The most famous nurse of all time is probably Florence Nightingale, ‘the lady with the lamp’. Florence became famous for her work as a nurse during the Crimean War over 150 years ago. But ……… Have you heard of Mary Seacole?

In 2004 Mary Seacole was voted the “Greatest Black Briton” of all time when the BBC asked people to vote for their favourite black person.

Mary Seacole was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1805.

Jamaica is an island in the Caribbean and Kingston is its capital city. It is a very hot place.

Mary’s father was a Scottish army officer and her mother was a free black Jamaican. Some of Mary’s ancestors came from Africa. They were black and had been forced to leave Africa and taken to Jamaica to work as slaves.

Mary’s father might have looked like the young officers in these pictures.

For 300 years until 1838, black people were kept as slaves. They were stolen from their families and taken away in chains and made to work for a master who often treated them very badly.

Slaves were bought and sold in a market and often put to work on sugar plantations.

Mary returned to Jamaica in 1853 when she was almost 50 years old. Her house was filled with people suffering from a terrible illness called yellow-fever. Then the medical authorities asked her to train nurses for the soldiers who were also ill with yellow-fever.

By the end of that year she went back to London where people were talking about the Crimean War and the terrible conditions there. British and French soldiers had been sent on ships to the Crimea to help the Turkish people to defeat the Russians.

Nurses were being sent out to help nurse the wounded and sick soldiers at army hospitals in the Crimean battlefields.

Who was Mary Seacole?

Mary Seacole was a black nurse who travelled to the Crimea to help take care of soldiers who were sick or had been wounded in the Crimean War. But her name is not as well known as Florence Nightingale’s.

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Mary wanted to be able to use her nursing skills to help the sick and wounded soldiers in the Crimea. But there were a lot of people who didn’t like her because of the colour of her skin and they told her to go away.

Even one of Florence Nightingale’s assistants turned her away. Mary was so disappointed she wept in the street.

However, Mary was determined that she would go and she used her own money to get out to the Crimea.

Once she was there people realised that she knew a lot about medicines and healing others and they could see that she worked hard. She wasn’t afraid to ride on her horse through the battle to help soldiers where they lay injured.

It didn’t matter to the sick and injured what colour her skin was. They were grateful that she was making them more comfortable and trying to help them.

After the war Mary went back to England. She was glad the war had ended but she was now very poor. Soldiers that she had helped heard that she was struggling and they decided to raise money to help her. They organised a fundraising gala with bands and fireworks that lasted four whole nights. Hundreds of people came to see her and to cheer. Until then hardly anyone, except the soldiers, had known who she was but the soldiers loved her and wanted to thank her. Mary became a heroine.

Queen Victoria awarded her medals for the work she had done and gave her money to help her in her old age.

One very famous newspaper reporter wrote: “I trust that England will not forget one who nursed the sick and who sought out the wounded to aid and succour them.”

In 1881 at the age of 76, Mary became ill and died. A notice in the Times newspaper said: “she was present at many battles and at the risk of her life often carried the wounded off the field.”

Mary Seacole was buried in London.