

Marvellous memories of a special day in Swardeston

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■ Edith Cavell, a Norfolk heroine from the history books. She became much more real during one visit to Swardeston in the 1950s.

It may surprise some people to learn that quite a lot of languages don't have words for yes and no. How could they possibly manage without them? But they do.

Latin managed it; Gaelic manages it. It's easy: "Are you ready? – I am." "Did they see it? – They did." "Has he arrived? – He has not."

Some languages, though, go the other way and have not one but two words for yes. In German, "ja" means yes – but not if you are disagreeing with something. If someone says it isn't raining and you think it is, you'll reply "doch!", meaning 'yes [it is raining, you're wrong]!'

This was also true of earlier forms of English, from Anglo-Saxon up to Elizabethan times. 'Yea' corresponded to German "ja", and "yes" to "doch". But we went even further than this in English, and had two words for no as well: "You're ready? – Nay [I'm not]". "You're not ready? – No".

There are also a number of different words for yes and no in various English local dialects. In the north of Britain, yes is "aye" – you hear it all the time in Scotland. In the traditional dialects of the West Country they say "iss". And of course in this part of the world too we

naturally have our own word for yes. I remember extremely vividly one occasion when I heard it used. One summer Sunday in the early 1950s, when I was about 10, my grandfather took my cousin and me for a walk in the country, as he sometimes did. Around midday we found ourselves in Swardeston and ready for a rest. Grandad got talking to an old boy who was sitting on a bench on the village green, leaning on his stick.

After a while, Grandad asked him a question which absolutely astonished me – had the old gentleman, Grandad asked,

known Edith Cavell? What a question, I thought! Of course he couldn't have! Edith Cavell was a heroine from history; she was a revered and legendary and almost mythical figure from long, long ago. I knew she came from Swardeston, of course, but she was someone from our history lessons – how could we possibly be talking about her, as a real person, on the village green now?

But then the old fella's reply astonished me even more. He sighed and nodded. "Ah," he said in very matter of fact way. "Ah. I remember the gal Edie".