

Edith Smith

Britain's First

Warranted

Policewoman

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Oxton History





Edith Smith

1876-1923

Oxton (Wirral), Grantham (Lincolnshire) and Runcorn (Cheshire) were all, at one time, home to Edith Smith. Her story is about an ordinary woman born in relatively humble circumstances in 1876, but her journey to become the first warranted female police officer in Britain was very far from being ordinary.

Edith would eventually earn a unique place in British social history, becoming the first official woman police officer to be given the power of arrest.

In her private life Edith founded a large extended family, who are rightly proud of her and would love to have met their famous grandmother. Sadly Edith died in 1923, at just 46 years of age, having taken her own life.

Her story, one of dedication, energy and courage, is closely linked to women's emancipation and the movement for women's suffrage.

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Edith Smith, Pioneer Policewoman

Edith was born on 21st November 1876 on the Wirral peninsula near the centre of Oxton Village in Birkenhead at 9 Rose Mount, her father's occupation being given then as a Nursery & Seedsman. But her family lived at three known addresses in Oxton Village. First, on Poplar Road c1871, next at 9 Rose Mount c1876 (where Edith was born), and then finally at 18 Palm Hill c1881, where she spent most of her young years. Her father, James, originally from Westmorland, operated a nursery and seed business on nearby Palm Grove, Claughton, throughout that period. Edith's mother, Harriet, was from Camden Town in London.



Oxton had, by that time, become a veritable residential enclave of rich merchant families, most with businesses in Liverpool. It attracted folk from far and wide, to work as servants and tradespeople and no doubt, like Edith's parents, hopeful of setting up business and making a good living.

It was their move to live at 18 Palm Hill, however, that provided Edith with her lasting family home – here she grew up and would remain until she married and moved away in 1897. The house on Palm Hill had a shop attached, from which her father ran his business, but it also doubled as a *Post Office, Telegraph Office & Postal Order Office*. It was this connection with the Post Office that perhaps shaped Edith's immediate future.

In 1897 Edith married William Smith, who came from Wainfleet, Lincolnshire and so kept her family name. By 1901 Edith had her own

(above left) 9 Rose Mount, Oxton

(above right) 18 Palm Hill – the red front door



*(above)
Wellington Road
Post Office in
Oxton*

family and had moved to become the sub- postmistress of Wellington Road Post Office in Oxton. William ran a stationery and tobacconist's shop on the post office premises. Their three girl children were two years, one 4 year and 5 months old in the 1901 Census. Also listed was Lillian Snape, a servant and cook, not unusual for such families in those days.

Tragically William died in 1907 at the age of 42 leaving Edith at 31 with the care of their three young daughters Frances, Victorine, Annette and a son, James.

Edith's life must have been turned upside down for the 1911 census shows that she was then training as a pupil midwife, lodging in Peckham in London, while her daughters were at various schools and lodgings across the country and her son was in an orphanage near Blackburn. What motivated Edith to make such a dramatic change to her life is not understood, but as later events were to prove she was, alongside her evident strength of character, both complex and fragile at heart. The tragic early death of her husband might well have been a tipping point for her.

Edith worked for a time as a nurse midwife but in common with most women of her time the events of the summer of 1914 were to change everything.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 gave influential women the opportunity to press their case for women to be involved in policing. The Women Police Volunteers (WPV) was formed in London and recruits were given basic training in drill, first-aid, and self defence.

They began patrolling the streets, giving help and advice to women and children especially amongst the flood of French and Belgian refugees that were pouring into the capital, many of whom were faced with the choice between prostitution and starvation. It was clear that male police officers could not assist in this way as they were seen as part of the problem not the solution.

The climate of the time was not encouraging to the institution of any form of women's police force. Sir Edward Henry, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police from 1903 to 1918, said he did not believe in the idea of women police, "especially in view of the strained relationships between the sexes, or some portion of the sexes, in connection with the agitation over the suffrage question". Nonetheless permission for a volunteer force was later granted, with little official assistance.

The WPV adopted a military style uniform. This was to give the impression that they were an official organisation and to distinguish them from other "smartly dressed women" who were known to offer them board and lodgings but at a price. They were invariably brothel keepers looking for "suitable" young women.

