

NURSE EDITH LOUISA CAVELL

b 1866 – 1915.

This month's 'OBJECT' is a Bench, to be found at The Garden of Rest, at St Edmund's Chapel Ruins. (nr the Lighthouse).

This Bench is in memory of Nurse Edith Cavell, her story begins :

Edith Cavell was born in Swardeston, Henstead, Norwich in 1866.

Her father was the Vicar of that village, his name was Frederick and her mother was Louisa. Together with her siblings, a Brother and two Sisters, they were brought up as devout Christians.



She was educated at Norwich High School for Girls then went on to several Boarding Schools where she learnt French.

In 1887, 22-year old Edith began working as a Governess in families all over Europe.

At some time in her life she had visited an Austrian Hospital and was so impressed that she decided to train as a Nurse herself. At the age of 31 years she started training at The Royal London Hospital.

After a year, still a Student, she was awarded a Maidstone Medal for her work in a Typhoid epidemic for working 7.00 am to 9.00 pm every day and risking her life.

In 1907 she moved to Brussels to work as private nurse to a Doctor's family. He was not any Doctor, he was the Royal Family Surgeon, Dr Antoine Depage. After a few months the

Doctor put her in charge of a new school, Berkendael Medical Institute in Brussels, as a Matron, training nurses in Florence Nightingale techniques. By 1912, Edith was providing nurses for 3 Hospitals, 25 communal schools and 13 kindergartens. In 1914 she was giving 4 lectures a week to Doctors and Nurses alike, plus finding the time to care for a friend's daughter who was a morphine addict, and a runaway girl.

Then with War that had started, and Germany having invaded Belgium, Edith returned to England and was safe with her family.

But not for long, as she decided to return to Belgium as she had a job to do. 'There were people to be cared for' she said.



She treated German and Austrian soldiers as well as Belgian and English soldiers, her Christian upbringing had taught her that all men were equal and their lives were precious. During this time, she became involved in not only treating wounded soldiers, but smuggling allied soldiers, including Belgian and French men as well as English men into neutral Holland, and then back to England. She knew what she was doing and what the consequences would be if she was caught, and that she and the others were likely to be caught.

She would have seen this helping to get to England as part of their care, if she handed them over to the Germans they would be thrown into a camp and left to fend for themselves.

Her Bravery was mind-blowing. To shelter and treat these men, then take them to pick-up points right under the German noses, is gallantry of the first order. It is estimated she saved 175 soldiers and men of military age.

Eventually she was caught and she confessed to the Germans. She was tried, convicted and sentenced to death. The Germans later explained that if they had spared her because she was a woman many other women would be sabotaging their war effort knowing they wouldn't be executed for it.

They ordered her execution the next day to make sure no appeal for clemency was successful.

The group that ran the Hospital / Evacuation building comprised of 27 'conspirators' and were all put on trial and convicted, only 5 were sentenced to death and only 2 actually executed.

The night before her execution by Firing Squad, a German Chaplain had sent a note to an



Anglican Minister who remained in Belgium at his Church of England parish in Brussels. This note asked for him to come and see one of 'his' Parishioners who was dying. His name was Rev. Stirling Gahan.

When he came that evening and was told the truth about Edith he 'almost collapsed', but he went to see her anyway.

He gave her Communion, and she told him they had been very kind to her, "But this I would say, standing as I do in view of God and eternity. I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone".

Rev. Gahan said she would be remembered as a Heroine and a Martyr. Edith replied, "Don't think of me like that, think of me as a Nurse who tried to do her duty".

Edith Cavell's grave – Norwich Cathedral The next day, October 12th 1915 at the age of 49, she was taken out to be put in front of a Firing Squad and even then she forgave the soldiers for what they were about to do.

The Execution took place and she was buried at Schaarbeek, on the outskirts of Brussels. After the war ended her remains were brought back to England. She was re-interred beside the walls of Norwich Cathedral, and she is honoured with a statue in St Martins Place, just off London's Trafalgar Square.



Edith Cavell memorial St Martin's Place

Her remains were transported in the same Luggage Van as that which carried Capt Fryatt, another executed Civilian, and the body of the Unknown Soldier – buried in Westminster Abbey. More information and pictures are available to view in our files at the Heritage Centre, just ask a member of staff to retrieve from our Filing Cabinets.

We shall be writing about Capt Fryatt in a future article but in the meantime, there does not seem to be any knowledge about who organized and why we have the Edith Cavell bench in the Memorial Garden apart from her being from Norfolk. Can anyone enlighten us?

In case you are looking for the bench, it has been relocated to a safe place for repairs. It is in a bit of a state with broken pieces of wood to the back and the seat.

***Researched and written up by Tony Armstrong,
Heritage Centre Volunteer.***