

Betty Levene

First off, Betty, do you want to just let me know how you, how you came to be at Greenham?

Well, I suppose I was already quite involved in the peace movement and anti-nuclear things and I'd been, I'd occupied, one of the people that occupied Luxulyan in Cornwall before that, as well as Torness and campaigns about other things. Waste dumping at sea off the Cornish coast. So it was a natural place for me to go in many ways. I suppose at that time, I was almost a full time protester, although I had a base in Cornwall that I lived at but I - if there was something in the air, I would sniff it. So I went up to Oxford for a weekend of workshops. I wait - I couldn't go at the very beginning, the walk from Wales because I was doing a boat building course, that I'd waited for a couple of years to be on. Because every year funnily enough, there were about 16 people on the course they only took one woman. It was just coincidence that every year there was one woman and so it took me a few years to get on the course. But as soon as that was finished, I hitched off up to Oxford with my boatbuilding toolbox, which was very heavy. And of course at that time, after a couple of months of the women being at Greenham, or the people being at Greenham, there were things going on everywhere. There were the new peace groups setting up and Campaign Atom was already fully active in Oxford, big big peace group. And I went to one their workshops and there I met a very wonderful woman called Carolyn -

Okay.

Who you may have come across one of the women who walked from Greenham, er from Wales from Braudy. And she almost - even though I had intended to hitch down to Greenham anyway, the following week, she almost headhunted me. I think she liked that I had a sense of humour, that I wasn't, that I clearly wasn't a separatist, that I wore pretty '40s dresses with welly boots, which was the uniform of the day in Cornwall if you were vegan!

(Both laugh).

Welly boots! And I went down to Greenham with another friend of hers from Oxford, called Annie, who gave me a lift, which was very nice, and that was it really. So I was there a couple of months after the women arrived.

So quite early?

Yes, perhaps perhaps three months. The end of the winter I think or the middle of the winter.

Gosh you went in the winter?

I think so. Yes. It was very cold. Yes. But remember I was, even though it's Cornish, I was used to living outside so it wasn't, to me it wasn't new and I don't necessarily like living in mud and rain, but I was used to it.

(Both laugh).

And what was it like when you got there? What was it like in those early days?

It was quite quiet. It wasn't like, you know, the big times when there was hundreds of women turning up to snip gates and quite a lot of times quite boring. I mean, there was always a lot of picketing of the, of the, of the cars going by, vehicles going by. And occasionally there'd be snipping of fences. But there was a lot of sitting around, trying to get the fire going and making cups of tea. And I, being me, used to go off for walks in the countryside. It was a new part of the world for me. Er so you know, footpaths down south to Berkeley and Kingsclere and all those places to watch wildlife, you know, which I was more interested in really. Lots of heavy discussion even from that period. Men still living at the camp in a support role.

Oh really? Staying over?

Yes, oh, yes. Up until, up until Embrace the Base. And I was in a little group that you know, with Carolyn and others, sort of eight or nine or ten of us that comprised the support men. They were definitely in a support role. They were the, you know, the few that were there were incredibly gentle, incredibly dedicated, incredibly hard working. The trouble was that if they did a lot of wood chopping, that was machismo, if they didn't do any chopping, they were lazy gits. So I didn't consider it very non-violent and the little group thought you know that that was my, my orbit women also didn't consider it very non-violent. And that in the end was why we left, because the decision to go entirely women only after Embrace the Base was for some women an expedience, a political expedience - which is fine, but it wasn't admitted to be such. It was, it was you know, it was all about women standing up for their own values and for nurturing and the rest of it. But no admittance of the fact that they'd ill treated men who weren't doing any harm.

That's interesting because I thought ,from other interviews, that erm, that the men, that was quite an early decision after they arrived only a few days after the march arrived that it would be women only, and that there would be - so to hear it's quite a lot later than that and that men had lived there for while, is that?

Well I told you, I'd give you the unauthorised version!

No it's good! That's interesting.

Men were only in supporting roles from almost I believe, the outset. And and when I was there, men were only in supporting roles. And on the day of in December of Embrace the Base, our little group - because we were very down

to earth, folk, I think - we dug all the latrines for Embrace the Base, took us about 12 hours.

Blimey.

The water table was very, very high at Greenham. So as soon as you've dug a ditch - well a trench, huge trenches - they'd fill up with water again, as its winter. And our little group that dug those latrines was mixed. And at the end of Embrace the Base, three o'clock in the morning, the couple of men in that group were told to bugger off. Still makes me cry really, so we left.

So you left with the men in solidarity?

Yeah, we'd be planning to set - because at that time, also, there were there was an expansion of camps erm, all over Britain, especially southern Britain, and we were planning to set up another camp in the south east of England, to, you know, to spread the idea of peace camps. You know, not everybody at Greenham was, was - ill treated, the few men that were still there supporting. But there was a little core that was a bit, you know, a bit Stalinist...

