

Green Plaque nominee, Ann Ayre Hely, nominated by Dr Wendy Freer of Pudding Bag Productions, Ashby de la Zouch, Leicestershire.

Ann Ayre Hely was born to a very ordinary family in Ravenstone, Leicestershire in 1819. Her parents kept the Plough Inn and her father was also a blacksmith. After only three years of marriage, she was tragically widowed at the age of 35 but she didn't let her grief stop her leading an active and remarkable life.

In March 1855, she travelled out with other nurses, following in the footsteps of Florence Nightingale, to nurse the sick and injured soldiers of the Crimean War. She worked first at Smyrna Hospital and eight months later was transferred to Renkioi Hospital in the Dardanelles. This was a very special prefabricated hospital, designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. After her return to England in 1856, she nursed Florence Nightingale herself for a while and was also chosen to nurse the mother of Queen Victoria although the Duchess sadly died before Ann could take up her post. In 1897, at the age of 78, she was awarded the coveted Royal Red Cross medal for nursing. She would have been presented with this honour by Queen Victoria herself, but she was too frail to travel to Windsor Castle and the ceremony took place in Ravenstone Hospital where she was living.

Ann was evidently very highly thought of as a nurse. Her superior officer at Renkioi described her as: "a very superior woman, a clever nurse, excellent temper, honest, sober, trustworthy and obliging, a great peacemaker amongst others." It must have taken remarkable courage for a simple village woman to even embark on the journey out to the East in the middle of the 19th century. She was venturing not only into a very strange foreign world but also a war zone where she would have to cope with horrific injuries and dreadful disease in crowded and unhygienic conditions. Ann was taken ill herself with Typhus at one stage but happily she recovered. The female nurses also would have faced resentment and hostility from the military medical staff yet in no time they had proved their worth.

After her death in 1902, Ann's name faded into obscurity and even her precious medal was lost. Her name and her life story have now been revived through a project undertaken by Leicestershire Heritage Group, Pudding Bag Productions who have produced a film and a book about her. However, she deserves to have her name and achievements commemorated and remembered with something as public and lasting as a Green Plaque which would be installed on an outside wall of Ravenstone Hospital historic almshouses where she spent the last 13 years of her life.