

The death of emily davison



History Assessment — The Death of Emily Davison The Epsom Derby was not only a very important race but also the setting at which several high calibre people met. It was an imperative social event on everyone's calendar.

However the Derby in the year 1913 was to be one of the most remembered Derby's in its history. At Tattenham Corner on 4th June 1913 spectators witnessed the death of Emily Davison a 41 year old woman. She was hit by the king's horse, Anmer, and died 4 days later in hospital. It is not ultimately known why she died though there have been 2 interpretations behind the reasoning of her death. Emily Davison may be considered a peaceful protester. Evidence to support this is that found on her person was a return ticket from which we can infer that Ms Davison didn't want to kill herself and instead she expected to return home. What's more is that she had a ticket for a suffragette festival the day after the Derby which tells us a similar story. Emily was also allegedly found in a ventilation shaft in The House of Commons and when asked what she was doing there she had replied, " I want to ask a question in the House of Commons". This suggests that Emily was quite civilised and had the nerve to talk about matters rather than resort to violence. Though it can be interpreted differently, she was hiding which communicates a possibly craziness therefore she would kill herself. We can largely trust this information as it was found in an official police report though we must acknowledge that some evidence may be tampered or altered with, as it doesn't follow current government views. For example the ticket may have been implanted so news readers would believe she was a peaceful protester and didn't kill herself because her views conflicted with those of the government; not allowing women to vote. We cannot though trust fully the story about the ventilation shaft as it recorded only in one

account and is similar to a rumour. Others may believe that Emily Davison was militant martyr. This view may be formed from the evidence that Emily Davison was a violent suffragette; proven by the white green and purple flag sewn into her jacket and her criminal record. Emily had begun by throwing stones but it became worse and she had set two post boxes alight. Her activities were worsening making it not unusual for her to kill herself. In addition, John Ervine tells his account, " She did not go on the course thinking the race was over and rather she meant to stop the horse", suggesting that there was intent and malice behind her actions making her a militant martyr. We can trust some of this evidence with some certainty as some is on a police record, making it official though this contradicts the evidence before from which we can surmise the police had no involvement in altering the evidence as if they had then they would alter this piece too. We can partly trust Mr Ervine as he was respected journalist, working for The Observer and The Morning Star, however for dramatic effect and emphasis his tale may have not been the real story therefore we may not be able to trust this evidence. We must also consider not only the two interpretations but why there are two interpretations. To begin, like all evidence, there is a trust element. Some evidence can be more reliable than another as its provenance is trustworthy whereas other evidence such as John Ervine's account shouldn't be immediately assumed to be correct. Depending on your viewpoint you can choose to believe some and not others or interpret some evidence differently. For example Emily said that she should be attending the suffragette festival every day except on the 4th, the day of the derby. From this we can infer that she wanted to come on the 5th making her death and accident though if consider the word should then you can interpret her

being unsure as to what she was going to do. This brings me on to my next point. Even though you may have gathered a lot of evidence for one side there may be conflicting evidence. For example, some say that Emily was attempting to pin a flag on Anmer though others say she had flags sewn into her jacket. We can trust one piece of evidence more than another but we can never be certain; there is no defining evidence to prove that Emily had martyred herself or was just a peaceful protestor. The only way we could have found out was an admission from Emily Davison, but we cannot obtain this ultimate evidence as Emily died in hospital. Ideally we would like to speak to Emily but we cannot and so due to this there is no certainty as to what happened therefore different interpretations are created. From the two interpretations we can see how significant Emily was. Both interpretations portray Emily as significant but in different ways. The obvious, Emily as a martyr, was extremely significant as she was the first martyr for the Suffragettes. It was a turn of the page for the Suffragettes but this was halted by the start of the war. On the other hand her actions just proved to men that if an educated women killed herself then surely those lesser educated women didn't have the sense and knowledge to vote with reasoning, in this sense it was a step back for the Suffragettes. The latter, Emily as peaceful has changed the way in which modern day races take place. There are now more barriers and safety measures to ensure that no one slips and people do not stand in cramped conditions. I believe that if Emily was a Martyr than this only made worse the rights for women therefore her reasoning wasn't just though I will now consider her motives. Emily was a regular at the suffragette festival. She felt extremely strongly about women rights and as a student she was not allowed to graduate from Oxford

University; a potential motive. She had spent almost a year in prison until she decided that the suffragette movement needed a martyr. She had tried to kill herself by jumping 30ft but this had not worked. At the time the suffragettes had not the publicity they needed to make a difference, petitions hadn't worked, throwing stones hadn't worked and neither did confronting Winston Churchill. Emmeline Pankhurst, a member of the suffragettes and a close friend, recalls " Emily Davison clung to her conviction that one great tragedy, the deliberate throwing into the breach of a human life, would put an end to the intolerable torture of women. And so she threw herself at the King's horse, in full view of the King and Queen and a great multitude of their Majesties' subjects". This suggests that Emily had chosen this time as Royalty were attending and from earlier knowledge it was a big social event so top business men would also be watching. Due to the caliber of the people attending there was no better place to put the suffragette flag into everyone's head than at the Derby; the perfect opportunity for publicity. For all we know there may have been several motives though Emily deciding that the suffragettes needed a martyr seems the most likely. In conclusion, Emily Davison may be considered both a peaceful protestor and a militant martyr depending on how you interpret different pieces of evidence. From what I've seen I have come to the conclusion that Emily Davison was a militant martyr. This is based upon the evidence that Emily had said she was going to be a martyr and also her violence was worsening therefore there is no surprise that she killed herself. These different interpretations create questions as to why she died. Why was she carrying the flags? Did she choose the King's horse? Why didn't she tell anyone of her plans? We can attempt to answer these questions but we will

never have a definite answer and we will never know with complete certainty the motives behind her death. <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Wdavison.htm> www.historylearningsite.co.uk www.bbcnews.co.uk www.parliament.uk