you think of the number of things that I could have started with like soldiers, war, and things like that, it was an amazing gift. As you look around the window, there's an awful lot of writing in it. It starts at the top with the words 'Lo! It is I.' Now, that's Nightingale's own paraphrase of a very important story that you might've come across where the disciples are on a boat and they see Jesus walking across the water to meet them. And they're really frightened; it's really scary. What's going on? And it's in a storm and Jesus says, 'Behold! It is I,' to calm their fears about the storm and everything else. Well, Nightingale turned that from 'behold' into 'lo'. And she said 'lo! It is I,' are the four words of one syllable that sum up the Christian faith, by which she means that the presence of God in our lives overcomes all fear, overcomes all strife and storm. So that's the bit at the top of the window that is the call.

And then at the bottom of the window are the words 'here, am I, Lord, send me' and that's from the book of Isaiah and you notice that she's got a Bible on her lap and it's open at the book of Isaiah. That particular phrase was the other most significant biblical quote to her in her life because she felt that it absolutely summed up why she'd committed her life to a life of service for God. She was linking herself there to Isaiah's response to God's call.

And there's other writing in the window and they're in the tree trunks that go up the side. This cedar tree that she was sitting under has a very distinctive split trunk. It grows from one place in the ground and then immediately turns into this wonderful framing device for my window. The side of the tree that's on the left-hand side of the window says, 'Blessed be the merciful.' When Nightingale got back from the Crimea, Queen Victoria presented her with a beautiful gold brooch, which was designed by Prince Albert and it's engraved on the back: 'To Miss Nightingale with grateful thanks from Queen Victoria', something like that. And the words around it say, 'Blessed are the merciful'. It's the idea of Nightingale as the kind of emissary of mercy in what she does at the Crimea, bringing all this amazing understanding of how to bring healing. Hence, she is the angel of mercy.

On the right-hand side of the trunk are the words, 'for I was sick, and she nursed me' and that's another quote from Jesus's words in Matthew. And Nightingale, when she would write regularly to all her nurses, she almost sent them written sermons to inspire them and encourage them. And that particular phrase, 'I was sick, and you nursed me', she would write to them and say, this is why we nurse. When we nurse, we're nursing Christ, we're nursing God, we must see God in everyone who comes to us for care, which means that we must never treat one patient with greater care or concern than another patient, be they prince or pauper.

She felt it very important that all her nurses treated everybody with respect and love. That's something that I think we've seen in shed loads on the news of how nurses care for these unconscious patients on ventilators: the tenderness and the love with which they turn these prone bodies to keep them alive. It makes you weep, really, to see the amount of concern and love from the nurses that they've had to just keep on giving day after day, week after week, month after month.

**Julie:** Absolutely, nurses are just absolutely amazing, and I don't think they get enough recognition. And I think that's quite important because the 12th of May, Florence Nightingale's birthday, is also the International Day of Nurses. So, we should celebrate them.

To the window, you have so many details in there. They are so well thought through and it all starts with the event of Florence sitting under the tree.

What other elements is in the window?

**Sophie:** If we start at the very top, there are swallows circling in the sky, and they are there as a kind of crowning moment in the window, even though they're the smallest element of the window. In the Renaissance, swallows were thought of, believe it or not, as symbols of resurrection. Because they disappeared in the winter, the assumption was that they buried themselves in the ground, rather than migrate. The idea with the swallow was that it would disappear in the winter and then return in the spring, like resurrection.

The next one is a little owl. When Florence was in Athens, she discovered in the ruins of a temple, this little fledgling owl, and it was being stoned by boys. How horrible is that? But she picked it up. She brought it back to England and it was her pet. And because she found the owl in Athens, she called it Athena. Now, as a little byword, my name is Sophie and Sophie means wisdom and owls are supposed to be wise. So, I collect owls. And so, it was such a thrill to me to be able to include an owl, so I knew I had to put Athena into this window. And Athena stands for Nightingale's family element because Athena lived with her at Embley Park.

