

## Report of the May 2024 meeting

The subject of Bob Knowles's talk to Sandbach History Society was "Edith Smith: Britain's First Warranted Policewoman".

He said that Edith was born in 1876 in Oxton Village, Birkenhead. Her father James, originally from Westmorland, operated a nursery and seed business in Claughton. Her mother Harriet was from London.

Oxton Village grew up in the 1850s with rich merchant families moving out of Liverpool and it attracted people to work as servants and also tradespeople who were hopeful of setting up a business and making a good living.

The Smith family lived at three addresses in Oxton but when they moved to Palm Hill the house had a shop attached. It was from here that Edith's father ran a Post and Telegraph Office and the family lived above the premises.

In 1897, Edith married William Smith from Wainfleet in Lincolnshire. They had four children: Frances, Victorine, Annette and James. By 1901, Edith had become the sub-postmistress of the Wellington Road Post Office in Oxton and her husband ran a tobacconist and stationery shop on the premises.

Tragically, William died of pneumonia in 1907, leaving Edith at the age of 31 to bring up the four children. The Post Office rules didn't allow a woman to run a post office if she didn't have a husband, said Mr Knowles, and she had to leave. The family were in turmoil and Edith had to make the decision to train for another job with a salary. The 1911 census shows her training as a midwife in London. The three daughters are living with relatives in various parts of the country and James is in an orphanage in Blackburn.

By 1914 the country was at war and many Belgians, fearing invasion, fled to Britain. Large numbers landed at Folkestone and then made their way to London to find work. Prostitution was rife and the women were targeted by brothel keepers. Faced with destitution or prostitution, many were forced to choose the latter.

A group of suffragists, led by Margaret Damer Dawson, Mary Allen and Nina Boyle, formed a voluntary group called the Women's Police Volunteers in 1914. They wore a uniform to give the impression of officialdom. Volunteers were given basic training in drill, first aid and self-defence and began patrolling the streets giving help and advice to women and children. Edith Smith became a member of the group.

The brother-in-law of Miss Dawson, a Captain Kensington, was stationed at an army camp established in Grantham. There were up to 25,000 young men at the camp and they wanted a good time, said Mr Knowles. Drunkenness, prostitution, drug taking and venereal disease became a great concern and the town was overwhelmed. The male policemen were not trusted by the women and they were unable to intervene. Two members of the WPV were sent to Grantham; one of them was Edith Smith.

Rather than live out of town she lived in a poor street amongst the people she was working with. A log for 1916, showed 411 cases which the WPV had dealt with over a wide range of matters. Edith, now working on her own, was described as a woman of outstanding personality – fearless and motherly. She put her nursing skills to good use and acted with authority – although she actually didn't have any! Her work would these days be described as community policing, said Mr Knowles. On 17th December 1915 she made history by becoming Britain's first warranted policewoman. She was paid 29/- per week and in 1917 it was raised to £2-10-0d. – more than that of the longest-serving policeman. She was quite a celebrity at the time, being nationally known. She travelled the country giving talks and wrote a text book for policewomen.

Edith took no holidays, had no days off, worked day and night as required and was paid no overtime or pension. She became exhausted and suffered with ill-health and in January 1918 decided to leave the police force moving to be matron of a nursing home in Grantham. Later she moved to Runcorn to work for the Halton and District Nursing Association. She worked hard to increase the funds of the Association and entered nursing "enthusiastically and efficiently and seemed to excel at everything she attempted" a later report said.

But a complaint was made later by a resident of the nursing home and a meeting of the board was convened to which she was not invited. They decided that matters could only be resolved by asking for Edith's resignation. Edith was so distressed by this that she took an overdose of morphine and died on 26th June 1923 aged 46.

The inquest heard how she had ordered a dress to be worn at the carnival the next day, she had planned a holiday in France with a friend and she had already given in her notice to expire on January 6th as she was going to be married on that day. The coroner returned a verdict that she took her own life whilst "temporarily insane". This may seem rather a cruel verdict to us but at that time, said Mr Knowles, suicide had legal consequences and was regarded as a sin which would have prevented her having a Christian burial.

Grantham Civic Society erected a blue plaque to the “Pioneer Policewoman” and named a street after her. In June 2018 the Oxton Society placed a blue plaque at Palm Hill, Oxton, unveiled by her granddaughter. A second blue plaque was placed at Wellington Road Post Office. In December 2018 there was a commemoration service at St Mary’s Church, Halton and another blue plaque was unveiled near the alms houses where she had lived. In Halton cemetery Edith’s previously unmarked grave was honoured with a headstone.

At the unveiling ceremony in Oxton, Superintendent Louise Harrison of the Merseyside Police said, “She was an empowered woman, incredibly strong, adaptable, flexible and had the sort of skills that are required of women police officers today.”

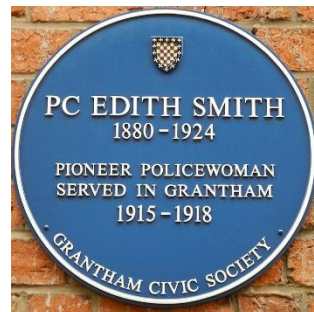
This was the last meeting of the season. Members will be visiting Acton Church in June and a new season of talks will begin in September. The programme can be found on the Society’s website [www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk](http://www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk) The website also contains reports on previous meetings, details of local history-related events and other interesting things.

### John Higgins



Edith, top right, with her mother, her daughter and grandson. (family photo album, Bob Knowles Has permission to use it)

Two other policewomen in 1918 (Euston Station). (Wikimedia Commons)



Blue plaque at Grantham (Wikimedia Commons)

