

Epsom Derby suffragette martyr Emily Davison remembered at plaque unveiling

By [Hardeep Matharu](#)

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Emily Davison's great-great-great niece Lauren Caisley, 19, with the plaque



A suffragette who was killed after being hit by the King's horse at the Epsom Derby a century ago has been commemorated with a plaque at Epsom Downs Racecourse.

The racecourse unveiled the plaque for Emily Davison, which is situated at the Tattenham Corner rails, on Thursday, April 16, at a ceremony which many attendees described as the "largest gathering of Emily's descendants and relatives to date".

Davison stepped out in front of King George V's horse, Anmer, at the 1913 Derby and died from the injuries she sustained four days later at the Old Cottage Hospital, in Alexandra Road, Epsom.

The teacher and governess, who was born in Blackheath, South London, and achieved a first class honours in English Literature at Oxford University, was a leading member of the Women's Social and Political Union, an organisation founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903 to demand votes

for women.

Debate continues as to whether Davison intended to become a martyr to the cause on Derby Day or if it was merely an attempt to raise awareness which went horribly wrong.

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Some believe that her return ticket to London and the flags of the suffragette's colours in her possession, which they say she hoped to pin onto the King's horse, suggest it was not an act of suicide.

Davison's great-great-great niece Lauren Caisley, 19, unveiled the plaque at the 800m post of the racetrack, to cheers of "votes for women!".

It reads: "It was from this place on 4th June that suffragette Emily Davison sustained injuries that resulted in her death at Epsom Cottage Hospital. Her lifelong dedication to women's suffrage and the contribution she made to the lives of British women past and present is remembered."

Ms Caisley said she felt "very honoured" to unveil the plaque and that it was "a privilege to see Epsom honouring Emily and the sacrifice she made for women's rights in this way."



Although a plaque was erected at the Old Cottage Hospital in 2002, there have been calls for many years for a permanent memorial at the racecourse to mark the role played by Davison in women's struggle for equality.

Rupert Trevelyan, regional director of London Racecourses which runs the racetrack, said the centenary of her death was the "best time" for Epsom Downs Racecourse to commemorate Davison.

He said: "The racecourse has wanted to strike a balance between all different parties and their opinions. A centenary is always one of the best times to do a commemoration.

"It beggars belief that women only got the vote in 1928. Emily Davison made her protest at the Derby because it was the biggest event in the world that day. "Epsom has 236 years of history attached to the Derby and we are proud to be associated with that."

Mr Trevelyan said that, as well as the plaque, the racecourse will be marking the centenary at this year's Epsom Derby by displaying images of her and the suffragettes on television screens around the racecourse. The Military Wives Choir, created by TV choirmaster Gareth Malone, will sing the national anthem to the Queen on the day and there will also be an all-women's sky-diving team.

National media reports in March said that security is to be strengthened at this year's event as officials are determined to prevent any attempt to disrupt the event on the centenary.

It was also reported that a request by the Emily Wilding Davison Memorial Campaign to hold a minute's silence on Derby day had been rejected. But a spokeswoman for the racecourse said she was unable to comment on these matters.

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"Margaret Thatcher was born two years before women got the vote"

Penni Blythe-Jones, project coordinator for the Emily Inspires working group, set up in Davison's parents' hometown of Morpeth, Northumberland, where Davison is buried, said the suffragette was known as a "lawless lassie" but was an "advocate for women and all people on matters of social justice".

She said: "Margaret Thatcher was born two years before women got the vote. It's not a long time since women didn't have that right and women now have a responsibility to vote. In the local elections in May, they will have the opportunity to show what Emily Davison died for."



A photograph of the fatal race showing Emily Davison hit by King George V's horse, Anmer

Helen Pankhurst, great-granddaughter of Emmeline Pankhurst, attended the event with her daughter Laura, who was dressed as a suffragette, wearing a purple, green and white sash with 'Votes for Women' written across it.

She said she believes the debate over Davison's intentions on the fateful day are "irrelevant" and what is important was her "complete faith in the issue".

Helen Pankhurst said: "She was willing to sacrifice everything.

"When she stepped onto the track she was willing to put her life on the line and would have done one thing after another. "What defined the Suffragette movement was their willingness to become more militant.

"Emily Davison was an important figure, but there were many, many others.

"The UK is a better place for women having the vote, but it was also about the wider democracy and there is still lots to be done.

"Less than 25 per cent of MPs in Parliament today are women and the public sphere is still dominated by men. "There are many countries around the world where women are struggling. The issues are still so relevant today."

She added: "Emily Davison was a very fascinating character and had interesting ideas - she hid in the broom cupboard in the House of Commons to register herself as living in Parliament during the census."

Davison was arrested and imprisoned a number of times for her increasingly militant stance, including a sentence of hard labour in Strangeways Prison. She would go on hunger strikes during these stints.

Maureen Howes' new book, *Emily Wilding Davison: A Suffragettes' Family Album*, aims to bring to light fresh evidence that Davison may not have been acting alone, but with the support of other suffragettes, and that she ended up as the one chosen to act.

Actress Kate Willoughby, who also attended the plaque unveiling dressed



as a suffragette, is preparing to become Davison in a play that she has penned, To Freedom's Cause, on the suffragette's life and the effect of her protest on Anmer's jockey, Herbert Jones, who ended his life by committing suicide. The play is to premier in Morpeth on June 14, before moving to the Tristan Bates Theatre, Covent Garden, on June 26 to June 29. It will also be performed at the all-female Downview Prison, near Banstead.

To further mark the centenary, the Epsom Tree Advisory Board is planning to plant a tree at the Old Cottage Hospital, and Epsom Council is asking artists to submit proposals for a piece of "contemporary public art", to be located at a site on Epsom Downs such as a roundabout. Bourne Hall, in Spring Street, Ewell, will be holding a free exhibition, Dying for the Vote, from May 7 to July 27. It will be a comprehensive examination of Davison's life and the suffragette movement in Surrey, and will celebrate the granting of votes for women.

The exhibition will be open from 9am to 5pm, Tuesday to Saturday. For more information call 0208 394 1734 or www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk

Do you have any links to Emily Davison or the suffragette movement in Surrey? Contact Hardeep Matharu on the newsdesk at 0208 722 6346 or email hmatharu@london.newsquest.co.uk.

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