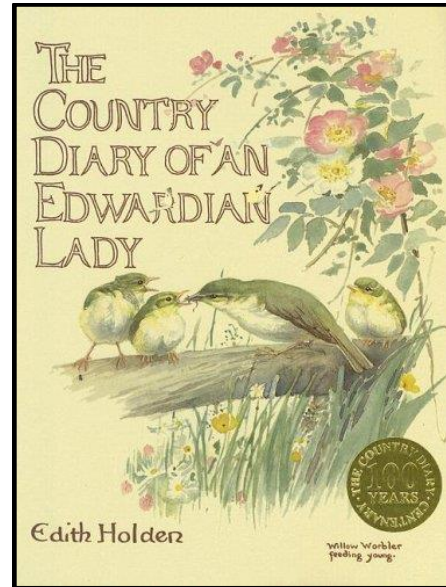


Edith Blackwell Holden, author of *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*

Celebrating 150 Years since her Birth



Edith Holden was born on **26 September, 1871** in **Moseley** at **Holly Green, Church Road**, where she lived until **1876**. She was the author of *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, a naturalist's diary for the year 1906, which recorded in words and paintings the flora and fauna of the British countryside through the changing seasons of the year. It was published in facsimile form in 1977 at a time of concern for the vanishing countryside and nostalgia for the turn of the century and became a best seller. It was a private notebook never intended for publication though she published several books she illustrated and completed fifty or so oil paintings. Writing such a journal was not unusual at that time: many middle-class Victorian and Edwardian ladies learned to sketch flowers and landscapes and paint them in water colours and kept and illustrated journals. Edith's journal included her favourite poems, personal thoughts and observations on the wildlife she saw around the various places where she lived in Warwickshire and on her travels through England and Scotland.

Edith's father, Arthur Holden, came from Bristol and moved to Birmingham after the death of his father in **1865**. Birmingham was a fast-growing industrial centre offering many opportunities. Shortly before leaving Bristol he married Emma Wearing, a well-educated governess. With a small inheritance left to him by his father, he bought, along with a partner, Mr Sanders, a firm of varnish-makers (Jeremiah Barrett and Company of Bradford Street) who were in financial difficulties following unprofitable speculation in American Turpentine. After three years he was in sole control of the business. By **1909** he employed

forty-three people and sold products all over the world (Arthur Holden & Son's Paint Factory). The Holdens were Unitarians and Spiritualists. They worshipped at the Birmingham Labour Church alongside Joseph Chamberlain, also a Unitarian. Mrs Holden wrote two religious books in her younger days for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *Ursula's Girlhood* and *Beatrice of St Mawse*. She believed she had psychic powers. Dissenters were barred from universities and could not live within 5 miles of a corporate town. Many were attracted to Birmingham for its industries and because it was not a corporate town. The Liberal politics of the period in Birmingham also suited Arthur Holden: he was a member of the Liberal Party and, when Edith was two years old, was elected to the town council for the Ward of Deritend. He was a member of the Free Libraries Committee, the Baths and Parks Committee and the Gas committee alongside Joseph Chamberlain. The Holdens participated in the life of Birmingham. Arthur Holden was a member of the Central Literary Association which met to debate philosophical and topical issues, listen to recitals and recitations and at various times he was its Secretary, President and Editor of their magazine. Like others at the time, they were concerned about the state of the poor and disease in the city, donating to a range of good causes. Arthur Holden was very interested in the arts. Birmingham had a free Central Lending Library (1865), Reference Library (1866), Museum and Art Gallery (1881), Municipal Art School (1885) and art galleries at The Royal Society of Artists (formed in 1821) which held two exhibitions per year and the Birmingham and Midland Institute (1854). There were musical performances such as Stockley's Orchestral Concerts and the Birmingham Choral Society.

On arriving in Birmingham the family first settled in Aston. The family grew and the business established itself. The **1871** census shows them in Moseley at Holly Green, Church Road, with three children, Effie Margaret, aged four years, Winifred born with a slight back problem, aged two years, and Arthur Kenneth, eleven months. They had two servants, Elizabeth Bennett, a general servant aged eighteen years, and a nursemaid, Rosamiah Gazey aged twenty, who remained with the family into old age. Within the year Edith was born. Two more children followed, Violet Mary and Charles Bernard. Both Arthur and Charles were known by their second names, Kenneth and Bernard. Edith was named after a famous relative better known in America than England – Elizabeth Blackwell, a cousin of the Holdens who was the first woman to qualify as doctor in the United States and the first woman on the medical Register of the General Medical Council. On one of her lecture tours of England she met and inspired Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. Elizabeth Blackwell's sister-in-law was Lucy Stone, an ardent suffragette in America. Effie Holden wrote a short biography of her.





