

Peterborough People: Edith Louisa Cavell

By June & Vernon Bull – local historians and authors

PETERBOROUGH PLAYED A large part in her early life; although born in Norwich on 4 December 1865, Edith spent her pupilage as a trainee teacher at Miss Margaret Gibson's Ladies School, Laurel Court, Cathedral Precincts. She was considered a vivacious and determined 19-year-old when she started a joint teacher/pupil role under the headship of Miss Gibson.

Later in life her courage and determination was linked back to the lessons she learned from her "fearsome and kindly" Irish headmistress. It was through Margaret Gibson that Edith first went to Belgium as a governess to look after four children.

Edith's job as a governess was cut short when her father took ill. She returned home to nurse him back to good health and it was reported that this may have been the motivation that sparked her nursing career.

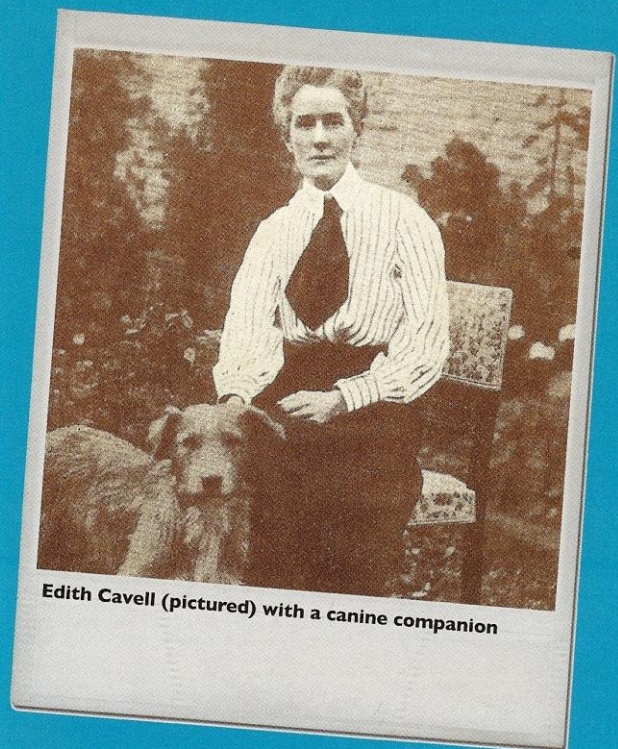
Belgium summoned her again when Dr Antoine Depage, surgeon to the King of Belgium, asked her to become the Matron of the first nurses' training school in Brussels.

On 20 August 1914, German troops entered Brussels, but Edith carried on nursing friend and foe alike. An order was given by the Germans that all fit men of military age – British, French and Belgian – should report for duty. This inevitably meant either forced labour in Germany or a prison camp.

Edith resolved to help them escape and so found hiding places until they could be passed on by other members of an underground organisation to make their way across to Holland. Betrayed by a Frenchman posing as a prisoner, Edith was captured by the Germans who demanded the death sentence for her, Philippe Baucq, Louis Severin, Mlle Thuliez and Princess de Croy, causing a wave of shock and horror over the civilised world.

On 12 October 1915, 50-year-old Edith was driven from St Gilles prison to be shot at dawn by firing squad at Tir National.

“Edith Cavell – attended the Ladies School in Cathedral Precincts and was executed by the Germans in 1915”



Edith Cavell (pictured) with a canine companion

In a chilling refinement of cruelty, they forced her to watch the shooting of Philippe Baucq and then came her turn. A contemporaneous report states that the firing squad were so impressed by her courage and demeanour (as she refused to be blind-folded and to have her hands bound) that they aimed high and the volley left her standing unharmed. Edith collapsed and fainted but before she could regain consciousness the officer in charge stepped forward and shot her through the head at close range.

After the war her body was exhumed from its prison grave at St Gilles, in a ceremony attended by King George V and King Albert of Belgium, and returned to England for a funeral service at Westminster Abbey. Edith was finally laid to rest in Norwich Cathedral.