The leaders of the WPV were Misses Damer Dawson, Mary Allen and Nina Boyle. Together with colleagues and friends they were heavily involved in the movement for Women's Suffrage. They were particularly outraged about the legal and penal culture of discrimination and brutality against women, in which the police at all levels played a part. Miss Dawson gave payments to the women, a generosity that later brought her to the brink of bankruptcy.

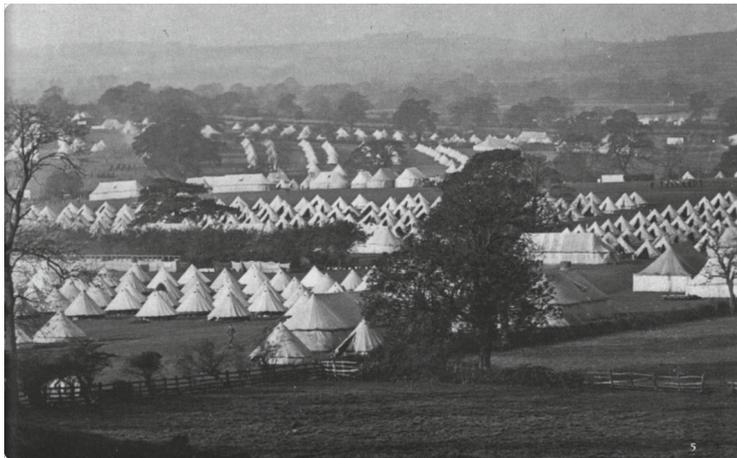


(above top) Edith worked for a time as a nurse midwife but events of the summer of 1914 were to change everything

(above) Two members of the Women Police Volunteers in London

“A woman of outstanding personality, fearless, motherly and adaptable”

As it happened Miss Dawson’s brother-in-law, a Capt Kensington, was stationed at Belton Park, one of the army camps that had been established across the country to train Kitchener’s new army. The arrival of thousands of young men billeted outside Grantham were causing concern to the civil and military authorities, as they struggled to maintain law and order; the main problems being drunkenness, the widespread use of cocaine, prostitution and the consequent spread of venereal disease. And it was by and large the women who were to be held more to blame for these latter problems... not the men. By any standards women, young people and children were all at serious risk and with little or no protection.



(right) Belton Camp, outside Grantham, where thousands of soldiers camped for training in machine gunnery before being sent to the front

And so Miss Margaret Damer Dawson was asked to provide two members of the WPV to assist. Mary Allen and Ellen Harburn arrived in Grantham by train with her on 27 November 1914, the first uniformed women police officers in the UK to carry out actual policing duties, though at this stage they had no power of arrest and unlike male police officers, were not paid out of the rates.

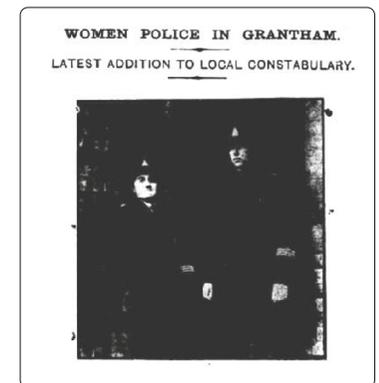
A crowd of townsfolk met the train and gave the women a noisy reception, with shouts of disapproval. For some time they were dogged by small groups of gawkers but soon it was generally acknowledged they were in the town not to persecute but to help.

Early in 1915 the WPV reformed as the Women's Police Service (WPS) and the two women police officers, Misses Allen and Harburn, moved from Grantham to Hull, to be replaced in Grantham by Mrs Edith Smith and Miss Teed. Both women had been trained in London, where a colleague Dorothy Peto described Edith Smith as “a woman of outstanding personality, fearless, motherly and adaptable”.

They moved drunks on, visited the families of girls that they believed to be in “moral danger” and, controversially, enforced a curfew imposed on the women of Grantham by the army. It was said that several times a day they had to adopt a variety of methods to separate couples having sex in the fields and lanes around the base... though a sharp crack with a rolled umbrella usually did the trick!

