

Edith Cavell Nursing heroine

Edith Cavell began life as a middle-class Victorian girl in idyllic rural England – and ended it in front of a firing squad in war-torn Belgium in 1915. A new biography by Trust Archivist Jonathan Evans re-traces the extraordinary journey of her life.

Croquet lawns, tennis games, fruit-picking and jam-making – this was the genteel background of Edith Cavell's early life in Swardston, Norfolk,

where her father was vicar. Born in 1865, Edith loved animals, the countryside and walking – and like many young ladies of the time, she became an accomplished water-colour artist.

Nursing wasn't Edith Cavell's first choice of profession. Instead, she chose one of the few other careers open to Victorian gentlewomen, to be a governess – and briefly as a fluent French speaker, her last governess post took her to Brussels.

Called back to England in 1895, aged 30, to take care of her ill father, she then realised that her true vocation lay in nursing and, with no experience, began her career as an assistant nurse at the Fountain Fever Hospital in Tooting, south London.

Catching the nursing bug

Having caught the nursing bug, she switched to training as a general nurse at The London Hospital. Her career there lasted from 1895 to 1901. She trained under one of the nursing profession's greats, The London Hospital Matron, Miss Eva Ludos – who initially found her charge 'somewhat superficial' and her work 'by no means thorough'. Within a year, however, Edith had turned this impression around and the two would always remain in touch.

Surprisingly, promotion eluded Edith in British hospitals. So, in 1907, at the age of 41, when an old Brussels contact offered her the opportunity to work with Dr Antoine Depage – a campaigner for better medical standards – she moved to Belgium. There, she started a nursing school from scratch. The task was frustrating, but

ultimately successful and, at the start of 1914, her Berliandael Institute had 90 students and staff.

Outbreak of war

She spent the summer back in Norfolk, but returned to Brussels abruptly after receiving an urgent telegram from one of her nurses on 1 August calling her back. Two days later, on 3 August 1914, the German Army invaded Belgium and World War I began.

Three months later, two British soldiers dressed in civilian clothes arrived at the hospital associated with her nursing school. Both were severely wounded. She took them in, treated their wounds and sent them on their way home to England. Before long, she had linked up with an escape network.

Eventually the occupying German forces became suspicious and, after frequent raids, arrested her on 5 August 1915. By then, it is estimated she

had helped several hundred soldiers escape. Edith was court-martialled and condemned to death. At 7am on 12 October 1915, she was executed, with three bullets to the chest and one to the forehead. She died instantly and according to witnesses, with poise and dignity.

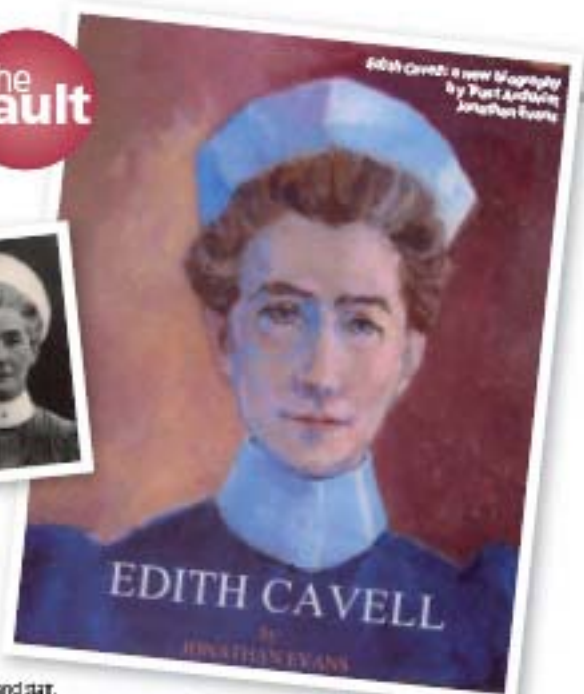
Act of wanton cruelty

Her death became an international cause célèbre and her execution was seen as an act of wanton cruelty. In 1919, after the war, her body was brought back to London for a burial service at Westminster Abbey. A statue of Edith was unveiled at St Martin's Place in 1920. Inscribed on it are her last words: "Patriotism is not enough – I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone."

For the past 80 years, nurses from The Royal London have placed a wreath there on the anniversary of her death. This year, Sisters Maggie Chikotwe and Aldeith Thomas from Royal Services had the honour of paying homage to her achievements, both as a nurse and a heroine.

Copies of Edith Cavell, a new biography by Trust Archivist Jonathan Evans, cost £5 and are available from The Royal London Hospital Museum or by emailing Jonathan.Evans@hertsandhelsondon.nhs.uk.

the
vault



Edith with her pet dog & cat and Jack.



RCH Nurses lay a wreath each year to mark Edith Cavell's death.