

Charlotte Cox : A Crimean War Nurse from Ock Street



Drawing by Marjorie Stephen

The drawing above is an artist's impression of Charlotte Cox wearing the distinctive brassard or sash of Scutari Hospital. This was the barrack hospital near Constantinople that was run by Florence Nightingale and to which sick and wounded soldiers were taken during the Crimean War in the mid-1850s. Charlotte's face is based on a photograph of her taken later in her life.

Only five Scutari brassards are known to have survived to the present day, and the one belonging to Charlotte Cox, then Mrs Charlotte Willesden, is the only one that can be linked to a particular nurse. A very faint 'C W' is still visible close to one of the side seams.

The following article was researched and written by Anne Smithson

Charlotte Cox was born on 30 April 1817 in Ock Street in Abingdon. Her parents were Stephen Cox, a carpet weaver, and his wife Ann. In the 1841 census they are still recorded as living in Ock Street, and Stephen is described as a weaver and sacking manufacturer.

In March 1837, a month before her twentieth birthday, Charlotte married William Higgins, a carpet weaver, at St Helen's Church. The 1841 census shows them living in Ock Street with their two daughters, three year old Harriet and ten month old Selina.

The marriage was short as William died in December 1843 at the

age of 38, leaving Charlotte a widow of 26 with two young children. A little over two years later Charlotte married again. Her second husband was William Willesden, a gardener. The marriage took place in St Ebbe's Church in Oxford where they were both living. This marriage was also short as William died in 1850. The 1851 census shows Charlotte living in Friars Wharf in Oxford with her two daughters and two lodgers, and working as a tailoress. Her daughters, Harriet, aged 13 and Selina, aged 10, are both listed as scholars.

The Crimean War broke out in 1854. Reports in *The Times* described the appalling living conditions that British soldiers were having to face, with deaths from disease and malnutrition much higher than those from battle. Florence Nightingale was appointed 'Superintendent of the Female Nurses in the Hospitals in the East' and arrived at the hospital in Scutari (near Constantinople) in November 1854 with the first 38 nurses. The nursing care she organised led to a dramatic improvement in the survival rate of wounded soldiers.

Charlotte must have volunteered to join the Crimean War nurses. She was recommended by Dr H Acland, the Reverend J West of Holy Trinity, St Ebbe's and William Parish of Speedwell Foundary. Maybe she had gained some nursing experience and also become known to Dr Acland during the cholera epidemics in Oxford in 1849 and 1854.

Charlotte was one of a party of twenty-seven women who travelled together to Constantinople to join the Crimean War nurses. They went via Folkstone, Boulogne and Marseilles, a journey that took twenty-three days. When she arrived, Charlotte was employed at the General Hospital in Scutari and was paid eighteen shillings per week. Florence Nightingale, in a letter, described her as 'a kind, active, useful nurse and a strict sober woman'.

In May 1856, after a little over a year at Scutari, Charlotte was invalided home. Three years later, back in Abingdon, she was married for a third time, this time to William Andrews, widower, an engine driver. The 1861 census shows that Charlotte and her husband were living in a house in Railway Terrace in Abingdon and that she had taken over the care of three young step-children then aged 5, 7 and 10. A brother-in-law of her husband's was also living in the house. The following year Charlotte's daughter Harriet married a neighbour, Thomas Brown, a railway engine cleaner, and over the next fifteen years had six children who were born in Paddington, Wallingford, Abingdon and Oxford.

Charlotte was widowed again by the time she was 52. In the 1871

census she is living as a visitor at the Race House (later the Horse and Jockey) in Bath Street and is described as having independent means. Ten years later she was living in the Vineyard.

Towards the end of her life Charlotte lived with her daughter, Harriet, who by then had moved to Swindon. She died in Swindon on 22 March 1896 at the age of 78 and is buried in the Civil Cemetery on Radnor Street.