

Edith Holden

Although she is now known for her Nature' Notes of an Edwardian Lady and The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady, during her life Edith Holden was well known as the illustrator of many books and articles concerned with animals or natural history. She was born on 26th September, 1871, at Holly Green, Church Road, Moseley, which was then part of Kings Norton. Holly Green was at that time one of only two houses between Coppice Road and Queenswood Road (there was no Sandford Road), but it is now surrounded by other houses and has been converted into flats.

Edith was the middle one of seven children. Her father, Arthur Holden, a varnish maker, came to Birmingham from Bristol in 1865 and was partner in the purchase of a factory in Bradford Street, becoming sole owner after three years. The firm is now in Adderley Park. A Unitarian, Arthur attended Birmingham Labour Church in Hurst Street where Joseph Chamberlain also worshipped. In 1873 Arthur Holden became a Town Councillor and later served on a number of committees.

Edith's mother, Emma Wearing, had been a governess and had married Arthur Holden shortly before leaving Bristol. Of her seven children Effie, Winifred and Arthur were older than Edith and Violet, Charles and Evelyn were younger.



Holly Green. Church Road Moseley

The Holden family left Moseley when Edith was five years old, two more children having been born at Holly Green. They moved to Acock's Green, a village on the new Great Western Railway line, and their father, who was interested in wild life, took the children walking in the country, pointing out birds and plants along the way.

In 1880 the family moved again, this time to Troutbeck, Darley Green. This was out in

the country not far from Pack wood, and Edith often visited both Packwood Hall and Pack wood House. After ten years at Troutbeck father decided that it was too far to the station, so the family moved to Gowan Bank, a handsome old house in station Road, Kingswood, with a staff cottage and an out-building for ponies. The station was only a short distance away, with the railway cutting at the end of the garden.

Arthur Holden always invited to Gowan Bank the evening preacher at the Labour Church besides any lecturers in socialism or spiritualism who were visiting Birmingham. The range of interest did not stop here; there were poetry recitals, musical evenings and amateur dramatics. Edith often helped with painting the sets and acting in the plays which were performed by a drama group formed by Arthur Matthison, who had joined the family firm. As a part of his interest in socialism, Arthur Holden had always been concerned over the hard lives of many work-people, especially their children, and he lent the cottage at Gowan Bank to the Cinderella Club, which the Birmingham Labour Church had formed for children who lived in the slums of the city, so that children could

stay in the country for a week. Edith sometimes sketched the children when she could get them to pose for her.

When she was thirteen Edith had started to attend the Birmingham School of Art and when she was sixteen she had one of her pictures exhibited at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists annual exhibition. It was also at this time that she was recommended by her tutors at the Birmingham School of Art to go to Craigmill in order to concentrate on animal painting. It was at Craigmill, near Stirling, that Joseph Denovan Adam had set up facilities for students to learn to draw and paint animals. Most of the students lived in lodgings, but Edith lived at Craig mill with the Adam family for a year. Later, Edith often stayed with Denovan's widow, who by then ran a guest house.

By 1897 it was decided that Gowan Bank was too large because Emma Holden's health, which had been poor for some years, had deteriorated so that she had to spend much time lying down. This time the family moved to Woodside, one of a semi-detached pair of houses at the edge of Dorridge wood, and close to Dorridge station, the next along the line. Edith was becoming well known as an artist, producing four pictures a year for the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists and illustrating books.

After eight years at Woodside it was time for another move to a new house in Kineton Green Road, only a short distance from Olton station, which was named Gowan Bank, recollecting the house at Kingswood. We are able to read of the move in *Nature Notes of an Edwardian Lady* in which we also read of one of Edith's visits to Dousland near Yelverton on Dartmoor. Edith had been visiting Dousland since 1902, when she first stayed at The Grange, a guest house with tennis courts and a ballroom, but she had become friendly with Mrs Trathen, who kept the Post Office, and her husband who was a stonemason. The Trathen children often accompanied Edith on her painting expeditions. In the following year Edith again went to Dousland, as noted in her *Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, in which she also wrote of her visit later in that year to Scotland. During the year Edith began teaching at a school in Solihull as well as continuing to illustrate books and design postcards for the RSPCA.

Edith often visited London to stay with her eldest sister Effie, whose husband was a handicraft teacher. Because of her growing reputation as one who could be relied on to complete a commission and who had never produced a careless drawing, Edith received several commissions when she stayed in London. It was on one of these visits that she met Alfred Ernest Smith, a sculptor and pupil teacher at the Royal College of Art.

Back home at Gowan Bank a letter from Ernest Smith, asking Edith if he may call on her, arrived after she had set off for a holiday in Scotland with Mrs Denovan Adam. Ernest went to Gowan Bank without waiting for a reply and was told where Edith had gone. Without delay he followed her, and on returning from a trip to Oban, Edith found him waiting for her at the guest house. It had always been assumed by the family that Edith would stay at home, but on June 1st, 1911, she married Alfred Ernest Smith at Chelsea Register Office. Many kinds of people visited Ernest's studio. His sculpted busts in marble included those of royalty as well as of famous artists of the day. Meanwhile, Edith continued her interest in nature, drawing plants and birds to illustrate books, including children's natural history books. But on 16th March, 1920, she was found drowned in a backwater of the river Thames near Kew Gardens Walk. For some time Edith had been suffering from headaches which could make her dizzy, she had one on the morning of 15th March, but, having recovered, later in the day she went for a walk along the river. She had her umbrella and was warmly dressed. Next morning a policeman found her body with her rolled umbrella and a bunch of chestnut buds lying nearby. It was assumed that she had been reaching for the chestnut buds when she overbalanced and was unable to get out of the water because of the weight of her clothes.

Roy Thomas

Sources of information:

Edith Holden, the Edwardian Lady, by Ina Taylor;

The Country Diary Companion, by Josephine Poole