

Contents and information for Teachers

Mary Seacole



Mary Seacole Artefact collection

We suggest this collection is best used to **set up a 'British Hotel' in the class home corner**, after pupils are familiar with her story (version included) and what the artefacts are. NB you will need to ensure they treat delicate items from the medicine chest appropriately or alternatively do not use those items (see checklist for delicate items). Children are to play in role as Mary, her staff and hungry or injured soldiers. An LA might be tasked with checking groups are keeping to this and to question them to gauge their understanding of Mary's story and what she achieved.

Wooden medicine chest and contents



Mary made her own medicines and treatments from everyday plants and other materials. She learned how to make most of these from her mother as a child in Jamaica. Prior to her work in the Crimea she had successfully treated people for cholera at home in Jamaica and in Cuba and for yellow fever in Panama. She even treated herself for cholera.

Cooking equipment – spirit stove, large cast iron pan, wooden spoon, brass skimmer

Pupils who have been camping may have seen something similar to the spirit stove. This could be used in the hotel's kitchen, or to warm food or water for tea in the field. The large pot would be ideal for boiling hams or chickens (as frequently mentioned in her autobiography) or making stews, gruel or simply tea.



Other kitchen equipment, enamel jug, butter pats



Foodstuffs – chicken, basket of veg (onions, carrots, potatoes), basket of eggs



Other hotel items – a rat, large union flag, muslin sheet (for use as a mosquito net)



Clothing for Mary – white cotton bonnet, large fringed shawl, crocheted gloves.



Information books

Two children's information books on Mary



PCET poster with further information on Mary



Other resources

Illustrations

Two illustrations from children's books about Mary, showing her tending to injured soldiers on the battlefield



Biographical information for teachers:

Mary Jane Grant was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1805. Her father was a Scottish army officer and her mother, a black woman, ran a boarding house in Kingston. The house was well known to naval and army officers and was called Blundell Hall. It was usual in that time to seek medical attention and convalesce at reputable hotels and Mary's mother was also a well known doctress.

It was from her mother that the young Mary learned about medicine and she became a competent doctress in her own right. In 1836 she married Edwin Horatio Seacole, a man considerably older than herself and in poor health. Together they opened a store at Black River Jamaica. However Edwin's health deteriorated and they returned to her mother's house in Kingston where he died within a month of their arrival.

So when war was announced in the Crimea, Mary resolved to obtain official permission to go. Her knowledge and field training were excellent and she wanted to help the troops in the war. She sailed to England and volunteered her services in October 1854.

It is doubtful that there were any women who were as experienced and well trained as Mary at that time in Great Britain, as nursing was not considered a suitable occupation for ladies. On 12th October 1854 a report from *The Times'* correspondent in Constantinople wrote that there were not enough surgeons, dressers or nurses. There were not even rags to make bandages necessary for the dressing of wounds.

Mary's resolve to go to the Crimea turned out to be optimistic and although conditions were crying out for more help Mary was refused permission. Undaunted she paid her own expenses and decided to finance herself and recoup her expenses by becoming a *sutler*. Sutlers followed the army and sold provisions to the men to supplement their meagre rations, which were usually meat, bread and occasionally cheese. To this end she joined company with a Mr Day, who also was going to Balacava, and together they financed their joint venture.

However, these new arrangements were not allowed to interfere with the main object of her journey and a great portion of her money was invested in medicines, and the remainder to purchase those home comforts which she thought would be most difficult to obtain away from England. One poor injured soldier who she met at Scutari hospital on her way to the front line was very anxious that she should take over plenty of vegetables of every sort. Telling her he existed for months on salt meat and biscuits until it gave him the scurvy (a painful skin complaint) and "Oh! Mother take them plenty of eggs; we never saw eggs over there."

Whilst in Scutari she again approached officials in order to register her presence and apply for a proper nursing position. She met with Florence Nightingale at the hospital and offered her services but was once again rejected. So Mary Seacole set up her '**British Hotel**' two miles from Balacava. Wholesome food and home comforts for the soldiers so far away from home were provided but drunkenness and gambling were forbidden.

The British Hotel's reputation was soon growing, although the 'hotel' was actually a large metal shed which also included the storeroom. A large union jack fluttered above it. Next to the building was a small kitchen and two wooden houses with sleeping compartments, outhouses, a canteen and a yard for the stock with sties, huts and stables.

She was often to be seen riding out to the front with baskets of medicines. She carried hams on one mule and her medicines on another. In her autobiography she talks about the medicines she used to cure cholera patients whilst visiting her brother in Cruces, Central America.

"Selecting from my medicine chest (I never travel anywhere without it) what I deemed necessary, I went hastily to the patient. It was a very obstinate case, but by dint of mustard emetics (medicine that causes vomiting), warm fomentations, mustard plasters on the stomach and calomel (a purgative medicine) at first in large and then in gradually smaller doses, I succeeded in saving my first cholera patient. The simplest remedies were perhaps the best. When my patients felt thirsty I would give them water in which cinnamon had been boiled. Another patient, a girl, I rubbed over with warm oil, camphor and spirits of wine."