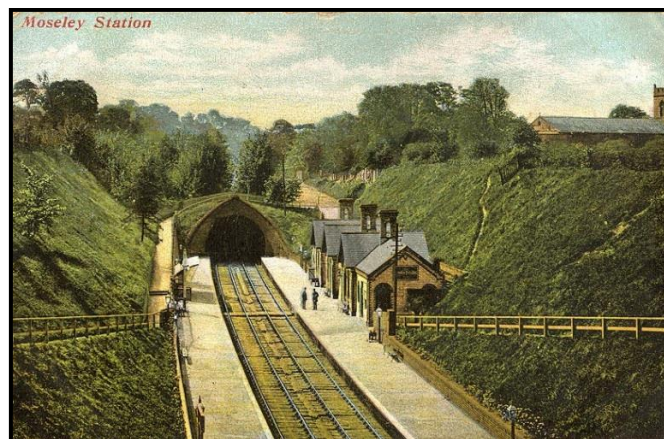
Victorian Houses in the area of Church Road where the Holden family lived, 1871-1876.

Moseley was gradually expanding during the period the Holdens lived there. Between 1871 and 1881 the population of Moseley increased from 2,400 to 4,200. Sale particulars highlighted closeness to Birmingham ('only 2 ½ miles'), elevation ('stands on elevated position'), views ('extensive views of the adjacent diversified countryside'), health ('purity of atmosphere'), rural aspect ('magnificent forest trees'), drainage ('natural fall for drainage') and geology ('gravelly sub-soil').¹ More land came onto the market, both small and larger units. One of the larger developments was the 1871 Birmingham Freehold Land Society development on Greenhill Road which comprised eighty-seven plots and created Prospect and Clarence Roads and Grove Avenue.² Eight new roads were built in Moseley between

¹ LBA, Sales Catalogues, Bham/Sc 1260.

² McKenna, *Birmingham: The Building of a City*, p.70.

1871 and 1876.³ 214 new houses were built between 1871 and 1880. As a sales catalogue claimed, villas were 'now springing up in Moseley in every direction'.⁴ In the 1870s, there were twenty-one adverts for apartments in the *Birmingham Daily Mail*, and ninety-one for houses, testament to Moseley's increasing popularity.⁵ Church Road, Moseley, where the Holdens lived, was an ancient highway. Their house was below Woodbridge Road towards the city, probably between Coppice and Sandford Roads. John Avins, a wealthy retired timber merchant, lived further up Church Road in an early Victorian mansion with grounds that extended to Wake Green Road. There were some cottages just before Woodbridge Road, but many of the houses were substantial new builds, detached and semi-detached houses rented by successful businessmen like Arthur Holden. His immediate neighbour at Ferndale, for example, George William Herberts, was a commercial clerk in a button factory. The house was convenient for transport. Arthur Holden needed to get into Birmingham to his factory easily. A new station had opened in the heart of the village in 1867 which backed onto Church Road with easy access from Woodbridge Road. By about 1877 thirty trains per day went to Birmingham New Street Station from Moseley, suggesting a popular transport form and significant commuter traffic.⁶ In 1871 horse omnibuses going to Birmingham from the Fighting Cocks Inn on the village green were 'very frequent throughout the day'.⁷ The *Birmingham Daily Post* in 1873 praised the motion, ventilation, speed and cheapness and described the carriages as 'light, commodious, comfortable, and convenient. . . . The seats inside are covered and backed with Utrecht velvet . . . canvas rendered waterproof, windows of ornamental stained glass'.⁸ It was also easy to hire private transport in Moseley if residents did not own their own. 'Growlers' were for hire by the village green and there was a carriage-hire firm nearby.



Moseley Station, view from Woodbridge Road, c. 1890.⁹

³ Blenheim, Cambridge, Coppice, Forest and Greenhill Roads in 1871, Ascot Road in 1873, Caroline Road in 1875 and Chestnut in 1876.

⁴ LBA, Sales Catalogue, Bham/Sc 1260.

⁵ *Birmingham Daily Mail*, Adverts, 1870s.

⁶ Kellett, *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities*, p.361; LBLH, *Commercial and Trades Directory of Birmingham*, Francis White & Co., Vol. 11, pp. 1418-1771; Gilbert, *The Moseley Trail*, p.8.

⁷ LBLH, 1871 *Post Office Trade Directory*.

⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 'Opening of the Birmingham Tramway', Monday 8 September, 1873.