The fact that the services of the two women were much appreciated by the military authorities is documented in a letter sent by Major General F Hammersley, the commander of the 11th Division, which was training at Belton Park Camp, to Miss Dawson. Major General Hammersley thought that the two women might be removed and he did not want this to happen.

“The services of the two ladies in question have



(above top) Miss Margaret Damer Dawson and Mary Allen, two prominent women in the establishment of the Women Police Volunteers. Both were to be later awarded the OBE

(above) Newspaper report of the arrival of Edith Smith and Miss Teed in 1915

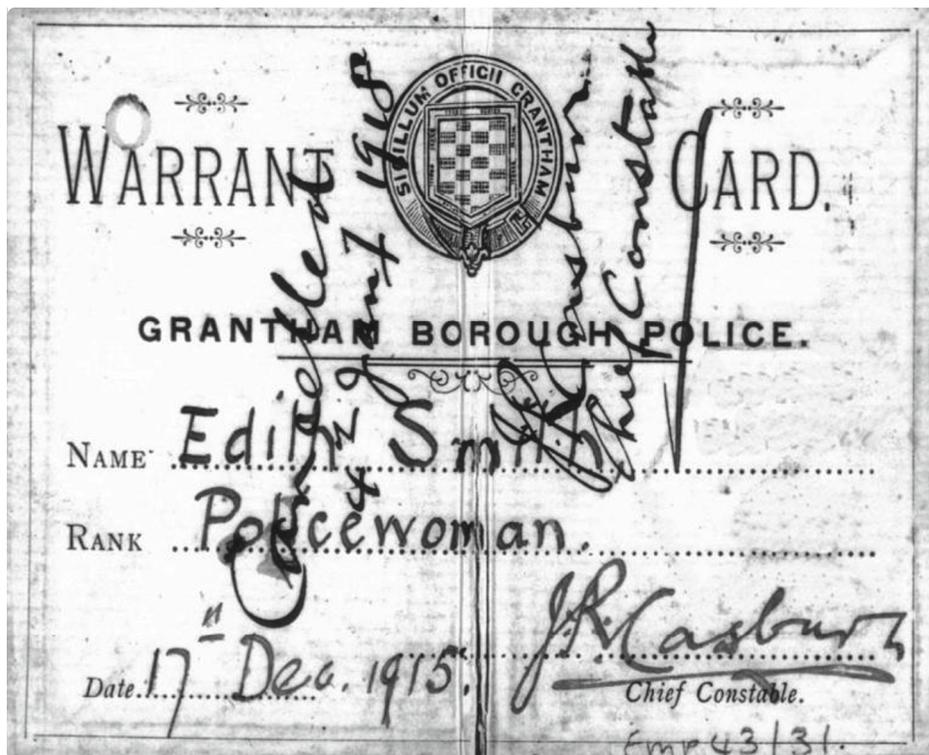
proved of great value. They have removed sources of trouble to the troops in a manner that the military police could not attempt. Moreover, I have no doubt that the work of these ladies in an official capacity, is a great safeguard to the moral welfare of young girls in the town."

In November 1915 a meeting was held in Grantham to discuss the progress of the policewomen. The Bishop of Grantham was in the chair. The Chief Constable said he was most satisfied with the women's performance and that he now wanted their work to continue in an official capacity.

The Women Central Committee under their chairman Lady Thorold had raised money through voluntary subscriptions to pay the policewomen but in December 1915 the Watch Committee of Grantham Borough Council decided to pay the policewomen from the rates, in the same way as the policemen were funded.

Then on 17 December 1915 Chief Constable Casburn signed Edith Smith's Warrant Card and she received the power of arrest, becoming the first full WPC and her name moved into history.

(below) Edith Smith's Warrant Card giving her the power of arrest, historically making her the first full WPC



Miss Teed and Edith received 28 shillings (£1.40) per week and merely changed their WPS Badges for the Town Arms of Grantham which was shown on her Warrant Card.

In her first annual report Edith Smith said, "I was officially appointed as a policewoman by the Watch Committee. I immediately found that I was in a better position for carrying out the works than previously, the official appointment made such a vast difference and in consequence the whole of the duties were performed in a much better and more satisfactory manner."

