

# Edith Cavell



Ethnic Minority Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement

## The early life of Edith Cavell

Edith Cavell was born in 1865 in the village of Swardeston in Norfolk, England. She had two sisters, called Lillian and Florence, and a brother called John. They lived with their parents, Louisa and Reverend Frederick Cavell – the vicar of the local church, in the vicarage.

When she was a young girl, Edith and her sisters studied at home, they didn't go to school. Edith loved to paint flowers and was a very good artist.

She studied hard and had a talent for learning French, which she would use in her working life.

In 1890, Edith moved to the city of Brussels, in Belgium, to work as a governess (a woman who taught children in a private household) for the François family. She spent five years there, giving lessons to the family's four children and, again she proved to be very good at her job, being kind but strict with the children.

Sadly, in 1895, Edith's father fell ill, and Edith returned to Swardeston to be with him. Edith assisted in nursing him back to health and was left feeling inspired. Edith Cavell now had a new passion — she wanted to become a nurse



## Edith Cavell's career as a nurse

In 1896, Edith spent a few months at the Fountains Fever Hospital to see whether nursing was the right profession for her. Later that year she was accepted at the Royal London Hospital to begin her professional training.

It wasn't long before Edith put her nursing skills into action. In 1897, a deadly disease called **typhoid** broke out in the town of Maidstone in Kent, England, and Edith — along with several other nurses — was sent to help those suffering.

She did a great job, and even received a '**Maidstone Medal**' - an award given to those who worked hard to beat the deadly epidemic.



Over the next few years, Edith worked in several hospitals in England. But in 1907, she was asked to return to Belgium to help look after a sick child, with the help of Dr. Antoine Depage.

By this point, Edith was a well-respected nurse and it wasn't long before Dr. Depage had another job for her — an important job with lots of responsibility.

Dr. Depage opened Belgium's first training school for nurses and he put Edith Cavell in charge. She was perfect for the job and made the school a great success.

In fact, Edith did such a good job that after just one year, she was training and providing nurses to three hospitals, 24 schools and 13 nurseries.



Nurses at a training school

( Edith Cavell is at the centre).



## Edith Cavell and World War I

In 1914, during one of her trips back to Norfolk to visit her family, news reached Edith about the outbreak of the **First World War**.

After hearing about all the men being sent off to fight in bloody battles, she decided she must help. And so once again, she set off back to Brussels in Belgium, where her hospital had been converted to a Red Cross hospital to care for war victims.

There, she encouraged the nurses to treat any soldiers that came through their doors, it didn't matter which side they were fighting on.

In August 1914, German forces advanced into Belgium and took control of the country. It was at this time that Edith made a decision that would change her fate - she decided to help British, Belgian and French soldiers escape to **Holland**, a 'neutral country' where they would be safe.

Working closely with a secret network of people, she sheltered **Allied soldiers** in her hospital until they were well, and then smuggled them out through an underground passage. She also helped to provide them with a bit of money, fake identity cards and secret passwords for their escape.

Over time, the German police became suspicious of Edith, and her colleagues urged her to flee to save herself. Edith refused, and insisted on staying and helping Allied soldiers leave Belgium.





But in **August 1915**, disaster struck when a Belgian spy discovered the secret tunnel beneath the hospital and reported it to the authorities. On 3 August, Edith was arrested and kept in **seclusion**. When **interrogated** by German officials, she chose not to lie and instead **confessed** to everything...

Many people felt she should be treated with mercy, given that she had done so much work to help and look after both Allied and German soldiers.

Sadly, their cries went unheard, and following a short trial, Edith was found guilty of **treason** and sentenced to death. And, tragically, on **12 October 1915** Edith Cavell was **executed** by a German firing squad in Brussels.

Edith Cavell's body was buried at the rifle range where she was executed.

Many newspapers, particularly in Britain and America, wrote about her death and how heroic Edith Cavell was. They also used her execution as '**propaganda**'.

But many people argue that this was far from what Edith would have wanted. To this day, people are amazed by the incredible dignity with which Edith met her death.

She accepted her sentence, describing it as "just", and even showed complete forgiveness towards her executioners. During a visit from a reverend named **Stirling Gahan** the night before her execution, she said the now famous words:



***"Patriotism is not enough; I must have no hatred or bitterness to anyone."***

On 13 May 1919, after the war had ended, Edith's body was returned to England. A memorial service was held for her at Westminster Abbey in London, and thousands of people lined the city's streets to pay their respects.

She was later reburied at Norwich Cathedral, near her hometown of Swardeston.



The memorial service in London, where thousands of people lined the streets.

### How is Edith Cavell remembered?

An important figure in European history, Edith Cavell is recognised as a **pioneer of modern nursing** in Belgium. She is remembered for saving the lives of many soldiers during **World War I**, regardless of which side they were fighting for.

What's more, she put the safety of others before her own, and accepted her fate with incredible dignity.



In 1920 a statute of Edith was unveiled near Trafalgar Square, with four words engraved - which describe the qualities for which this remarkable woman is best remembered: **Humanity, Fortitude, Devotion and Sacrifice.**





## Glossary

**Typhoid** - a bacterial infection that can lead to a high fever, diarrhoea, and vomiting. It can be fatal. The infection is often passed on through contaminated food and drinking water, and in places where handwashing is less frequent.

**The First World War** - a huge war fought between the Allies on one side (the British Empire, France, Belgium, Russia and later, the USA), and the Central Powers on the other (Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey).

**Holland** - a 'neutral country' where they would be safe.

**Allied soldiers** - Allied forces are armies from different countries who are fighting on the same side in a war.

**Seclusion** - being kept away from other people.

**Interrogated** - asked lots of difficult questions.

**Confessed** - to tell the truth about something you know is wrong.

**Executed** - to kill someone as a punishment for a serious crime.

**Propaganda** - to make people think of the German forces as brutal and cruel, and to encourage men to join the war and fight against them.

**Pioneer of modern nursing** - a person who realised that patient care and good hygiene was important to help the recovery of a sick person. Florence Nightingale did this too.

**Treason** - is when a person acts against his/ her country. For example, somebody might help another country fight a war against his country by keeping secrets or failing to protect his country.



## Quiz

Answer the following questions in sentences.

1. When and where was Edith Cavell born?


2. What was her favourite hobby or pastime?


3. In which hospital did she begin her professional training to become a nurse?


4. What was the name of the deadly disease that broke out in 1897?


5. In which year did World War 1 begin and why did Edith want to help?




6. How did Edith smuggle Allied soldiers out of the hospital?


7. Who was Reverend Stirling Gahan?


8. Where was a memorial service held for Edith after her execution?


