

'Edith Cavell: a Heroine of the Great War'

The speaker at the February meeting was Ian McCardle whose topic was 'Edith Cavell: a Heroine of the Great War'.

Edith was born in 1865 and was brought up near Norwich in a middle-class family where her father was a Church of England clergyman. She was educated at home and Norwich High School for Girls before boarding at Clevedon and Peterborough. After schooling, she obtained a position in Brussels as a Governess to the 4 children of a doctor. She had to return home to look after her father, but it was becoming clear that her vocation would be in nursing.

On returning to England she trained as a nurse and worked in various hospitals. She made steady progress to the position of deputy matron, but she then found it difficult to make further progress. Apparently, there were personality clashes with the matron whose negative references were preventing her from being promoted. For a while she became disillusioned and returned home. Then through her Belgian contacts she was asked to set up a training hospital for nurses in Brussels, the first of its kind in Belgium. The hospital established a very good reputation and grew rapidly. Within a year she was a training nurse for 3 hospitals, 24 schools and 13 kindergartens.

When war broke out in 1914, Edith was visiting her mother in England. She returned to Brussels and the hospital continued to operate under German occupation treating soldiers of various nationalities including Germans. At some stage Edith was approached by the Belgian resistance movement asking if allied troops could be accommodated in the hospital whilst awaiting a safe passage, usually over the Dutch border, as Holland was a neutral country. She agreed to this putting herself and others at enormous personal risk.

On the 3rd August 1915 Edith and several others were arrested for harbouring allied soldiers. She was held in St Giles prison for 10 weeks, the last two being in solitary confinement. After a short trial at which she admitted helping soldiers to escape from the occupied territory, she was sentenced to death and she was executed by firing squad a few days later. It is probable that this haste was to avoid any opposition to the death sentence gaining momentum. As it was there was immediate and worldwide condemnation of the execution and this 'barbaric act' was used by the allies for propaganda purposes.

After the war her body was taken back to Britain for a memorial service in Westminster Abbey and then laid to rest in the grounds of Norwich Cathedral. Memorials were created throughout the world including statues near Trafalgar Square and at Norwich Cathedral.

Edith had led a simple life keeping very few personal belongings and she was fiercely determined in her wish to help others without regard to her personal safety. She made the following statement to the Anglican priest before her execution. 'Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hate in my heart' which is inscribed in the statue near Trafalgar Square. This was a serious talk, well researched and well presented by Ian. The vote of thanks was given by Jan Fowler.

The next meeting is on 22nd March when Jacqui Hyman will be speaking on 'Buried Textile Treasures: Discoveries from Medieval Egypt'.

Ian Reid