⁹ Baxter & Drake, *Moseley, Balsall Heath and Highgate*, p.74; MSHGC, (MC/D1/5), Postcard Album; PCRC, Postcard; PCJE, Postcard.



A Horse bus outside *The Fighting Cocks*, Moseley, 1870s.¹⁰



Growlers at the Village Green.¹¹

¹⁰ Baxter, M., & Drake, P., *Moseley, Balsall Heath and Highgate*, The Archive Photographs Series, p. 72.

¹¹ MSHGC, (MC/D1/5); PCRC.



Carriage Hire, Moseley Village, Later Nineteenth Century.¹²

In **1876** when Edith was five years old the family moved to a larger house, The Elms, Yardley, Warwick Road, where they remained until **1880/ 81**. On the day of the 1881 census Arthur and Emma, both forty-five years of age, were at home with Winifred (twelve years), Arthur (ten years), Edith (nine years), Violet (seven years), Charles (five years) and a new addition, Evelyn, aged three years. They had three servants, Rosamiah as before, and two other new servants, Eliza Franklin, twenty-six, a general servant, and Sarah West, a twenty-two year old nurse and domestic. They had a visitor too, William Polley, aged eighty-five, an annuitant. There were many books in the house, particularly poetry, and the family enjoyed walking in the countryside around their home honing their knowledge of wild life. Yardley and Acocks Green developed after Moseley given that these areas were further from Birmingham and convenient transport arrived there later. However, as Birmingham continued to expand, the area around The Elms became built up and the traffic on the Warwick Road to the city increased.

The family moved further out into the countryside in **1880/81**, to Troutbeck, Darley Green, in the small hamlet of Packwood, fifteen miles south of Birmingham where they lived until **1890**. Troutbeck was one of a pair of imposing semi-detached houses recently built. It had a long garden to a small stream and was surrounded by fields. Packwood was a very small hamlet of small farms, a blacksmith, a shop, a school and a few farm cottages and Darley Green comprised the new houses, a cottage and an old mill. The family often walked

¹² MSHGC, (MC/D1/F12/6), Clive Gilbert Photos, (MC/D5/7) & (MC/D6.15-18), Images of early transport.

through the grounds of Packwood House and also visited Packwood Hall. After the birth of seven children close together, Emma Holden was delicate and her health poor. She never recovered her strength. Consequently Effie went to stay with an aunt in Bristol. Staying with relatives or family friends was a typical arrangement in such circumstances in the nineteenth century. Emma, as a former governess, was an experienced teacher and she taught her children the three 'R's', languages and literature, but Winifred gradually took on educating the younger children and household duties given her mother's poor health. Edith started at the **Birmingham Municipal School of Art** in the Elementary Class on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings in **1884** when she was aged thirteen. She had to pass the examination of the Department of Science and Art in freehand and model drawing within two years. She passed with an 'Excellent' (the highest grade) in freehand and received a prize. A highlight of her first year was a visit by Edward Burne-Jones (he was then President of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists) when the Art Gallery put on a special exhibition of his and George Watt's work.¹³ He inspected Edith's geometry class. The two boys, Arthur Kenneth and Charles Bernard, went to school and were being prepared to enter the family business. The distance from the railway at Darley Green meant it was difficult for Arthur Holden to get into the factory and to keep up his public life, for Arthur Kenneth who had finished elementary education and joined the family firm, for Edith travelling to and from Birmingham for lessons at the Municipal School and for Violet and Evelyn who also wanted to attend the Municipal School in 1890.

Thus the family moved house, this time for Gowan Bank, Station Road (near Kingswood Station), Lapworth where they lived between **1890 and 1897**. The **1891** census shows Arthur and Emma, now fifty-five years of age, had living with them Winifred (twenty-two years), Arthur Kenneth (twenty years), Edith (nineteen years), Violet (seventeen years), Charles Bernard (fifteen years) and Evelyn (twelve years). In the home too were Arthur Holden's father-in-law, Samuel Wearing, a widower and retired silk mercer (eighty-one years), a visitor, Reynold Rogers (thirty-three years), a shipping agent, Eliza Franklin (thirty-six years), the cook, Rosamiah as before (thirty-eight years) and a housemaid and Alice Moore (sixteen years), the under-housemaid. Kingswood was a small village sixteen miles from Birmingham. The station was barely 300 yards from the house and ran along the edge of their garden but in a cutting. The house was old and much larger than their previous homes with extensive gardens, a staff cottage nearby and various outbuildings for ponies and traps. The firm prospered. One of Edith's pictures was accepted for the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists' Autumn Exhibition, an oil painting, *A Cosy Quartette*. She gained 'Excellent' in 1890 in her Third Grade Examination in line drawing and a First Class in Second Grade Elementary modelling. One of her fellow pupils was Sidney Meteyard who lived in Moseley from 1901 (See 'Stained Glass Artists in Moseley'). Edith specialised in animal painting and when she was twenty years of age in 1891 she went to study with Joseph Denovan Adam in his home, Craigmill, just outside Stirling in Scotland, an artist famed as a painter of animals and with a reputation as a teacher of animal painting. He took as many as twenty-five students with some, such as Edith, living in the house with his wife

¹³ George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) was a British painter and sculptor who became famous in his lifetime for his allegorical works such as *Hope* and *Love and Life*.

