Former Florence Nightingale museum director
Alex Attewell sends a topical postcard

I took a group to the Selimiye Barracks at Uskudar, a suburb of Istanbul on the Asian side of the Bosphorus straits, as part of a recent tour.

British soldiers injured fighting the Russians in the Crimean War were brought through the straits, via the Black Sea, to the barracks hospital at Scutari, the British name for Selimiye. The British used it for 18 months during the conflict, which lasted from 1853 to 1856.

Historic journey
Hardly any local residents know of Florence Nightingale’s connection with the Turkish first army’s headquarters, which remains much as it was when the Ottomans ruled the country.

After taking the military bus from the main gate of the barracks, tourists go on a journey back in time. The present-day Scutari museum to Florence Nightingale is located in a corner tower in the military building. It is not in the original tower occupied by Miss Nightingale and her nurses, which was located on a different side of the main gate.

The museum does not contain any original artefacts from Miss Nightingale’s day, but that is no surprise. The real artefact is the building itself.

People on the tour always say that the experience of visiting the building is spinechilling and emotional. With all my years’ association with the nursing profession and with Miss Nightingale through my work as director of the Florence Nightingale Museum in London, I can appreciate the solemnity and the elation of standing where it all started.

Stepping on to pristine marble tiles where once there were rotting floorboards, visitors can stop for a moment and imagine those four miles of beds placed just 18 inches apart.

Miss Nightingale’s latest biographer Mark Bostridge said it is only on seeing the size of Scutari that the challenge faced by Miss Nightingale and her colleagues can be appreciated.

The museum contains reproduction prints of the corridors and wards in various states of repair. Some, it has to be said, are romanticised; nothing comes close to portraying the ‘calamity unparalleled’ encountered by the nurses in that first winter of 1854, when mortality peaked at 40 per cent.

However, the pictures help visitors to orientate themselves as they can glimpse the actual building out of the corner of their eye.

My tour included sites of Istanbul, including the recently uncovered cisterns beneath the city’s streets. These would have fascinated Miss Nightingale, who was so interested in clean water and drains.

Alex Attewell is a former director of the Florence Nightingale Museum in London and is now a freelance writer and heritage consultant.

RESOURCES
- Scutari tours
  www.jonbainestours.co.uk/itinerary.php?tour_id=43
- Scutari site
  www.florence-nightingale-avenging-angel.co.uk/scutari.htm
- Florence Nightingale Museum
  www.florence-nightingale.co.uk/cms