

'DETECTIVE' WORK : ARCHIVES AND AN UNDISCOVERED NURSE WITH EDITH CAVELL IN BRUSSELS, 1910-1916

This is the story of an email enquiry to the Edith Cavell website (www.edithcavell.org.uk) this summer. It is about a nurse who worked with Edith Cavell between around 1910 till her execution. It was sent in by her great niece.

The bare facts of the story

Much of what the enquirer had found out about Margaret was from an article in the *Western Mail and South Wales News* of November 11 1935 (see below) and from her research on the Ancestry website.

Name : **Margaret Sarah Pickering** Spinster

Born : April 1878 Place of birth: Coedpoeth, Wrexham, Denbighshire

Died : 10 November 1935 Place of death: Tywyn (or Towyn) Merionethshire

Cause of death: Seizure. Age at death: 58

Father: Reverend John Pickering, Welsh Baptist Minister. Mother Laura. One younger sister Catherine (also a spinster) who survived Margaret: trained as a midwife. Three brothers died in infancy.

Known nursing career:

Trained and worked at Great Ormond Street Children's hospital, London from around 1901; Worked at Edith Cavell's Belgian School of Nursing, Brussels from about 1910 to autumn 1915

Then forced to work as a nurse for the German Legation in Brussels, nursing wounded German officers and 'suffering great privation'.

Winter 1915: Escaped in disguise to England with help from the American Refugees Committee in Brussels.

From 1916 nursed in private nursing till her death.

Did the Cavell Archive have access to any more details on Margaret? There was no record of the nurse in the various biographies about Edith Cavell. There appeared to be no way of corroborating her story.

Another lead

The enquirer had, however, discovered a blog from 2014 by an archivist of the Salvation Army in London. (See the blog at <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/about-us/international-heritage-centre/international-heritage-centre-blog/patriotism-not-enough>). He reported that records showed an approach had been made in late April 1914 to the Salvation Army by nurse Cavell on Margaret Pickering's behalf. They were seeking help with the birth and placement of Margaret's baby, due in May 1914. (Edith's nursing work in inner London prior to her appointment in Brussels in 1907 had almost certainly given her knowledge of this Salvation Army service).

Edith Cavell wrote that she had arranged that the father of the baby should pay 5s 6d weekly towards its support which Edith would remit monthly to the Salvation Army. [In addition, Edith Cavell herself offered £5 towards the Salvation Army's costs.]

As things worked out, the baby was born before the place offered in the Salvation Army's maternity home could be used. There is, as yet, no record of the birth in Belgium nor of what arrangements were made for the baby's care – all we know is that Margaret returned to her nursing with Edith with no baby to care for.

Reading between the lines

What stories lie behind the bare facts of Margaret's life and career and her unplanned pregnancy?

Margaret's predicament in 1913-14

She was a British nurse in a foreign land, pregnant by an un-named local man from autumn 1913. We do not know how good her French was: finding maternity care and a family or agency who would look after the child by herself would have been challenging. Should she resign? If not, when should she explain her predicament to her employer Edith Cavell? What might she expect of Edith? – disappointment, concern that her pregnancy should not be viewed by her other nurses as 'acceptable' (contracts with nurses of the day would often be ceased by marriage)? Was dismissal likely? – and, if so, what future job might Margaret be able to apply for with this 'history'?

What was Margaret's view of Edith?

Edith was head of the first professional nursing service services across Brussels: by 1914 she had many nurses working under her. She, like Margaret, was unmarried: she was more than ten years older than Margaret and came across to some as strict and serious. She spent many an evening with her nurses sharing her experience and discussing nursing values, standards and ethics.

Like Margaret, Edith's father was a minister and for both, their shared Christian faith was deeply important. Edith lived in the light of her mother's inscription in her confirmation Bible (aged 18) of verses from the hymn '*O Jesus I have promised to serve Thee to the end*'. As they wrestled with the dilemmas arising from Margaret's pregnancy perhaps the hymn's prayers came afresh to them.

*Be thou forever near me, my Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle if thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway if thou wilt be my guide.*

Edith Cavell's response

We can only guess at this, based on what she did with and for others that has been recorded. In addition to her busy leadership role in Brussels, Edith cared for two young women (one abandoned by her father, one who was dependent on drugs following an operation). Crucially for Margaret, Edith was there to help. She 'went the extra mile': she persuaded the baby's father to take financial responsibility, and used her experience to find the best option for Margaret's baby back in England. She cared to such an extent that she was willing to have Margaret back on her staff after the birth.

Margaret's subsequent career

We have no details (as yet) of Margaret's confinement in Belgium. Did her baby survive? Did the father provide a home or was the child adopted? How soon did Margaret resume work? How did she cope with the pain of loss of her child over the months and years ahead?

We do know that she remained working all through the early months of World War 1 with Edith Cavell and her deputy, Sister Wilkins. After Edith Cavell's execution on October 12th 1915 Sister Wilkins read her last letter, written from prison on October 10th, to the nurses. Parts of this must have had particular poignancy for Margaret:

'When better days come our work will again grow and resume all its power for doing good. I told you in our evening conversations that devotion would bring you true happiness and that the thought that, before God, you have done your duty well and with a good heart will sustain you in the hard moments of life and in the face of death... I may have been strict, but I have loved you more than you can know.'

