



EDITH SMITH'S LEGACY THAT CHANGED POLICING FOREVER

By Charlotte Miller

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Grantham is recognised for the public figures it has produced and the lasting impact those figures have had on the country. One of the most remarkable is Edith Smith, a woman who not only shaped the history of Grantham, but created inspiration for female police officers across the globe by becoming the very first female police officer in the UK. Although she was born in Birkenhead in 1876, it was Edith's ambition that led her to Grantham. Widowed at just 31 with four children, she faced immense challenges yet refused to let them define her. In 1911, she trained as a midwife in London, gaining experience which became an incredible foundation for her later historic role in policing. When the First World War started, the absence of men leaving for the military left women across the country to step into public life. Groups such as the Women Police Volunteers patrolled public spaces, discouraged prostitution and supported vulnerable women. However, their role remained limited as they couldn't arrest or formally charge suspects so had to rely on male police officers. This system changed in 1915 when Edith was appointed to



the Grantham Borough Police, becoming the first woman in the UK to hold full powers of arrest. She no longer wore a volunteer badge and instead wore the same badge as the men she worked alongside, with the same legal authority too. Her work was uniquely focused on protecting women, particularly those involved in prostitution, an issue that was especially prevalent at the time. Drawing on her emotional strength and medical background,

Edith brought a rare combination of authority and compassion to this role. Yet her real legacy lies in what she represented, not just her duties. Britain's significant global influence meant that her role in Grantham strengthened the global argument that women could hold civic authority and therefore shifted perceptions far beyond the town.

Today, you will find blue plaques in both Grantham and Birkenhead commemorating Edith, which serve as permanent reminders of her commitment to the female policing movement and the widened possibilities for those who followed her.

