

Emily Mary Shackleton (Née Dorman)

Summary View

Emily Mary Dorman, later to become Lady Ernest Shackleton, was born into a large wealthy family in Sydenham, Kent. She was described as graceful, slim and confident with a talent for singing. Her father raised his children to have an appreciation of literature and nature, living between their town and country houses.

When Emily met Ernest in 1897 she thought of him as an adventure-prone dreamer and her family thought he was not her equal in class. However he was smitten and through his perseverance they were married on his return from Scott's Discovery expedition in April 1904.

Born : 15th May 1868 (other sources 1867).

Died : 9th June 1936. Buried ColdWaltham, West Sussex.

Parents: Charles Dorman & Jane Swinford

Spouse : Ernest Henry Shackleton

Children : Raymond Swinford, Cecily Jane Swinford and Edward Arthur Alexander

Link to Eastbourne : Lived at 14 Milnethorpe Road, Eastbourne from 1916 until ?

For much of their married life Ernest was off on expedition or on lecture tours. There was little or no communication with her husband whilst he was away and Emily learned to be self-sufficient. Emily played golf and became involved in the Girl Guide movement, becoming integral to organising the group in Eastbourne.

Ernest was "unlucky in business and hopeless with finances". When he died on his final expedition he had left provision for his men but not his family, leaving a large debt. Emily died after a long illness in Hampton court, the apartments given to her by King George.

Researchers view

It was interesting getting to know someone who may have walked the same streets that I have 100 years ago. However I felt more of an affinity with her children and their relationship with a father who was hardly there. As a submariners daughter my father would go off on patrol for months at a time with little or no communication. We never knew where he was. This stranger would turn up called daddy, with sweets, who we could smell before we saw him. By the time we got to know him he would be off again, and my mother could get back to her routine.

Full research

Emily Mary Dorman, later to become Lady Ernest Shackleton, was born into a large wealthy family in Sydenham, Kent. She was the youngest of six children, having four brothers and a sister. She was born in an era where it was considered unsuitable for a woman of her class to work and so she was destined to be wife, mother and homemaker. Little is known about her early life, she was described as graceful, slim and confident with a talent for singing. Her father raised his children to have an appreciation of literature and nature. Her mother died when she was 24 and it is possible both she and her sister felt the need to remain at home to look after their father and the town and country houses.

Emily was friends with a sister of Ernest Shackleton, and was visiting her in 1897 when she first met her future husband. Ernest was home on leave from the Merchant Navy, having just returned from a voyage to Japan.

He was besotted with Emily, however she saw him as an adventure-prone dreamer and didn't take him seriously. Her family did not approve of their relationship as they thought he was not her equal in class and it would not last. She used their difference in age to refuse his advances, she was six years his senior. However this made him all the more determined and Ernest set about making himself a more suitable prospect. Getting promotion and being accepted onto Scott's Discovery expedition to the South Pole. He wrote many letters and would spend much of his leave time with the Dorman family. In May 1900 he is reported as visiting the family at their summer house in Eastbourne. By the time he was due to set off to the Antarctic with Scott in 1901, he had achieved his goal of winning Emily and had her father's permission to marry her. In October of the same year sadly Emily's father, Charles Dorman, died aged 72.

Ernest was invalided home from Scott's Discovery expedition in 1903. They were married the following year in Westminster Abbey, London 9th April 1904. In their early married life they lived in Scotland where Ernest had a job at the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh. However it was Emily's connections which opened the door to an exclusive social circle. In the summer taking a house in St Andrews to play golf, which Emily became more proficient at than her husband. There is another story of them spending a summer at Seaford to play golf, so it is quite possible they also played in Eastbourne.

It wasn't long before Ernest became restless and started to plan his own expedition to reach the South Pole. In 1907 Emily was left with two young children for the 2 years Ernest was away. She would have had staff to help and her own family and friends but it must have been difficult being alone and away from where she had grown up.

Ernest's time away from family took its toll on Emily, and even when he was home there were constant demands on his time. "The waiting is so long and weary. I used to dream that he was back & that I said "tell me this isn't a dream" but it always was." There would have been little or no communication with her husband as the telephone was only just available in people's homes. It wouldn't be until 1915 that there would be the beginnings of a transatlantic phone network, however telegraph was available. Radio wireless telegraph and ship to shore radio communication was still in its infancy. Therefore Emily would have been reliant on the telegraph service for news that her husband was alive and safe. Followed months later by a letter, possibly reading the papers for more detailed information of where her husband was.

On Ernest's triumphant return in 1909 there would have been many engagements as everyone wanted to hear the stories and be linked to a great explorer. He had set a new record for farthest south and was knighted by King Edward VII. Emily joined Ernest on a relentless round of dinners, receptions and speeches, but gradually became side-lined. Instead of making sure his debts were paid and his family provided for he donated fees earned from appearances to good causes. Thankfully Emily had an allowance from her family estate of £700 a year which was not be used for expedition debts. Although she accompanied him she would not always attend the event or leave

early. It must have become quite tedious to hear the same stories over again, I wonder if she also missed her children on these tours as there is no mention that they joined them.