Edith said that she got to know the 'bad girls' of the town personally and that she was able to "distinguish them from the professionals from adjacent towns, who flock through the streets at night."

The authorities, it has to be said, were not on a moral as much as a practical campaign. Venereal disease was a significant problem at the time and for the army in particular. For instance it was recorded that some 30 per cent of soldiers in the Crimean War were in hospital with sexually transmitted diseases, prompting one commanding officer to say that "there are more soldiers in hospital than on the battlefield".

Once whilst in training in London, Mrs Peto, a colleague of Edith's described how, on finding a young couple wrapped around each other in the grass in Hyde Park, Edith frankly pointed out the dangers and appealed to the man to be more chivalrous. Mrs Peto reported that they responded with thanks and desisted their activities!

The workload back in Grantham was

considerable. Overall the cases handled by the WPS in Grantham 1916 are as follows:

100 wayward girls cautioned, 15 larceny cases of women and girls, 16 drunk women cautioned, 10 prostitutes proceeded against and convicted, 8 prostitutes placed in institutions, 10 prostitutes returned to their parents, 50 prostitutes cautioned, 2 disorderly houses proceeded against and convicted, 20 disorderly houses suspected and under observation, 5 affiliation cases assisted, 18 respectable girls assisted during temporary stay in town and getting them back home, 1 fortune teller charged and convicted, 2 women charged and convicted under the Defence of the Realm Act, 5 respectable women assaulted, 5 girls placed in institutions owing to unsuitable home surroundings, 24 illegitimate baby cases, 10 blacklists at the theatre and picture houses, 10 dirty houses reported to the sanitary authority or RSPCC, 1 charged, 1 convicted, and 100 cases advised and helped.

Altogether the Women's Police Service handled total of 411 cases in 1916. Edith appeared to be so good at her work that the first report on her annual activities recorded that "fallen women" (prostitutes from elsewhere) had voluntarily left town because "the policewoman was such a nuisance".

By June 1916, Miss Teed had resigned and Edith continued to work alone in the town. In April 1917 the Watch Committee voted to raise her weekly pay to £2.10 shillings (£2.50). This was more than the oldest male Constable in the force and raised a few questions.

Alderman Lee defended the decision. "Mrs Smith did entirely different work to the

men. Her duties were most onerous. When they engaged her, her work was to be particularly amongst the women and children."

"She was also doing rescue work among the girls, and looking after troublesome homes, saving many cases from coming to police court; she was the healer of many breaches."

"She was a very intelligent woman and gave wise counsel; and perhaps it was unknown to the members of the Council that her front room was quite a consulting room for the womenfolk of the town who sought her advice and instruction."

"Being a qualified nurse she was able to render very valuable service. Altogether her work was really outside that of an ordinary police constable and therefore she did not want to rank as the same practically. She was contented and satisfied; her whole heart was in her work and she was a faithful policewoman."

Edith took no holidays, had no days off, worked night and day as required and received no overtime or pension.

In October 1916 there was a sign that the family were together again when her daughter Frances was married at St Wulfram's Church, Grantham to Sgt V G Weekes, an instructor in the Machine Gun Corps at Belton. Sgt Weekes was promoted to Sergeant Major on his wedding day and Edith, in her policewoman's uniform gave her daughter away. Edith's youngest daughter Emily was a bridesmaid.

Edith with her mother Harriet and daughter Frances with her baby Geoffrey



Edith travelled throughout Britain, gave talks and wrote books and pamphlets on women's policing. Edith Smith was a great campaigner, talking at conferences about her work and she toured Scotland showing the Scottish authorities how women policing might succeed. Based on her own experience she wrote:

"Wartime has created another opening for such women as are specially suited to the work."

"There is no question as to their usefulness on the Force, given the right woman and a good training, consisting of drill, police law and etiquette, combined with previous proficiency in one or more of the following: typewriting, first-aid, midwifery, nursing or

experience of district work as health visitor, schoolteacher or inspector."

It was recorded that whilst in Scotland on one occasion she occupied the pulpit of a nonconformist church and gave a "straight talk" to an adult congregation. On another occasion she struggled with and overcame a soldier who was attempting to cut his own throat on Euston Station, London.

