

Christmas at the Swardston vicarage, 1886 - rediscovered 2024 – a parallel with a Christmas party in her Clinique in Brussels 1914

The Norfolk Chronicle and Norwich Gazette published a column on January 9 1886 (page 5) which reported on a Christmas celebration in the Cavell vicarage in Swardston. The text reads:

The children of Swardston were on Thursday last, Old Year's day, very kindly entertained at the vicarage by the Reverend F and Mrs Cavell and family.

While the children were assembling the time was pleasingly spent in singing school songs and exchanging friendly greetings with the little ones by the worthy Rector, after which the children sat down for a bountiful supply of bread and butter, buns and jam.

Teat being over and Grace sung, all repaired to the dining room where the grand feature of the evening, the "Christmas tree", awaited them. The tree, which reached almost to the ceiling of the spacious room, was most tastefully decorated, not only with toys but also with more useful ornaments such as shirts, stockings and drawing slates for the boys, and petticoats, chemises and work baskets for the girls, and was lighted up with a great many wax tapers.

The pleasing task of distributing these presents being over, the children were again regaled with buns and other refreshments, and dispatched to their homes with light hearts and well pleased with the last burden of the old year - their Christmas presents.

Context:

Early in 1886 Edith Cavell was aged 21 and a governess in Norfolk, so she is very likely to have been in attendance. Her two sisters Florence (19) and Mary Lilian (15) and her brother Jack (13) would have been there too. Revd Cavell was aged 61 and his wife 50. The Cavell children were used to being around the parish – they often took helpings of the family's Sunday lunch out to people who the vicar was aware of as being in need. Edith will have known some of the children present from church services and her links to the new village school (which opened in 1878). She was to help in raising funds from 1886 for a Sunday school room by selling her art work. The room was located next to the vicarage and was opened in 1888.

Thanks to Derek Barber local historian for Swardston for this item.

It is of note that at Christmas in 1914 Edith Cavell hosted a similar party in her Clinique in Brussels – Diana Souhami describes it (edited):

At Christmas, Edith Cavell gave an all-day party to which thirty very poor children came, refugees from the villages and towns. Toys, chocolate and candy had been sent by ship from America. for dinner there was roast beef and plum pudding. There was a decorated tree and

for each child presents of a bundle of clothes and a doll for the girls and a toy train or car for the boys. Sister Wilkins had a sore finger from so much sewing of dolls and clothes.

For tea there were current buns, jam tarts and milky coffee. All the nurses allied to the school came. Many had relatives who were wounded or fighting. Grace Jemett spent Christmas with her American friends nearby - Pauline Randall, however, was at the party as were Jose the Romanian house manager and Marie, Edith Cavell's German maid, together with the cleaners and the cook.

Reverend Stirling Gahan arrived late in the afternoon ... his wife Muriel was ill. Edith sent her present round to their house - a tea service. Gahan was surprised to find a half a dozen British soldiers milling among the guests. These soldiers had had their Christmas dinner down in the cellar before coming up to join in the party. Two of them, Sergeant Jesse Tunmore and Private Lewis, had arrived two days previously.

Reverend Gahan thought there was a "spice of danger" about their presence but it did not occur to him that Edith Cavell might be at special risk.

Source: Diana Souhami *Edith Cavell* 2010, pp. 224-225