Okay.

... with their attitude. And, you know, there was all sorts of women there who wanted it - the great majority of women wanted it to be women only, but for different reasons. For political expediency, for having a safe women's only space, because of the joy of being amongst only women. So you know, I'm not, you know, I'm not, I'm not coming down hard on Greenham as an idea. I just think erm...

It sounds like it's not even about the idea of a women only space for you. You can see the value of that. It's about the way those particular men who were there at that time, were perhaps disposed of.

Absolutely. But also I'd been involved in lots of sort of short and long term groups of direct activists and affinity groups that had been mixed and you know, in very, very nurturing loving communities of you know men and women together. So to me, it wasn't necessary.

Okay.

(Laughs).

Would you have, so would you - is that what, did you did you ever go back after you'd left?

Yeah, we went back for actions and we went, we went up and set up another base and indeed, I visited another camp that had friends who'd set up as well. Oh, yeah, we went back for the actions in May - I can't remember when all the

things were - and for some of the blockades. Yeah. Oh, yeah. We didn't cut ourselves off from them or anything like that. It sounds very, very extreme, but no it wasn't as bad as that.

No, no it doesn't at all.

But I'd been involved in things quite early on and we did a fast for, to raise money for the Windscale inquiry when I was first at the universi - the art college down here in Cornwall.

What's the Windscale inquiry?

The Windscale inquiry was 1974. It was, er, it was an inquiry into the expansion of what is now called Sellafield, but was Windscale until -

Oh!

I don't know when, until the '80s, some time in the '80s I can't remember. For - can't think of the word but never mind.

The nuclear power plants?

Huge public inquiry. And at the end of that there was a big rally in Trafalgar Square in I suppose, late '74, early '75 I can't really remember, probably organised by friends, I can't remember. And that it was announced that there would, there was a campaign to stop a new nuclear power station being built in East Lothian, south of Edinburgh. And I got very, very involved in that over the next year, or two or three, and in fact, got chucked out of the art college as a result of spending all the time up in East Lothian. So yeah, so I was, that was my first big involvement in things really. And huge occupations, you know, hundreds and hundreds, thousands of people coming to occupy the site and do direct action. Which again, we were saying about earlier, about people not knowing about earlier non-violent direct actions. But affinity groups from all over Britain going to a place south of Edinburgh a long, long way from Cornwall, a long, long way from the south of England as well, to take direct action.

And what sort of form did that take? I think for a lot of people listening to the interviews it's quite hard to sort of sum up what non-violent direct action is.

Well, the er the big, the big event at Torness we - I was involved in an affinity group from, mostly from Bristol, Bath area and I was a little offshoot.

Can you explain affinity groups as well?

Affinity groups, usually between 8 and 12 people - something like that - that become, that come together, maybe through friendship or neighbourhood or maybe on purpose, to learn how to break the law, really. You don't have to

break the law to be in an affinity group, but non-violent direct action against whatever. So you learn how to erm, how to physically cope with being arrested or being attacked, you learned physically how to deal with human beings emotionally and you know, tactically, how you how you face off or un-face off police and all those things. So erm -

Oh wow, that's really interesting.

So - which is you know, millions and millions of, lots and lots of affinity groups are now happening for Extinction Rebellion. So, and you know, many of those people think it's new. But of course, it's not. There's nothing new under this sun. I wish there was a sun today. So we went up to Torness and there was probably, I don't know 20 or 25 - I don't really remember - different affinity groups from all over Britain taking direct action at this site, which was being built. So that the building wasn't up yet but they'd built the, they'd dug out the reactor core, which is like sort of quarter mile across you know, there's a huge hole in the ground like, like Delabole slate quarry. And erm, the thing that our affinity group did was find a water supply, find hoses and tried to fill the reactor core with water. We didn't really succeed. We put a, put a decent sized puddle in there! Other people were digging up the roads that had been built, you know, the mud roads. I remember on the, on the day, some persons who shall definitely remain anonymous, put some sugar in some works vehicles on site, big works vehicles, you know, sort of JCB type things and caterpillars and I think set fire to one or two vehicles. And there was -

Oh my goodness.

A long discussion about whether that was non-violent or not because it was not a living thing. That took up a lot of energy.

Because that might have hurt someone else in the process and I bet views were quite split on that weren't they?

Yeah, we've got, I've got a photo of somewhere of a group sitting in a circle with hands in the air, waiving, gesticulating, and a little ball of smoke in the background were the (inaudible)... Yes, very yes. Lots of very in depth discussions. So yes.

Where did you fall in that discussion?

