History Mystery

1.6 Did Emily Davison mean to kill herself?

The Derby is one of the best-known horse races in the world. Every year, thousands of people – including the Royal Family – flock to Epsom Downs racecourse to watch the best horses and riders in the world battle it out for the famous trophy. It always gets plenty of coverage in the newspapers, which is why a suffragette named Emily Davison thought it would make the ideal opportunity for the suffragettes’ next publicity stunt. Historians cannot agree over what happened next. What do we know is that Davison was knocked down and killed by the king’s horse, Anmer, and that over 20,000 people attended her funeral. But did Davison deliberately kill herself for the suffragettes’ cause or did she misjudge the speed of the horses and die in a tragic accident? And what does the evidence say?

Read through the following pieces of evidence before explaining your conclusions in the Work section.

EVIDENCE A: Part of Emily Davison’s prison record.

She was a very militant suffragette who believed in ‘deeds not words.’

March 1909
One month in prison for obstruction (blocking a road)

September 1909
Two months for stone-throwing

November 1910
One month for breaking windows

January 1912
Six months for setting fire to postboxes

November 1912
Ten days for assaulting a vicar whom she mistook for a Member of Parliament

EVIDENCE B: From a book by G. Colmore, The Life of Emily Davison (1913). The Suffragette Summer Festival was a week-long meeting of hundreds of suffragettes.

‘She was able to go to the [Suffragette Summer] Festival on the opening day, Tuesday 3 June. Emily was never brighter than on that day. She stayed long at the fair and said she should come every day, “except tomorrow. I am going to the Derby tomorrow”.

“What are you going to do?”

“Ah ha!”

It was her usual answer… when she had planned something. “Look in the evening paper,” she added, “and you will see something”.

EVIDENCE C: From an eyewitness, John Ervine, who stood near to Emily Davison on the day.

“The king’s horse, Anmer, came up and Ms Davison went towards it. She put up her hand, but whether it was to catch hold of the reins or protect herself, I don’t know. It was all over in a few seconds. The horse knocked her over with great force and then stumbled and fell, throwing the jockey violently onto the ground. Both he and Ms Davison were bleeding a lot. I feel sure that Ms Davison meant to stop the horse and that she didn’t go onto the course thinking the race was over.”

EVIDENCE D: From an Internet website, written by a modern historian.

‘Some believed that Davison was trying to cross the racecourse and had failed to see that not all the horses had cleared the course. Other spectators claimed that they heard her shout “Votes for women” before leaping out in front of the King’s horse. A crude black and white film was taken that caught the event “live”… and it shows clearly that Davison stepped in front of Anmer (therefore she did not want to simply cross the course) and it appears that she tried to make a grab for the reins of the horse.’

EVIDENCE E: From Sylvia Pankhurst’s The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals (1931).

‘Her friend declared that she would not have died without writing a farewell message to her mother. Yet she sewed the [suffragette] flags inside her coat as though to make sure that no mistake could be made as to her motive when her body was examined.”

EVIDENCE F: The front page of a newspaper published the day after the Derby and before Davison had died of her injuries. Look closely at the photograph. Why do you think there were so few reliable witnesses despite the thousands of people who attended the race?

EVIDENCE G: From an eyewitness, John Ervine, who stood near to Emily Davison on the day.

‘As soon as I got the chance I threw myself over the prison railings. The idea in my mind was that one big tragedy would save many others; but the netting prevented any injury. Then I threw myself down on an iron staircase, a distance of 10 to 15 metres, but the netting caught me again. I felt I had only one chance left, so I hurled myself head first down the staircase, a distance of three metres. I landed on my head with a mighty thud and was knocked out. When I recovered I was in agony.”

EVIDENCE H: Adapted from the writings of Emily Davison herself. These events occurred in Holloway Prison, two weeks before her release from a six-month sentence for arson.

‘I am going to the Derby tomorrow”.

EVIDENCE I: From an Internet website, written by a modern historian.

‘Some believed that Davison was trying to cross the racecourse and had failed to see that not all the horses had cleared the course. Other spectators claimed that they heard her shout “Votes for women” before leaping out in front of the King’s horse. A crude black and white film was taken that caught the event “live”… and it shows clearly that Davison stepped in front of Anmer (therefore she did not want to simply cross the course) and it appears that she tried to make a grab for the reins of the horse.’