On Ernest's return his two children would not have recognised him, being only two and barely one when he left. It would have been hard for Ernest to find his place in the family on his return as many seafarers have found. Like many wives of forces personnel Emily would have learned to be a self-sufficient single parent, always listening out for news of their loved one whilst also dreading what it could be.

During this time Emily would have realised what her life would be like under the shadow of her explorer husband. Seeing two sides of him, the charismatic explorer to the outside world and at home the struggles of husband and father. Whilst she loved and admired the adventurer, as a husband and father he failed. He was unlucky in business and hopeless with finances, however his charisma and charm helped him and meant he was in demand for lectures. He is reported as having many women admirers and enjoying the company of women. He admitted to his wife that he had "committed all sorts of crimes in thoughts if not always in action and don't worry much about it". Many biographies of Ernest allude to him having extra marital affairs, there is no doubt he had many admirers and needed to charm them to maintain his funding for expeditions, however there seems to be little evidence of actual affairs. Emily dutifully kept up appearances, however in one interview in the USA she is reported to have said she did not believe in reading her children fairy stories where the marriage ended happily ever after as doing so might encourage a girl that marriage was the only option, "How wrong that is". Her own daughter Cecily never married.

By the time Ernest left in 1914 for his most famous expedition their marriage was struggling, and they had another child Edward born in 1911. His letter home as he sailed south admitted whilst he loved his wife and children, he loved adventure far more. He was never happier than when he was off on an expedition. He accepted he was lucky to have a wife as capable as Emily and yet again promised this would be his last expedition. Emily was very astute and knew her husband probably better than he did. I don't think Ernest knew how much his wife had helped him. When Ernest had returned in 1909 he was in a great deal of debt. They were introduced to the Political journalist Sir Henry Lucy of the Daily Express and his wife. Emily confided to Lady Lucy their problems with debts, well aware of the power of the female network and how to use it to let men think it was their idea. Sir Lucy immediately published a statement in the Daily Express of his consternation that Ernest had been saddled with debts of an expedition that brought the country such honour. Prime Minister Asquith issued a grant to Ernest to cover his costs. Emily had prevented the family from being destitute, however her husband believed it was he who managed to find the answer to their financial problems.

The story of Ernest's Trans-Antarctic expedition on endurance, spurred on by the South Pole having been reached, is legendary and depicted in many books and film. However Emily also faced challenges, WWI broke as Ernest travelled South on 4th August 1914. The Eastbourne Gazette of 7th August 1914 reports the endurance anchored off Eastbourne on 4th August, in part to say good-bye to family and allow benefactors to look around the ship, but also to pick up a response from the admiralty. Ernest had offered his crew to the war effort and the answer from Winston Churchill, First Lord of the admiralty, "Proceed".

WWI marked a great social change. It was the first time that such a large number of men had been sent away to war. There was a change in attitude towards women as they stepped into men's jobs, giving them the opportunity to show how capable they were. Many women were also home alone

and had to fend for themselves. This meant that women's attitudes to their own status and position in society also changed.

Conscription brought together people from different classes, and from all over the empire, this mixing was seen as a great leveller which accelerated social change after the war. The old hierarchy was being questioned and the working classes were demanding more rights and a voice. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act extends vote to all men over 21 and most women over 30. Up until that time many in the country were unable to vote with the poorer classes and women being very much underrepresented.

Whilst Ernest was away Emily kept herself busy doing what she could for the war effort, the Sunday times December 6th 1914 reports Lady Shackleton opens a bazaar at the Empress club in aid of the Red Cross. On 6th February 1915 Emily's brother Charles died, he was staying with a cousin at Minster Lodge, Grassington Road, Eastbourne. The cause of death is unknown however at the beginning of the 20th century, tuberculosis (TB) was one of the UK's most urgent health problems. A vaccine would not be available until 1920 and it was not until after WWII that a vaccine programme was sufficient to significantly reduce the number of deaths due to TB. It is possible Emily would have visited or even been staying to help nurse him. The proximity of East Sussex to France meant that the sound of large artillery guns and explosions regularly drifted across the channel, this must have been an eerie sound.

In March 1916 a message came through from the Aurora, the other boat in the expedition, that it was due to arrive in New Zealand in April. The Endurance party was expected to reach civilisation by November 1915, but if the weather was against them they would over winter and meet the Aurora the following April. Emily now knew that something was wrong, she wrote letters for help to PM Asquith and the Australian high commissioner. However Britain was still in the middle of a war which had gone on much longer than many had first thought. There were reports in the papers condemning the expedition when so many were losing their lives on the front, Emily wrote defending her husband. Emily also attended a meeting with the expedition officials along with Mrs Mackintosh the wife of the commander of the Aurora. A decision was made that they needed to organize a relief expedition. The expedition had run out of money to pay the dependents of the expedition members, it was only the generosity of Dame Janet Stancomb-Wills that prevented even further disaster. However by May 1916 Ernest has reached South Georgia and a message sent home.