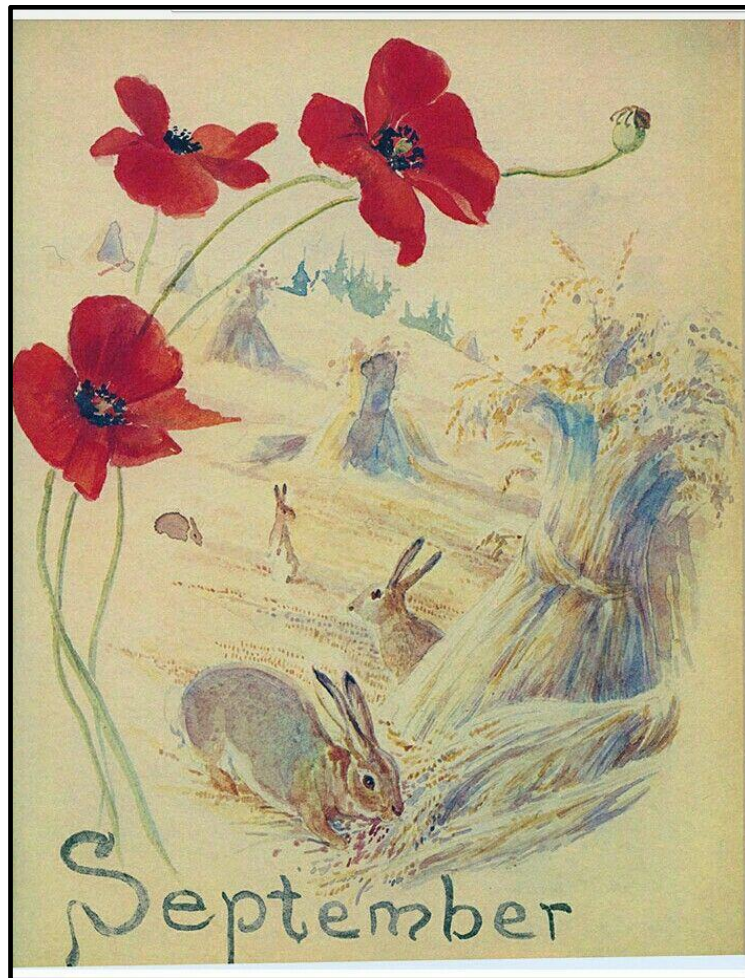
and children. This was a very successful year in which she honed her skills, made many friends and fostered a love of Scotland which she subsequently visited regularly. Her exhibition pieces at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists regularly included Scottish work such as *Springtime: near Stirling*, *Highland Calves* and *Beside the Forth*. Meanwhile Effie was in Sweden studying the Arts and Crafts movement there. Violet and Evelyn were at the Birmingham Municipal Art School. They both had great success with their book illustrations. In 1894, for example, both sisters illustrated a fairy story by Blanche Atkinson *The Real Princess* and then the following year their own book of nursery rhymes, which was published as *The House that Jack Built*. Life at Gowan Bank was busy with visitors, socialist and spiritualist speakers visiting Birmingham and theatrical productions, the latter particularly enjoyed by Arthur Kenneth Holden and his friends. Arthur Holden senior was very much involved with the Cinderella Club, a group set up by the Birmingham Labour Church to help the slum children of Birmingham. The club met at 7.30 p.m., the children had two buns and two cups of cocoa and then games, soup and a fairy tale. At 8.45 p.m. they had cocoa and a bun and an apple to take home. Christmas celebrations were organised as well as summer outings, including a visit to the Holden's Kingswood Gardens and later, trips to Sutton Park. Arthur Holden lent his staff cottage in **1896** so that child invalids could have a holiday.

