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Northumberland and Durham Family History Society

At the latest meeting of the Northumberland and Durham Family History Society's north Northumberland group at Bell View, Belford, Andy Griffin gave a talk entitled In Search of Emily Wilding Davison, Northumbrian Suffragette: Sorting the Facts From the Fiction.

Andy reminded us that this year was the anniversary of the centenary of the death of Emily Davison, who is buried at Morpeth.

His well-illustrated talk went on to reveal some colourful details and certainly brought this character to life.

After giving us an outline of the family background, our speaker went on to tell us about Emily's early life.

Brought up in Blackheath, London, and Essex, she did not come to Northumberland until she was in her 20s.

After having to leave Royal Holloway College for women in London when her father died, Emily became a governess, something she had not planned but was obliged to do when it was discovered that her father's wealth had disappeared.

Even then, she stipulated to her MP employer that she must be allowed two hours each evening for private study!

She eventually graduated and received her degree, celebrating by throwing a bag of black bullets on the village green for local children.

After becoming a teacher, she joined the WSPU in the early years of the 20th century and became an active member

In 1911, she made history by hiding in a broom cupboard in the House of Commons so she could rightly record this on her census form. There is now a plaque on the cupboard recording this.

Much of her time in Morpeth in her mother's village of Longhorsley was spent recovering from the force-feeding she was subjected to while imprisoned for her militant activities. Emily was driven to participate in these when newspapers ceased reporting their usual activities. The only way of securing publicity was to get arrested.

The argument of Stone against Property, as opposed to People, aroused much opposition.

There has been much speculation over whether Emily intended to take her own life or whether it was an accident. For years, Emily's action was referred to as 'throwing herself in front of the King's horse'.

A film made by Clare Balding earlier this year purports the theory that she did not intend to kill herself, that she had literally drawn the short straw among a group of women and that she was, in fact, attempting to pin a banner onto the bridle of the horse in order to promote cause of women's suffrage.

She did, after all, buy a return ticket to Epsom and had made plans for the following day.

We shall probably never know the facts but Andy pointed out that she had pinned Suffrage colours to the inside of her jacket. Perhaps her real intention had been to display these when arrested on the racecourse. She was aware that this would appear on film and would bring the cause unprecedented publicity.

After the tragic event, King George V enquired: 'How is the horse?' and Queen Mary: 'How is the horrid woman?' which says something about their views on women and suffrage.

Emily's funeral was a momentous occasion with crowded streets of onlookers at the procession in London and t20,000 people at the funeral itself in Morpeth. It is said that half of the households in Morpeth drew their curtains in respect. Yet there were others who believed she had brought disgrace upon the town.

The grave was sadly neglected for many years but has been recently restored and is now bedecked with Suffragette ribbons and flowers the whole year around.
