

Dying for the Vote: Militant suffragette Emily Wilding Davison at Bourne Hall Museum

By Emily Beeson | 07 May 2013
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Exhibition Preview: Dying for the Vote: Emily Wilding Davison centenary exhibition, Bourne Hall Museum, Surrey, until July 27 2013



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Meet the most militant suffragette in Britain: Emily Wilding Davison's cause of death was recorded by the coroner as "misadventure" in June 1913. Yet the suffragette's loss of life seemed to be the result of brave and intentional self-sacrifice.

Now Epsom and Ewell commemorates her death and the cause for which she died with a new exhibition at Bourne Hall Museum curated by Irene Cockroft.

One hundred years ago, in the midst of Derby Day, Davison dramatically delivered a message to King George V. Stepping into the centre of the racing track, her intention was, perhaps, to wave the flag of the militant Women's Social and Political Union in front of newsreel cameras.

Instead she collided with the King's horse and was fatally injured. Her skull was fractured and she received serious internal injuries. She died in Epsom Cottage Hospital some days later.

Many Suffragettes attempted acts of violence to gain the attention and support of the nation and to alter prejudiced attitudes held by Parliament and the British public. Often, these women were arrested and imprisoned, and men who supported them suffered the same fate.

Davison was a passionate Suffragette activist who was imprisoned several times. In 1912 she was given six months in Holloway Prison for setting fire to a pillar box and, like many other female suffragettes, she went on hunger strike but was brutally force-fed. In protest she threw herself down an iron staircase, which resulted in serious spinal injuries.

In 1913 the leader of the Women's Social and Political Union (WPSU), Emmeline Pankhurst was sentenced to three years in prison, and since she was pledged to hunger strike it added an urgency and momentum to the protests of her fellow suffragettes.

A great deal of speculation surrounds Davison's death. The exhibition explores both her intentions and the events of the day: was she simply

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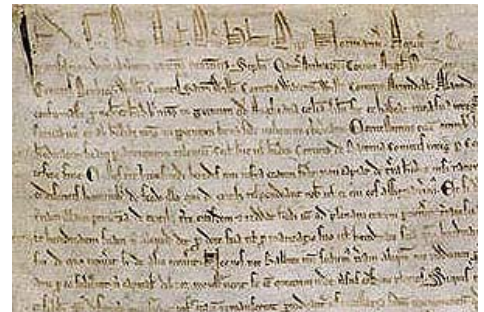
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trying to cross the track, to wave a flag concealed in her clothes? Or perhaps she intended to achieve the highly dangerous feat of attaching a Suffragette banner to the King's horse, Anmer.

Instead, Amer's galloping hooves struck her head, knocking her to the ground unconscious and unseating the jockey, who suffered concussion.

Following her tragic death, she was awarded a martyr's funeral by the WSPU.

Less than a year later the First World War intervened, causing a tactical shift in the tactics of the WPSU in support of the war effort - a move which opened the door to parliamentary and legislative reform and votes for women in 1928.

The effect of Davison's death on this journey can still be debated, but it stands as a defining moment in the cause of women's rights - and the realisation of gender equality.

- **Open Tuesday-Saturday 9am-5pm. Admission free.**

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