In November 1915 a new matron took over the nursing services and Margaret was pressed into nursing German officers in the German Legation building. Did Edith Cavell's statement from early in the war echo afresh in Margaret's head? *'Any wounded soldier must be treated, friend or foe. Each man is a father, husband or son. As nurses you must take no part in the quarrel – our work is for humanity. The profession of nursing knows no frontiers.'*

Margaret will have been grateful for Edith Cavell's support and her generous Christian spirit. She continued in private nursing for nearly 20 years till her death in 1935. She died preparing to attend Sunday morning church where she ended up, nursing in the community back in Wales.

If YOU know anything more of this story or other stories connected with nurse Cavell

please contact enquiry@edithcavell.org.uk

Reproduction of the Western Mail article 11.11.1935

WESTERN MAIL & SOUTH WALES NEWS, MONDAY, NOVEMBER

ROAD DEATHS DUE TO TELEGRAPH POLE

Jury's Request to
Postmaster-
General

"This is the second time within six months that I have been called upon to investigate a fatality on this particular road which was solely attributable to a telegraph pole. Had this pole not been there would be all the difference in all human probability this man would be alive to-day."

Mr. Herbert Williams (coroner for the Monmouth Division) made these remarks at an inquest at Chepstow on Saturday, when a verdict of "Accidental death" was returned in the case of Thomas William Trebarne, aged 28, of Essic-street, Cardiff. Trebarne fell out of a lorry which struck a telegraph pole on the Gloucester road at Tintern, near Chepstow, on Thursday. He was an Inman's man employed by the Central Electricity Board.

"Under the circumstances," said Mr. Williams, "the jury might think it their duty to make some recommendation with a view to the removal of the pole being moved to less dangerous positions."

The jury added to their verdict a rider strongly recommending that the Postmaster-General be requested to remove all telegraph poles and place them well clear of the highway.

LONDON WELSH AT THE ABBEY

Hymns Without Organ
Accompaniment

WITH NURSE CAVE AT TIME OF HER ARREST

Death of Nurse Who
Escaped in
Disguise

The German invasion of Belgium and the shooting of Nurse Cavell by a German firing squad is recalled by the death on Sunday at Townyn, Merthyr, of Nurse Margaret Pickering. Nurse Pickering was on Nurse Cavell's staff at Brussels for four years before the city was occupied by the German army in 1914, and with the famous nurse she was made captive and forced to undertake nursing work at the German Legation in Brussels, where she suffered wounded German officers and suffered great privation.

ESCAPED IN DISGUISE

Shortly afterwards, however, with the aid of the American Refugees' Committee, she escaped in disguise from the country and eventually reached England. She was the last British nurse to serve under Nurse Cavell.

Her war experiences had affected her health, but after the termination of hostilities Nurse Pickering carried on private nursing and was well known in New Zealand, where she died.

Born at Coedpoeth, near Wrexham, she was the eldest daughter of the late Rev. John Pickering, the noted Welsh Baptist minister. She was trained at Great Ormond-street Children's Hospital, London.

On Sunday she was dressing to go to church when she had a seizure and died within two hours.

Only last week she disposed of the local ironmongery business of which she and her only sister were the owners.

senior magistrate of the Rhyl Petty-sessions Division died on Sunday after a heart attack. Mr. Jones, who was aged 70, a member of the council for many years, died at his home in Wales. Mr. Jones leaves a widow, married only three months ago.

Mrs. Sophia E. Soll Swansea

Mrs. Sophia Elizabeth Soll; Mr. Walter Solly, of Upp Sketty, Swansea, director of Concrete Products, died on Sunday.

She was well-known in Merton's and Cardiff districts, formerly being South Wales manager of Messrs. A. D. Dawney, engineers.

Mrs. Solly removed to Swansea when her husband went to the town. Mrs. Dawney's wife, Mrs. Mr. Walter Solly, of Swansea's daughter, Mrs. H. V. Phillips, Welsh international and woman hockey player.

MR. ARTHUR JOHN, CA
Mr. Arthur James John, for man under the old Mercantile Company at Cardiff Docks, Saundersfoot.

Mr. John, who was unwell, died at his home in Cardiff, and resided in Roath.

He was a brother of Mrs. the new Deputy Lady M. Cardiff.

MRS. A. L. EVAN
Mrs. Annie Letitia Evans, née J. Evans, formerly of Br. Bay, has died at Cwrt-yr-y-parc, Cardigan. She was the widow of the late Rev. George James.

Reproduction of the Salvation Army record on Margaret's case April 1914

149

Refiled. Private file 3. 21 May 1919.
under 6.

Mrs. E. Cavell (Belgian School of nurse) 149 Rue de la Culture. April 29th
Margaret Pickering " " (per 3/12) " age 30 £5
Bruxelles
Maternity case. Sent forms 29/4/14. To consult Dr before taking May
journey. Held 4.5 m. Born Wrexham. Relative Rev. J. Pickering
Bryn Alun. Llwyn. N. Wales. Trained nurse. £36 ply. Longest
time 5 yrs. Present employer Miss Cavell. Has clothing. Baby to be accepted
placed in home. Father of child is a Belgian. Miss Cavell has
arranged with him for his payment of £5 per wk. to be paid monthly
through her, but cannot disclose name or address. His position depends
on him making repayments. Miss Cavell will send £5 towards expense
send nurse with her if necessary. Work 40 hr & gave Collaud address
illness took place suddenly. Due to cost postage work 70 hr in Scotland
Papers refd. & filed May 19th
Miss Pickering parents do not know of condition
(Papers sent)
Collaud
May 19th

Photo from the Archive – Edith Cavell and nurses in Brussels c 1912
(we do not have a record to identify one as Margaret)



Dr Depage and the nursing staff at the Clinique. Edith Cavell is next to Dr Depage