Florence Nightingale  
(1820-1910)

Just 150 years ago nursing was not regarded as a profession. Stories about nurses in the early 19th century suggest that they often did little to help their patients recover. One of the women who changed that image of nursing was Florence Nightingale.

Who was Florence Nightingale?  
Florence Nightingale was born in Italy to wealthy English parents. She was frustrated by the lack of opportunities in life for women from her social background. Against her parents' wishes she went to Germany and trained as a nurse. In 1853 she worked in the Middlesex Hospital during a cholera outbreak.

How did she become well known?  
Florence Nightingale's big opportunity came when the Crimean War broke out in 1854. The British Army suffered horrific losses from the new exploding shells and from lack of medical support. The Secretary at War, who knew the Nightingale family, asked her to go to the Crimea to take charge of the hospital at Scutari in Turkey. When she arrived, with a team of 38 nurses, she found the wounded lying on bare boards among piles of filth, she was met with hostility from the army doctors. Despite this opposition, she transformed the hospital by improving sanitation, cleanliness and supplies to patients. Within two years the death rate had fallen from 40% to 2%.

How did she change medicine?  
Florence Nightingale used her reputation gained during the Crimean War to improve standards in nursing back at home. The public donated £44,000 to set up a nursing school, at St Thomas' Hospital, London. By 1887 Nightingale's nurses were working in Australia, Canada, India, Sri Lanka, Germany, Sweden and the USA. Their standards helped to turn nursing into a respected profession. Nightingale also helped to reform the army medical service and the way in which hospitals were run.

What was her legacy to medicine?  
Florence Nightingale is often portrayed as a romantic figure walking the wards of Scutari. In fact she was very determined and faced opposition from her own family and male prejudice. She played a vital role in the establishment of the nursing profession in Britain.