

After 100 years, has the real story emerged at last about Emily's fate?

Published on **30/03/2013 07:00**

THIS summer, history will be re-written as Northumberland marks 100 years since the death of Suffragette Emily Wilding Davison.

Though born in Greenwich, London, Emily was a Northumbrian lass through and through.

Many of her family were born and bred in the county, including her parents, and her Morpeth roots run deep.

Following the death of her father, Emily and her mother Margaret returned to Northumberland to live in Longhorsley.

Emily was a passionate supporter of the campaign for women's suffrage and in 1906 she joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) to press for change.

Within a year, she had given up her teaching job to devote more time to the campaign and became increasingly militant, spending time in prison and going on hunger strike.

But it was her tragic death that brought her to worldwide attention.

On June 4, 1913, Emily was at the Epsom Derby. It is believed that her aim was to pin the Suffragette colours to the King's horse Anmer, but events took a terrible turn. Unable to reach the horse in the paddock, she ran out onto the track during the race, attempting to attach the colours to the horse's reins. She was struck instantly, suffering severe injuries and died four days later in hospital.

Her death sent shockwaves across the globe and tens of thousands of people turned out to line the streets for her funeral and subsequent procession from Morpeth Railway Station to St Mary's Church, where she was laid to rest.

However, in the weeks, months and years that followed, Emily's story was changed.

The WSPU held her up as a martyr, who had willingly given her life to the cause. Politicians and the Government used her death as an example of the dangerous extremism of the movement.

It soon became the accepted belief that Emily had deliberately committed suicide.

Now, in the centenary of her death, the Morpeth-based Emily Wilding Davison Working Group aims to put the record straight.

Project Director Penni Blythe-Jones said: "What Emily was trying to do was to get the King's attention.

"In the weeks before the Derby, the Morpeth Suffragettes were seen practising pinning their colours to horses on the Common. Then it was a case of drawing straws to see who would go to the Derby.

"Emily drew the short straw, but the intention was to go into the Royal Enclosure. When she got there she knew people would recognise her so she couldn't go in. At that point, she had psyched herself up for something so she found some other way."

Working group Chairman Andrew Tebbutt added: "We know that Emily didn't intend to commit suicide. It is clear that she just completely misjudged the speed of the horses and what it would be like to be hit. Any suggestions that she decided to kill herself are just nonsense."

An Emily Inspires programme has been organised to run throughout the year that will focus on the real woman behind the hype – her intelligence, interests and background.

It will look to Emily's attributes to inspire others, with activities arranged for all ages to enjoy.

Not only that, but new books will be published about Emily and her writings to tell her true story, including a biography by local historian Maureen Howes, who has had unprecedented access to Emily's family archives.

Published by The History Press, the book will include photographs that have never before appeared in print and for the first time the family will be able to tell their story.

The book is due out at the end of May.

Another book will be published by Professor Carolyn Colette, of the University of Michigan, analysing Emily's extensive writings, some of which were first published in the Morpeth Herald.

It shows Emily's spiritual side, as well as her intelligence.

Ms Blythe-Jones has penned *Women of Wit, Wisdom and Wonder: Women Who Inspire* after interviewing women from Europe, South Africa and India about their lives, the women who have inspired them and how they will inspire others.

Morpeth author Janet Macleod Trotter has brought out a special edition of her novel *No Greater Love*, which tells the tale of a North East Suffragette and features Emily as a background character.

A signing event was held in Rutherford of Morpeth on International Women's Day, when the Emily Inspires programme was launched and £200 was raised for Oxfam.

There is also an opportunity for others to try their writing talents in a national competition.

Participants are asked to write thoughts and feelings through the eyes of Emily as she headed to Epsom, or write from her mother's perspective or the neighbour's who took Emily to Morpeth Railway Station that day.

The competition, which is run by professional writer Rachel Cochrane, is open to novices and experienced writers, with four contests in one – national adult, Northumberland adult, Northumberland schools for ages 12 to 18, and an under 12s section.

Seven workshops will take place in county libraries to support the initiative and material, including an audio workshop, can be found online at www.listenupnorth.com

All winning entries will be posted on the site and read out during the centenary commemorations in June.

The closing date is Friday, May 10, and further details are available from libraries or the Emily Inspires website.

There is intense media interest in the centenary of Emily's death, which the Morpeth group hopes to use to tell her story.

A Channel 4 programme, presented by Clare Balding, is filming in the town this week for broadcast in May, which will look at the life of Emily.

Local women's choir Werca's Folk has been invited to sing on camera.

There are also programmes scheduled for Radio 4 and BBC Two.

Ms Blyth-Jones said: "The Emily Inspires programme is re-writing history quite literally to tell the real story.

"It is about the real story of Emily's death and the story of Emily the woman, the whole of who she was and the importance of that, not just now, but in the future.

"There is also her place as a woman of Northumberland.

"One of the things we want to do is draw people to Northumberland from a tourism and [economic](#) perspective. Emily is a tremendous draw for that, and not just this year."

For more information visit www.emilyinspires.co.uk

Next week the Herald will present a full round-up of the Emily Inspires programme.

Like 2 Tweet 6 0