I never did anything like that, but I wasn't really fussed about machinery. (Laughs).

So you, I mean, did you - what was your experience of the police and law? It sounds like you've done so many things that, you must have been arrested at some point?

Yeah, some some, a few times. Yeah, it depends where - in Scotland the police tended to arrest you and dump you in the countryside because it was, it was near a town called Dunbar which is about suppose the size of Penryn, probably Penryn pre university. But very rural otherwise, and so you'd have a sort of three or four or five mile walk back through the centre.

And no, and no paper work for them sort of thing?

Yeah, of course, yes. It was just a way of putting you off really. I, in large, we've always I've always built good relationships with er, with the police when I've been living somewhere and getting to know people. At Burghfield, the peace camp we set up when we left Greenham we built quite, quite deep and profound relationships with the MOD plods the MOD policeman at the site.

How come? How did that -

Because we were living there. And because the ethos of being at Burghfield was to actually, it was to bring to light the site which was supposed to be a secret site. But actually to build relationships and change people's minds through discussion. So that wasn't just the local community. It was the MOD Plods many of whom were things like ambulance drivers who couldn't afford to be an ambulance driver anymore. So they'd become an MOD policeman because it was a bit more reliable in terms of pay and employment.

That's interesting.

Erm I've come across a lot of police and prison officers who, you know, why I might laugh at their naivety in my eyes, have said they do the job in order to help people.

Really?

Yeah, the young ones. (Laughs). We were very friendly at Burghfield, very friendly. You know when I was on the last Extinction Rebellion thing I did we chatted to the police - much against the stuff that's laid down by Extinction Rebellion, 'Don't talk to the police, you might give something away at your, for your court for your court case.' But the police may be institutionally racist, but if every single police officer, whether they're racist or not, is beyond redemption, what does it say for the rest of the society? Because they're only other members of society.

Yeah.

So it's not non-violent to regard other individuals as -

Inherently harmful.

Inherently. Yes, absolutely. Yes. By and large.

I agree. Do you, do you take - it sounds that you really have embodied the principles of non-violent direct action as part of your personal political -

Non-violence, I mean -

Non-violence, is that different - sorry.

In my daily - well direct action in my day to day life I don't take a lot. But non-violence, yes, which is all about treating human beings and giving them a way, it's about giving them a way out as well to come back from perhaps something they're doing, which you might disapprove of deeply.

That they on some level are hopefully uncomfortable with.

And also I mean, you know, Burghfield was founded on no means to ends, which was we felt -

What does that mean?

That you don't, you don't, it's, the expedience goes out the door. And it's very, you know, almost impossible to be, to live your life entirely without means to ends.

Right.

I'm going to tread on this worm, because I need to get to that side of the bridge, you know, whatever. But you know, what I've been saying about Greenham and about how the men were treated in order to gain the expedience of a women's only camp, which did a huge amount for the peace movement in terms of publicity and changing people's lives.

And a huge amount for women of that generation.

That was an expedience. But yes it was an expedience to treat the men the way they did. So that's why at Burghfield we had a lotus symbol, a Buddhist lotus symbol, even though we weren't all Buddhists as our symbol of the camp, that, you know, that was quite deep non-violence I think.

Yes. It's interesting. So so how many of you were living at Burgh - Burgh - Burghfield, is it?

Burghfield, yeah. Only usually about between eight and twelve I think. It was about a core group of eight or nine of us.

That is quite intense, isn't it?

Yeah it was quite intense every day, we every day, I think, in the end of the day, I think we sat down and discussed the day and what we'd achieved or not achieved. And every day, we discussed one person, how they were feeling and so you know, we were quite an intense group.

Oh wow.

There were other people who came and supported from, it was only about four miles from Reading. The village of Burghfield was half a mile away, a mile away - I don't know. So lots of people coming and going er, we had Reading University. But yeah, it was a core group.

And how did it feel if you were the person that was being discussed?

I didn't like it at all. But I'm sort of a bit, you know, sort of a bit, 'Ah no problem with me! Oh, I don't need anything discussing about me I'm alright, I'm alright Jack!'

(Laughs).

I didn't like it very much, but I'm sure it was useful.

Did you hear things that were useful do you think? Or was it...

If I'm honest, I can't really remember. (Laughs).

That's fair enough.

It was a long time ago!

You just remember not much liking having the spotlight on you?

No!

How did you feel about commenting on other people? Or was the whole process slightly uncomfortable?

No, I don't think so. I think I probably preferred it to people commenting on me. Yeah, I think it's probably - yeah, yeah, it's probably a bit more like gossip when you're talking about other people. Yeah.

So how long did you live there for?