By the end of 1917, Edith was tired. She had worked non-stop for two and half years. In her resignation letter of 4 January 1918 to the Chief Constable, she said her ill-health was due to "chest trouble which becomes worse in the winter owing to late hours in the fog and the damp."

In this letter Edith said that she was "indebted to the help and assistance of the male (police) force and to the public" during her time in the town. Edith returned to nursing and became the matron of the Lindis Nursing Home in Grantham.

After leaving Grantham, Edith moved Runcorn in Cheshire to work for a Nursing Association. It was reported (in her obituary) that:

"On coming to the district to work for the Halton and District Nursing Association, she found that the funds were in very low water and immediately set about to improve the position. She gave several interesting lectures, organised whist drives and even formed and conducted shorthand classes - all to aid the funds of the Association. She entered enthusiastically and efficiently into the nursing side of the work. She seemed to excel in everything she attempted. She would play a very vigorous game of tennis and won a billiard handicap in Runcorn. She was also a pianist and the possessor of a beautiful voice. At house parties she showed accomplishment in all kinds of indoor games. She seemed to possess unlimited energy and to add to her many interests she recently obtained a knitting machine so that she could make stockings from wool supplied by the villagers, making a small charge for the benefit of the Nursing Association. As a result of her work the association finds itself in a happy financial position".

But there was concern in the Association, as the County Superintendent said that she "did not complain about the nurse's work, but about her methods". Perhaps Edith's policing and nursing style was way in advance of its time?

It was recorded that in the days before her suicide she appeared to be in good spirits. Her postman reported at the inquest that he was delivering, on the day of her death, a dress to be worn at the carnival the next day. She had also planned a holiday in France with a friend.

"She was a very intelligent woman and gave wise counsel. Being a qualified nurse she was able to render a very valuable service"

(right) Halton Almshouses, Runcorn



It was further revealed that Edith had already given in her notice, to expire on January 6, as she was going to be married on that date.

Edith at that time had made her home in Halton Almshouses. It is not known whether this was because she had little money to support herself or perhaps that she wished to be closer to her “patients”. Mr W Snape Looker, the Hon Secretary of the Halton Nursing Association said that “until recently the nurse had been all that could be desired”. But nonetheless it was recorded that the Association had issues with Edith and convened a meeting to which she was not invited. In fact they decided that they could only resolve these matters by asking Edith for her resignation, and a deputation went to her home to tell of this. Edith was so deeply moved and distressed by this course of events that she felt compelled to take her own life. She wrote a suicide note which was presented at the Inquest saying:

“I give my midwifery bag to the Halton District Nursing Association as a memorial to the nurse who lived and died for her patients. I have no sense of having wronged anyone. God is more merciful than man. He won’t misjudge me nor condemn me unproved. I love my patients and it has cut deep that they have so cruelly mistreated me. I have never harmed them, my whole thought was to save their pain and suffering. Goodbye. God bless you for all you have done for me. I shall lie waiting on the other side and will work out our way together through Purgatory to the feet of Jesus Christ, Our Saviour.”

She died from a self induced overdose of morphine on 26 June 1923. The coroner, in finding that death was due to morphia poisoning, said it was a painful duty to return a verdict that the

deceased took her own life but he believed that she did so whilst “temporarily insane”, and he returned a verdict accordingly. Such a verdict does not have the same connotation as it might have today, for although it might sound harsh, then it served as a form of legal “kindness”, ensuring inheritance, reducing the stigma of suicide and enabling Christian burial rites to be performed.

Though strong and energetic, it seems Edith was a sensitive woman, and perhaps experiencing what today would be seen as “depression”. She was buried in Runcorn, her grave to be found in Halton Cemetery. She shares the unmarked grave with her niece, Marjorie, who died aged 2 years, just 10 days after Edith’s death.

Following her unveiling of a Blue Plaque on 19 October 2014, The Deputy Chief Constable Heather Roach, based at the Police Headquarters in Nettleham, Lincoln ended her address by saying: “Edith Smith was an absolute pioneer for women in policing. What she achieved was really quite outstanding and she proved how valuable and powerful women could be in the police service at a time when it was absolutely unheard of.”

