

# A LOCAL SAINT

Mark Curthoys

Sister Dora, who is commemorated in Walsall for her devotion to local people, was both a nurse and a member of a religious order.

**D**ora Pattison (1832–1878), the daughter of a mentally unstable clergyman, experienced a bleak early life in Hauxwell, North Yorkshire. Her father controlled his daughters' lives. In her late twenties she gained independence as headmistress of a Buckinghamshire village school.

She found her vocation while holidaying on the North Yorkshire coast when she discovered a newly-founded Anglican sisterhood in Coatham, near Middlesbrough. In 1864 she joined the order, whose sisters nursed accident victims in the nearby ironmaking industry.

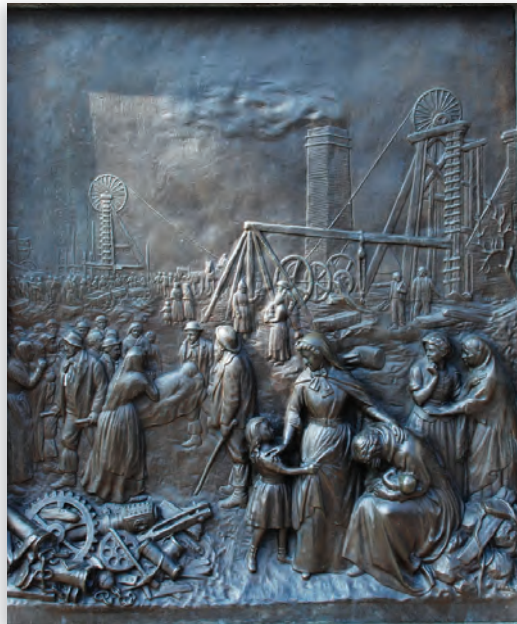
## A Nurse in Walsall

Sister Dora was sent to Walsall in 1865 when assistance was needed at the town's cottage hospital, where those injured in industrial accidents were treated. She had no formal training, but became a skilled surgical nurse, looking after the victims, including children. She was noted for her treatments of burns and fractures, avoiding amputations in cases which previously would have been regarded as essential to prevent gangrene and death.

When a new hospital opened in 1868, Sister Dora became head of the nursing department. She enforced hygiene and ensured that patients were properly fed. Above all, she showed concern for each individual, nursing smallpox sufferers in their own homes during the epidemic in 1868. Her inspiration was religious, and she took part in mission work in the town's most deprived areas.

## Industrial Disasters and Smallpox

Sister Dora was remembered for her work among the victims of two industrial disasters which affected Walsall, and were later depicted on brass reliefs beneath the statue in her memory. In November 1872, when the Pelsall Hall colliery flooded, trapping twenty-two men and boys underground, she organised relief for families at



Sister Dora comforts relatives at the Pelsall Hall pithead disaster in 1872. Relief at base of Sister Dora's statue.

the pithead. In October 1875, after a blast furnace explosion at Birchills, she nursed sufferers from appalling burns.

Earlier in 1875 Sister Dora had broken with the sisterhood when, without their sanction, she took charge of Walsall's fever hospital during a renewed smallpox outbreak. Her commitment to the people of her adopted town outweighed her obedience to the religious order.

## Reputation

In 1877, she was diagnosed with a fatal illness from which she died in 1878. The population of Walsall lined the route of her funeral procession, and the memory of her as a saintly figure in the Black Country grew after her death, as illustrated by the preservation of relics such as her cross

(now in Walsall Museum).

The number and variety of commemorations of Sister Dora – a stained-glass window in the parish church, a fund to support patients in convalescent hospitals, and a statue unveiled in 1886 – pointed not only to her reputation, but also to disagreements about her legacy. Victorians were unsettled by her estrangement from her family and by her controversial decision to join a sisterhood when the orders were associated with Catholicism. The discovery in the twentieth century of private correspondence with a young ironmaster (now preserved in Walsall Local History Centre) revealed her private emotional life and the pressure on her of public expectations. ●

**Dr Mark Curthoys** is Research Editor, *Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

## Further Reading

Susan McGann, 'Pattison, Dorothy Wyndlow [known as Sister Dora]', in *Oxford DNB*. Freely available online with your public library card at [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com)

Dorothy Pattison was said to be the first woman, other than a member of the Royal Family, to be commemorated by a statue. A bronze copy, cast from the original, stands in the centre of Walsall.