The war illustrator William Simpson reports on seeing her often and he frequently expressed admiration for the woman who took her medical bag into the thick of battles. Doctor Douglas Reid recalled ... "*She did not spare*

herself if she could do any good to the suffering soldiers, and at her own expense supplied hot tea to the sufferers while they waited to be lifted into the boats she was always at her self-chosen post, with her stove and kettle, in any shelter she could find, brewing tea for all who wanted it, and there were many."

There were cheerful moments on the sick-wharf as well, when Mary met up with sailors she had known before in Kingston, Jamaica. She was always ready with a kind word, a sip of lemonade or even sometimes a piece of homemade sponge cake made with eggs brought from Constantinople. Sometimes this was all the doctors would allow her to give to the wounded. *"They all liked the cake, poor fellows, better than anything else, perhaps because it tasted of home."*

Mary also had a store at Kadikoi, near Balaclava, where she sold all sorts of commodities, including clothing and food. Here are just some of the things it stocked: linen and hosiery, saddlery, caps, boots and shoes, , meat and soups of every variety in tins; tinned salmon, lobsters, and oysters,; game, wild fowl, vegetables, also preserved eggs, sardines, curry powder, cigars, tobacco, snuff, cigarette papers, tea, coffee, toothpowder, and currant jelly. When cargoes came in from Constantinople, she bought supplies of potatoes, carrots, turnips and greens and sometimes bread rolls; although more often it was Turkish bread (ekmek), baked at Balaclava.

Officers at the time noted that; "You might get everything you needed from Mother Seacole's from an anchor to a needle." When summer came it brought out the insects. The officers in the front suffered terribly from them. A Lieutenant in the Royal Naval Brigade, a relative of the Queen (Victoria) pleaded with Mary to find him something to help keep the flies at bay. She rode down to the store at Kadikoi and brought a length of muslin, which she pinned up, as there was no time to sew it into a mosquito net. The prince was delighted. When the prince retired later through ill-health and took up sculpture he carved a bust of Mary Seacole. It was first exhibited in 1872 and is now held at the Institute of Jamaica.

Cooking and providing wholesome nourishment was an important part of the role Mary Seacole played in caring for the soldiers, frequently providing sustenance or medicines direct to their lodgings:

"Don't you think, reader, if you were lying, with parched lips and fading appetite, thousands of miles from mother, wife or sister, loathing the rough food by your side, and thinking regretfully of that English home where nothing that could minister to your great need would be left untried -don't you think that you would welcome the familiar figure of the stout lady whose bony horse has just pulled up at the door of your hut, and whose panniers contain some cooling drink, a little broth, some homely cake, or a dish of jelly or blancmange?"

The high regard in which Mary was held by the officers and their men is demonstrated by the many letters written to her:

'Mrs Seacole would confer a favour on the writer, who is very ill, by giving his servant (the bearer) a boiled or roast fowl; if it be impossible to obtain them, some chicken broth would be very acceptable.

I am yours truly obliged, JK., 18th R.S.

Arthur C---, Comm. Staff Officer, having been attacked one evening with a vey bad diarrhoea at Mrs Seacole's, took some of her good medicine. It cured me before the next morning and I have never been attacked since. October 17th, 1855.

Archibald R. L. , Comm Staff, Crimea, was suffering form diarrhoea for a week or more; after taking Mrs Seacole's good medicine for two days, he became quite well, and remained so to this day. October 17th, 1855.'

Many of the poorer soldiers could not afford to pay for the medicines she dispensed but still she ministered to them. Sometimes, once well, they paid in kind by buying fruits in Balaclava and leaving at the store or promising to send goods once they were all back home.

Despite the demands on her service Mary Seacole and her workers roasted about 20 chickens daily, besides boiling hams and tongues. In the evenings they made sandwiches, packed up chickens, tongues, ham, wine and spirits, and restocked medicine chest with lint, bandages needles thread and medicines.

When peace was declared the soldiers began to return home. Although Mary was very happy the war was over it was also the beginning of her ruin. Having expanded her business and filled the shelves of her storehouse at a great cost, the provisions were no longer needed. It was impossible to carry everything home with her. Everything had to be sold for whatever price could be obtained which was usually a lot less than the price she had paid for it. As the regiments moved out Mary was inundated with acknowledgements and gratitude from those she had helped.

When almost all had left, the British Hotel was pulled down and the outhouses and sheds were dismantled and given away to the Russians. She could sell nothing now. Horses had to be given away, as did cheese and wine which had cost such a lot of money.

A few days later Mary was standing on board a crowded steamer, holding a battered parasol given to her by one of the soldiers, taking a last look at the shores of the Crimea as she began her journey homewards.

Although Mary Seacole's work won her praise and gratitude, her achievements in the Crimea have, until recently, been overshadowed by those of her more famous contemporary, Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). In many ways the two women were similar: The both possessed remarkable powers of organisation, steely determination and the strength of mind to break many of the conventions of the day in order to devote themselves to work they considered worthwhile. Seacole's more informal contribution during the years of the Crimean War (1853-1856) was easily forgotten, except by soldiers whose lives she had saved.

Although Mary Seacole's work won her praise and gratitude, her achievements have, until recently, been overshadowed by Florence Nightingale. But in the 1970s, over 90 years after she died in London, some people decided to celebrate her work and raise awareness of this other nurse that attended British soldiers in the Crimea. Her gravestone in a London cemetery was re-discovered and restored in 1973. By 2004 she was voted the Greatest Black Briton by an internet poll.