“She spent time getting to know the people in her area and thoroughly understood the concept of “neighbourhood policing”. I’m incredibly proud to say that I’ve followed Edith in her footsteps.”

“Times have changed and policing is no longer a male dominated environment, as it perhaps was 40 or 50 years ago. Female officers are now rated on their performance in their professional roles rather than their gender – as indeed all officers are – and that’s something to be celebrated.”



“Edith Smith was an absolute pioneer for women in policing. What she achieved was really quite outstanding and she proved how valuable and powerful women could be in the police service at a time when it was absolutely unheard of”

(left) Deputy Chief Constable Heather Roach, The Mayor and Mayoress of Grantham and Courtney Finn of the Grantham Civic Society at the unveiling of the Blue Plaque

However the Chief Inspector of Constabulary at the time that Edith was warranted, Leonard Dunning, was not at all pleased by events in Grantham and wrote a Home Office Memo stating that the Chief Constable of Grantham had “apparently fallen in the hands some strong ladies” and that the Chief Constable’s senior woman police officer (Edith) is “perhaps a better man than he is”.

Those attitudes and the way they were expressed have thankfully changed since Edith’s days in the Force. In December 2015 the then Home Secretary Theresa May paid tribute to Edith in a speech at the British Library, when she apologised that her own department, The Home Office, had first challenged the appointment of female police officers.

It seems evident that Edith’s life was marked more by her achievements than the sadness of her death. To celebrate her unique position as the first warranted woman police officer, Grantham Civic Society erected a blue plaque to the “Pioneer Policewoman” in a road that has been named “Edith Smith Way”, on the wall of the original police cells between The Guildhall and Grantham Museum.



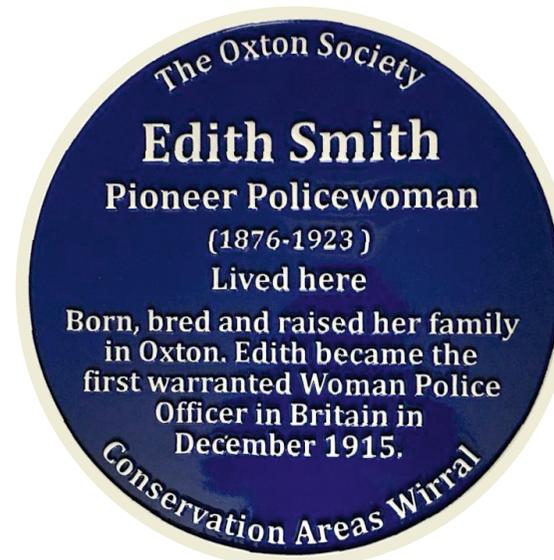
On 16th June 2018 The Oxtown Society also placed a plaque in Oxtown Village at number 18 Palm Hill. Margaret Smith, Edith’s granddaughter, unveiled the plaque. The guests included many of her family, Superintendent Louise Harrison from the Merseyside Police, (Chair of The Equality Network) Rhiannon Evans and Bob Knowles from the Oxtown Society.

Louise Harrison said “There is a huge correlation between what I read

about Edith and the work we carry on today in the Equality Network. She was an empowered woman, incredibly strong, adaptable, flexible and had the sort of skills and attributes that are required of women police officers today.”

Perhaps as a consequence of Edith’s contribution, there seems to have been an initial change of mind in Birkenhead for, as it was harder to obtain the services of suitable candidates to the Birkenhead Force who were over military age, twelve women were enrolled in February 1917, one of whom was given the rank of Sergeant.

The struggle for equality and recognition by women in the force did not stop there however, for by 1920 only three policewomen remained and the Chief Constable stated that in his opinion “they are considerably below the value of policemen”. Two of the policewomen resigned. The remaining member continued until March 1921, when she too resigned. Even in the 1940s numbers of women police officers was insignificant, 1 female officer in a force of 225 in 1943 and 6 in a force of 334 in 1947. Now women make up some 30 per cent of Merseyside constables.



(above top) The Blue Plaque in Oxtown was unveiled by Margaret Smith, Edith’s granddaughter, seen here with Bob Knowles of the Oxtown Society History Group and Edith’s great great granddaughter

(above) Birkenhead Policewomen, 1917

(left) The Blue Plaque