

## **A promising future carved out around Kingsway**

**Meg Roper**

As Edith alighted from the tram into a sunny September evening she caught a fleeting glimpse of herself in a window. Her familiar frame and face stared back at her but something was different. The confidence with which this figure held herself was not her own. However, as she had an appointment she had no time to dwell on the transformation so rather than dive off Kingsway to her lodgings she marched westwards towards Stukeley Street with a mixture of hope and anticipation.

Some months ago she had chanced upon a small advert in a magazine that a fellow passenger had left on the tram. It was more of a pamphlet than a magazine really. She had been intrigued by the writing, which she could only describe as “modern”. The words were familiar from the wireless and the conversations of the union men in the canteen at lunchtime. The totality of the articles’ meaning was, however, slightly out of reach. Having read the pamphlet from cover to cover, an advert on the final page caught her eye: *“Adult evening courses in literature, art and philosophy: two shillings per term for one course; one shilling for each additional course. Exciting courses at our new venue.”*

On seeing this advert her heart leaped. Ever since she could read, she had devoured literature. Even now, whilst her friends spent evenings in the local picture houses or Lyons tea rooms, she would while away the time reading novels, plays and poetry by the electric light in her room. The prospect of being able to study filled her with excitement and rebellion. How she would love to defy the expectations of her family and “waste time” exploring the ideas of the great writers of the past and modern authors like Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh and T.S. Eliot.

Edith popped the pamphlet into her bag and resolved to call the number. The next day at noon she avoided the office canteen, stepped out of the London Tram Company office where she worked as a clerk, and popped across to Waterloo Station to use a telephone. In the privacy of the booth, she lifted the receiver and asked to be connected. A well-spoken woman answered the telephone, confirmed

there were no admission requirements for the courses and noted Edith's address so she could send her a copy of the "prospectus". Edith trembled with excitement: never in her life had she expected to be sent a course catalogue!

A week later Edith arrived home to find a large brown envelope on her doormat. Whilst brewing a cup of tea in what passed as the kitchen of her apartment, she almost quivered as she slipped open the envelope stamped WC2. She read the prospectus from page to page three times, savouring the names of the courses and their descriptions and marking in pencil those of interest, class times, enrolment dates and fee details. On the back of the envelope she worked out how much she could save from her weekly wage towards her "studies". She was relieved that there would be no extra travel costs as the City Lit was just round the corner from her tram stop on Kingsway. And by limiting herself to sandwich or soup suppers for three nights a week, in preparation of the regime she envisaged once the academic year started, she calculated she could save enough to sign up for three courses. After much consideration she settled on Nineteenth Century Novels, Modern Literature and Restoration Drama.

For the next three months Edith stuck religiously to her budget to save the course fees. In preparation for her first term of adult education she would even alight from the tram at the Kingsway Underpass and walk the hundred and fifty yards to Stukeley Street. She was not sure whether she wanted to check that the academy was indeed there or whether she just wanted to be close to a place where she could learn more than in her 12 years of schooling to date.

After a month of exploring the route to and from the City Lit, Edith expanded her detour home. Rather than catching the tram she would cross the river and head to Charing Cross Road where she spent a couple of hours in the public reading library. She had always been an avid user of libraries but as September drew nearer she found her excitement was tinged with anxiety. Was she, the daughter of a tram driver and a tea room waitress, who had left school at 16, really prepared for formal adult education? To banish these fears she started to read in the library rather than in her rooms, picking books off the shelves, which she would not previously have considered in order to challenge herself.

But now the first day of term had arrived and there was no turning back. Edith marched the well-known path to her first class with hope and a little trepidation. When she stepped through the black doors the fear subsided and her enthusiasm and enquiring mind took over. Edith had never dared to dream she would find such delight in the intellectual discipline of literary criticism.

On a balmy September evening a confident and radiant lady left a red brick building in Covent Garden. As the black door shut behind her, it occurred to her that it was later than she had expected for her first day. Still, she did not mind as she had waited most of her life for this opportunity. Whilst heading towards Holborn Edith looked up and recognised the name on a building. She remembered her grandmother telling her how her own career in publishing had started – somewhat belatedly – with three evening courses at the City Lit and thought how proud she would be of her granddaughter's job as assistant editor of a magazine dedicated to the work of budding poets.