EVIDENCE J: From Sylvia Pankhurst’s The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals (1931).

‘Her friend declared that she would not have died without writing a farewell message to her mother. Yet she sewed the [suffragette] flags inside her coat as though to make sure that no mistake could be made as to her motive when her body was examined.”

Work

There are two main theories about Emily Davison’s death. Consider them both.

1. She tried to kill herself for the cause of ‘votes for women’, hoping to turn herself into a martyr in the process.

2. She wanted to make a protest by stopping the king’s horse but it went badly wrong and she died in a tragic accident.

Now reread the evidence on these pages and consider:

• why she had two flags
• why she didn’t tell anyone what she planned to do
• why she chose the king’s horse – or did she step in if it was not the king’s horse

Step 1 Make sure you fully understand all the evidence.

Step 2 Find any evidence that Davison was trying to kill herself.

Step 3 Find any evidence to show that Davison did not plan to kill herself.

Step 4 Deliver your verdict in the form of a report.

Imagine you are part of a government enquiry team that has been given the job of investigating the death in order to arrive at a conclusion. Give a basic outline of Davison’s death. You might include details of Davison herself and the events before she was killed.

Do you think Emily Davison planned to make a protest or did she plan to die as well? Back up any of your conclusions with evidence. Best of luck!
By July 1940, Hitler was close to becoming the ‘Master of Europe’. He was friendly with, or his armies had successfully invaded, most European countries (see Source B). Britain and the USSR were two of the more powerful nations that could stop him… but Britain was firmly in Hitler’s sights and he was hoping to invade in September 1940.

**Source A**: A poster which first appeared in 1940.

**Source B**: Hitler’s conquests up to September 1940.

**Source C**: A summary of the order to launch air strikes in the build-up to Hitler’s planned invasion. The RAF was the Royal Air Force, the official title of Britain’s air force.

**Source D**: A photograph of RAF pilots ‘scrambling’ to get to their planes to intercept approaching enemy aircraft.

**Mission Objectives**

- Explain what ‘Operation Sealion’ was.
- Decide why Hitler wasn’t able to invade Britain in September 1940.
- **FACT!** In total, over 3000 pilots fought against the Germans in the Battle of Britain. Over 2000 were from Britain but they were joined by New Zealanders (102), Poles (141), Canadians (90), Czechs (86), South Africans (21), Americans (7), and many more.

**5.3A Who were ‘the Few’?**

Towards the end of 1940, posters like Source A began to appear all over Britain. This poster featured five smiling fighter pilots and a famous quotation from Britain’s Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. So why was this poster published? Why were the pilots smiling? And why did so many people have to be thankful to ‘so few’?

**Source D**: A summary of the order to launch air strikes in the build-up to Hitler’s planned invasion. The RAF was the Royal Air Force, the official title of Britain’s air force.

For Operation Sealion to have any chance of success, Hitler knew he had to destroy Britain’s air force. He believed that if the Luftwaffe (German air force) could win control of the skies, it would be far easier for German ships to transport soldiers over the English Channel to begin the land invasion of Britain. If the RAF was destroyed, British planes could not attack the ships bringing across Hitler’s troops.

Throughout the summer of 1940, German and British pilots fought each other in the Battle of Britain high above southern England. From the start, the odds were stacked against the British:

- The Germans had 824 fighter planes and 1017 bombers in service. Britain only had about 600 fighter planes.
- It took five minutes for German planes to cross the Channel from France. However, it took 15 minutes for British planes to take off and reach the invading planes after they were spotted.
- Many of the British pilots were part-timers and had not received the same level of training or experience as the Germans. Germany trained 800 new pilots a month, while the British trained just 200.

**Work**

1. Why were some people calling Hitler the ‘Master of Europe’ by July 1940?
2. a. What was ‘Operation Sealion’? Try to give a really detailed answer.
   b. Do you think Hitler had good reason to believe that an invasion of Britain was possible by 15 September? Give reasons for your answer.