

# Edith Craig Biography

Edith Craig (1869-1947)

Born Edith Godwin 9 December 1869 at The Red House, Gusterd Wood Common, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire.

Changed name by deed poll in 1883 to Edith Ailsa Craig (known as Edy). Baptised in 1887 as Edith Ailsa Geraldine Craig

Lived in Priest's House, the next house up the hill from Smallhythe Place, with female friends Clare Atwood and Christobel Marshall, known as Christopher (Chris) St John.

Died 27 March 1947, Priest's House, Smallhythe

Costumier, theatre director and women's suffrage activist.

Edith Craig was the daughter of Ellen Terry and Edward William Godwin. Shortly after her birth, her parents moved to the house at Harpenden that Godwin had designed for them, Here, Edy, as she was known from infancy, lived until 1874. She was educated at a co-educational school in Earl's Court, kept by Mrs. Cole, and later at Dixton Manor near Winchcombe in Gloucestershire by Mrs. Cole's sister, Mrs. Malleson, one of the pioneers of Women's Suffrage and kindred reforms.

Like her brother Edward, Edith changed her surname by deed poll to Craig. In the early 1880s, during a tour of Scotland, Ellen Terry, Henry Irving and Edward took a boat trip to Ailsa Craig, a rock off the Ayrshire coast. Ellen thought Ailsa Craig a good stage name and decided to give it to Edy, who used it when she first went on the stage. Later, she reverted to Edith, to avoid confusion with another actress. Her baptismal name of Geraldine is derived from her Godmother, Mrs Stephen Coleridge

Edith made her first appearance on the stage in 1878, at the age of 9, during the run of *Olivia* at the Court Theatre, but her future career was not then decided. After leaving school, she went to the Royal Academy of Music, and thence to Berlin to be trained as a pianist. The doubtful question that this was her vocation was settled by her life-long enemy, chronic rheumatism, and she returned to England and the stage, becoming a regular member of Henry Irving's Lyceum company in 1890. She played a great number of small parts in Irving's productions during the next ten years, and gained further experience as an actress on tours with Mrs. Brown-Potter, and the Independent Theatre (1897).

From 1911, she moved into direction and design. She founded the Pioneer Players theatre society, which staged many innovative plays in London and supported the suffragist movement, and produced some 150 plays for them. She was active in the development of amateur theatre for the British Drama League and the Little Theatre movement at the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead and Leeds Art Theatre.

In 1899, Edith's mother purchased an old farm at Smallhythe, which included three houses. She invited Edith to live in Priest's House, about 100 yards up the hill from Smallhythe Place. Edith shared Priest's House with her female friends Clare 'Tony' Atwood (artist) and Chris St John (writer). It is not clear whether Edith was lesbian or bi-sexual. All three women were active in the suffrage movement and their home at Priest's House seems to have been a haven for many other activists. The trio were part of a literary community that included Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, and the controversial lesbian author Radclyffe Hall.

Edith Craig was determined to create a lasting memorial to her mother. After her death in 1928, she transformed Ellen's home at Smallhythe into a memorial museum, converted the barn into a theatre and organised an annual memorial performance in the theatre. The first performance was on Sunday 31 July 1929. In 1932 Edith established the Barn Theatre Society, running it on a subscription basis in much the same way as today. Her other activities included the production of pageants, a few appearances in film, and a scholarly collection of scrapbooks and notebooks.