On Ernest's return the family moved to 14 Milnthorpe Road, Eastbourne. However it is reported that he could hear the guns from France and rushed back to London to enlist. In April 1919 he returned home to Eastbourne for 4 days, which was the longest time he had been home in 5 years.

It is around the time of moving to Eastbourne that Emily is reported as becoming involved in the Girl Guides. The Girl Guide movement formally started around 1910, however it was seen as controversial as depicted in a report in The Times September 11th 1911.

THE DUKE OF DEVONSHIRE AND THE GIRL SCOUTS' MOVEMENT.

The Duchess of Devonshire yesterday opened a new High School for Girls at Chesterfield, which has been erected by the Derbyshire County Council at a cost of £20,000. The Duchess was presented with the gold key by the county architect, Mr. G. H. Widdows.

The REV. W. TEMPLE, Headmaster of Repton, said it was of vital importance that all classes should be properly represented and carefully considered. If the real solution of the problems of to-day was to be found it was necessary that the citizens who took part in solving these problems should be of cultivated minds and trained judgment.

The DUKE of DEVONSHIRE said he was looking forward to the time when they in Derbyshire would have a fully-equipped University similar to that at Leeds, of which he was Chancellor. While bearing testimony to the benefits of muscular development, he hoped that the gymnastic training given in the school would not induce any of the students to take part in the various movements which were better confined to the male sex. As a strong opponent of the Girls' Scout movement, he trusted that the gymnastics would not induce them to take part in demonstrations of force at Westminster or elsewhere.

[The Times, Tuesday, September 19th, 1911. Page 5](#)

Emily was keen to ensure that her husband was remembered in a positive way. She asked his friend Hugh Robert Mill to write his biography "**The life of Sir Ernest Shackleton**". Emily helped with material and also asked for information from others. Dame Janet Stancomb-wills sent the correspondence she had from Ernest. They were very confidential and were difficult for Emily to read, her husband wrote about his hopes for his family and his disappointments.

Ernest had left around £40,000 debt, about £1.5 million in today's money. Her allowance was barely enough and even with the proceeds from the book Emily had to take her son Ray out of Harrow. A friend had offered to pay the school fees for Cecily and Eddie. It must have been awful having to accept charity. Emily was used to living frugally and she stayed at their house in Eastbourne for a while before moving to ColdWaltham in West Sussex with her daughter.

In 1929 King George granted Emily apartments at Hampton Court where she died in 1936 after a long illness. She was buried in St Giles Church, Coldwaltham, West Sussex

By the end of WWI however attitudes had begun to change, and the support of the Royal Family meant the Guide movement was acceptable in polite society. Emily became Eastbourne divisional Commissioner. In 1921 her husband's ship, Quest, arrived in Eastbourne before heading south to his final expedition. The Eastbourne Division of Girl Guides presented Sir Ernest with a prismatic compass as a token of affection and goodwill. Ernest did not return, he had a heart attack and died in South Georgia where he is buried at his wife's request. He had left provision for his men on his death but not his family, leaving a large debt.

Emily's story is of a dutiful daughter and a dutiful wife who after the horrors and upheaval of WW1 very much began to be her own person. Changes in laws and societies attitudes opened up many opportunities for women that we take for granted today. I am sure that Emily's subtle negotiating and diplomatic skills, along with her connections to important members of society may have played a part in bringing change not just in Eastbourne but further afield.

Researchers view

The research took a number of twists and turns many of these due to having to check conflicting information. It was like searching for pieces of a puzzle which I slowly started to piece together revealing the story of a woman who lived 100 years ago not far from me.

Whilst Emily's life was eclipsed by her husband for the vast majority of us our histories will be mere shadows, although the digitising of vast amounts of data is gradually making our past more accessible than ever.

It was interesting getting to know someone who may have walked the same streets that I have. However in my research I felt more of an affinity with her children. In the Independent obituary of their youngest son Lord Edward Shackleton he is reported as saying he hardly knew his father growing up. He was 3 years old when his father went to the Antarctic, and on his return promptly left to play his part in the war.

As a submariners daughter my father would go off on patrol for months at a time with little or no communication. We never knew where he was. Every now and again we would send or receive a 'bluey' the forces airmail letter. This stranger would turn up called daddy, with sweets, who we could smell long before we saw him. By the time we got to know him he would be off again, and my mother could get back to her routine.

Emily must have been a strong woman to handle the time apart the way she did, there were a few stories of her waving the ship off to sea. This took me back to a childhood memory of standing on the cliffs, near Hooe, to watch my Dad's boat (submarine) leave Plymouth Sound. The boat came in quite close to shore and all the men were on deck lined up facing us. The wives encouraged us children to wave and cheer, but we were happy because we had the morning off school. Looking back it must have been quite poignant and moving, but as a child of six or seven it was just part of being a submariner's daughter.

Michelle Merrilees