As he grew older Arthur Holden felt the need for somewhere smaller. In **1897** the family moved to Dorridge, Knowle, Solihull, a few miles from Kingswood to a smaller modern house, Woodside, where they lived until **1905**. It was a very rural area, but there was a station at Knowle. The 1901 census shows Arthur and Emma Holden were sixty-five years of age and living with them were Winifred (thirty-two years), Violet (twenty-seven years), Charles Bernard (twenty-five years), then a secretary of the company, and Evelyn (twenty-three years). Also there were Annie Lees, twenty-five, a servant, Louise Price, the cook aged twenty-one and Ada Paget her adopted daughter aged sixteen. Edith was still living at home, but was probably away on her travels or visits on census day. She visited Scotland every year sketching and painting, for example, and, in 1902, she began taking holidays on Dartmoor, visiting there regularly until 1910. Mrs Holden was ill as she had been for some time. They continued to hold weekly séances in which the daughters participated. Edith focussed on painting animals especially in oil and modelling them, producing two pictures a year for the exhibitions of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists. Evelyn produced oil paintings of roses and pansies for exhibitions. Violet's speciality was book illustrations. Effie joined her sisters at the Birmingham Municipal Art School doing handicrafts, but she also gained recognition from her poetry. In 1900 she married Carl Heath, a teacher, whom she met in Sweden and they eventually moved to Limpsfield, Surrey, where they worked with an intellectual and artistic circle. In 1904 Evelyn married Frank Matthews, who was also involved in the Cinderella Club and was a friend of Arthur Kenneth Holden. They went to live in Bournville and Rosamiah went to live with them to look after them. Mrs Holden died shortly afterwards in 1904. The company of Arthur Holden & Sons was having financial difficulties. It became a limited company with the Holdens holding the balance of shares. Arthur helped out a friend financially which the company had to pay. The shareholders secured a Board of Control believing that Arthur was too old to continue. The two sons took opposite sides with Kenneth staying with his father and Bernard siding with the Board. The girls also took sides.

Because of these difficulties and the decreasing household, the family moved in **1905** to Olton, where he rented a much smaller recently built house and garden in Kineton Green Road which they named Gowan Bank. Arthur Holden, Edith, Winifred and Violet lived together here with much reduced staffing, just Florence, the maid who became their cook, and a daily help. Charles Bernard was living in lodgings elsewhere in the countryside, business relations with his father and brother having become strained. Olton was nearer Birmingham, but still rural. **1906** was the year of Edith's ***Nature Notes*** that were to be published in 1977 as *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*. Early months in the diary reflected her walks in the local countryside, but she also cycled back to the area of her previous home such as Balsall Temple. She became friends with the sister of the vicar of Shirley, the Rev E. Burd who ran a private school for about forty girls in Solihull and from early in 1906 Edith taught art there on Friday afternoons to the older girls (fourteen to seventeen year olds). Most pupils were day pupils, a few boarded and some brothers of pupils were in the nursery. The focus of her lessons was sketching and painting flowers twigs and berries as the girls were encouraged to keep diaries recording the seasons and link their work with passages from literature. Pupils were also taken into the school grounds to sketch views of the school, the grounds and Solihull Church. Edith taught at the school for about four years.

Edith continued to visit friends on Dartmoor and in Scotland, sketching and painting whilst she was there. Some of these paintings, such as *Dartmoor Ponies* were exhibited in Birmingham. In 1907 she designed a calendar for the magazine of the National Council for Animals' Welfare, *The Animals' Friend*. The calendar was sold commercially to raise funds. Edith belonged to this society and contributed many illustrations to its magazines. In the same year she travelled extensively in England and Scotland. She visited her sister, Effie, in London frequently at this time when Effie's husband, Carl, was teaching there and she met a sculptor, Ernest Smith who was studying at the Royal College of Art. Over the next few years the situation for the family became difficult including financial difficulties for the firm and the breakup of Kenneth's marriage, but Edith worked on many commissions for book illustrations. The **1911** census shows Arthur Holden, aged seventy-five, Winifred aged forty-two, Edith aged thirty-nine, Violet aged thirty-seven, a servant, Maria Colliatt aged seventeen and a visitor, Emily Kate Morgan, aged thirty-six, living at Olton. Edith married Alfred Ernest Smith on **June 1, 1911** by special licence at Chelsea Register Office and they moved to a flat in Chelsea behind Cheyne Walk. Alfred was seven years Edith's junior. She continued her illustrating work and he worked for the Countess Feodora Gleichen in her studio in St James' Palace.

Edith Blackwell Holden died on **Tuesday 16 March, 1920**, aged forty-eight. She drowned in a backwater of the Thames near Kew Gardens Walk. She had supposedly been reaching for a branch of chestnut buds. Her husband, Ernest, died in 1938. Edith's sisters gained greater recognition in their lifetimes for their literary and artistic works, but Edith became famous through *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* published fifty-seven years after her death.



Jan Berry

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