Further down the window, there's another bird and that's a nightingale. I didn't put in this window anything that's straightforwardly telling you that it's Florence Nightingale, because there's no lamp, there are no soldiers and there's no Crimea, but there is a nightingale and there is a sort of Florence because in the golden light that forms the cross that she's turning towards, there are four buildings and the first one at the top is the Duomo in Florence. So, Florence and nightingale are keys to tell you who's in the window.

Going back to the buildings, we've got the Duomo at the top and then the next one down is Scutari Barracks, very distinctive building, that's near the Bosphorus near Istanbul. And that's where the soldiers were brought, which is where Nightingale went. She didn't go to the Crimea, she went to the hospital where the soldiers of the Crimea were sent, slightly different, significant difference.

The next building down is Winchester Hospital, because of her involvement in its design, and then the last building is St. Thomas's because not only did she design or help with the design of St. Thomas's, it's also where she founded her school of nursing, which subsequently has moved to King's, but it started at St. Thomas'.

There are other symbols in the window as well, and that's using the language of flowers. In the bottom panel, where the words 'here am I, Lord, send me', there are three different sorts of flower and the first is the snowdrop. The snowdrop was actually growing wild across the plains of the Ukraine, the Crimea, and the soldiers saw these beautiful little snowdrops and they dug up the bulbs and sent them back to England, to their families. They were then planted in the UK and they've now become naturalised. There's a very distinctive species of snowdrop which originated in the Crimea. So, I included the snowdrop for that reason.

And then Lily of the Valley, which is actually the flower for the Guild of Nurses, is the birth flower for May so it's Nightingale's birth flower. Then the other flower there is the primrose, and the primrose is the birth flower for February and February is the month when Nightingale had this call, had this amazing moment that changed her life.

So those three flowers, which wouldn't normally bloom at the same time, the fact that they're all blooming together is a sort of proof, if you like, that what we're seeing in this window is a supernatural moment rather than a natural moment. Yes, it was a physical, actual moment in her personal life story, but it was also happening in a spiritual realm, making it a supernatural moment.

There are tiny little extras just to add, which is that there's a pile of books by her feet and that's there because Nightingale was a very prolific author. She published huge numbers of books, pamphlets, leaflets, all about nursing, social care and hygiene and all the rest of it.

Then there's ivy trailing up the left-hand side and ivy is a symbol of eternity because it's an evergreen. So, it again represents the spiritual element, the supernatural element of the events going on in the window.

**Julie:** So how long did it take you to actually make it?

**Sophie:** It took as long as I live! I mean, there are lots and lots of stages about making a stained-glass window. There is in fact a book about the whole thing, which you can either buy from, Romsey Abbey, from the bookshop when it's open, or from me, through my website.

And I do explain at some length about how I made this stained-glass window, the technical elements, because I find them absolutely fascinating, using hydrofluoric acid and firing things, using silver nitrate, how glass paint works and all the different elements of it. I also talk about how I came to design all those elements in it. A lot of designing something is about knowing what not to keep. You have to be pretty ruthless about saying, well, that bit might look nice, but actually, it's not really going to relate to everything else or it's going off at a bit of a tangent or it's difficult to get the scale right or whatever it might be. I had lots of things on the cutting room floor. There were all sorts of things that I thought I would include but didn't make the final cut. Then once I'd decided definitely what I wanted to include, the next element of design was working out how they were all going to be pieced together to make a coherent design that felt like it could be an authentic moment.

**Julie:** It's so different from person to person, the creative process.

**Sophie:** I think one of the things I've learnt as an artist and as a teacher, cause I've done a lot of art teaching in my time, is that I think one of the things that often stops people from embarking on a creative project is they don't know where to start. But the truth is, you've just got to start somewhere, and you may not end up with what you started with but the journey that you take from having an idea to what it finally looks like might go through countless transformations, but you've literally got to start with something, even if what you start with ends up not being part of the final thing. So, for

anybody out there who's thinking about, 'oh, I'd just really love to pick up a box of watercolours and go and paint, but I just wouldn't know where to start.'

Just start. Just do something and it's like this great unblocking moment where even if it ends up in the bin, you've actually made a mark and made a start. And then that's where the journey begins.

**Outro:** We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, [www.winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://www.winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.