Only er, I think less than six months, about six months. Again, the Falklands War was setting off. Two of the core group were gonna go on the peace walk from - I can't remember where it started, it probably started in different places in Europe to er, to the Balkans, Balkan peace march which was, I suppose related to... And so the group was going to be very reduced in size, and we'd

done the job we wanted to do, which was getting the people of Burghfield who worked at the site, thinking about their work. Making Burghfield a public site because it doesn't - well I don't know if it does now I don't suppose it still does - doesn't appear on OS maps. It literally doesn't, you might as well put a (inaudible) duck though instead. It was removed in I guess, I think the '80s it was removed from the OS maps - oh no it was removed earlier from the OS maps. And then it was removed from the registry, the land registry in the '80s I think.

Wow.

It literally doesn't exist. It's the final assembly point for all Britain's nuclear warheads.

I did not know that.

Yeah. So it's in. It's in a trio of lovely places. Burghfield, Aldermaston, Greenham basically. Troubling - and of course the nuclear convoy was coming through the Berkshire roads to get there and leave it.

Did you ever take part in Cruise Watch? Which was kind of...

No I never did. We watched, we watched the missiles, we came across - although we tried very hard to find them but we came across a couple by accident I thought of the convoys coming into Burghfield -

Oh really.

Late at night.

Really, what was that like?

I suppose a bit surreal, very quiet. No noise, just the noise of the vehicles. Lots and lots and lots of lights I think about, in a erm convoy I should think there was probably 15 or 20 vehicles, including the outriders and things so you got lots and lots of security. So it wouldn't, I wouldn't have wanted to rush out and sit in front of them, that's for sure. (Laughs).

People did didn't they?

At Cruise? Yeah. Oh, yeah.

So what were the actions that you felt kind of best aligned with your, with...

At Greenham?

Well, either at Greenham or anything else that you've done. Because I mean it sounds like you've been involved in lots of things and what are the actions you did sort of feel best reflected you're...

Well I think Burghfield was was great in that it did this thing of all of a sudden in national papers people knew about this assembly point, you know which was great. I think the most useful thing I ever did was definitely with the same affinity group I was talking about from earlier on was we brought to pu - again, brought to public attention the dumping of nuclear waste at sea 300 miles off the Cornish coast.

That's a big deal.

And again, it hadn't really been known about. A lot of nuclear waste was every year, taken in a, by train from out from Windscale and other parts of Britain to a non-unionised little docks in, on the Seven, Berkley, where the castle is, and loaded onto a ship and taken out to sea in, in just oil drums and dumped in a deep trench.

Oh my god...

It's now of course, none of it's there anymore.

I was going to say is it still there?

Of course not. (Laughs). It's, you know, one of the slow poisonings we've done to the earth.

And to ourselves.

Yes. And we did that and what I, what was great about that is we were a together group who, who strategised. We planned a campaign, we started by talking to the local villages, the dockers, we did a March through town and then over the village. And then we did a little blockade of the docks and the next year, we did a much bigger blockade with the train, much more (inaudible). So we had, we had a beginning a middle and an end. The last action we did got huge amount publicity, and it got then, Greenpeace took it up. The National Union of Seamen took it up and after the National Union of Seamen took it up, it only took about six months for waste dumping to be stopped. So we actually -

That's amazing.

Yes, that actually had, you know, a big achievement.

A profound effect. Yeah. That's one of the things that I'm really interested in about Greenham is that it was, as activism goes, it was, you could argue it was very successful. In terms of its aim - if its broad aims were no more cruise missiles and

get the common land back, those were both achieved. Arguably, by the Greenham women or not.

(Laughs).

But, you know they happened.

Yes.

And that sounds like a similar thing. That, a quantifiable success.

In a sense, a much smaller thing than cruise missiles because, you know, if you have a union that doesn't want to handle something so profoundly against it's, it's other statements of intent and doesn't like the idea of non-unionised seamen as well.

Yeah.

They were they were a powerful lot then.

But it shows all the links to human rights, peace, socialism, the power of the why why, you - the fact that these are they're targeting a non-unionised workplace to start to do something so illegal and detrimental. It's sort of all quite connected, isn't it?

I would argue that probably Greenham didn't stop, wasn't really responsible for INF.

Right. Okay.

I don't think it was at all.

Do you not?

But nevertheless it had a -

Do you not think it influenced like public dialogue or the international dialogue around...

Maybe a modicum, maybe a modicum. It did a huge amount for women's empowerment and for people's empowerment, as well. But I think INF came at a time when you had these two geezers who came along who bizarre - or three geezers who came along who clicked, bizarrely. Thatcher, Gorbachev and Reagan. And it was all about saving money.

Yep.

And actually making the world a safer place. It was a sort of realpolitik. So yeah, I think yep, Greenham contributed a little.

So what do you think its positive impacts were then because you did mention its effect on women and people?

Oh, yeah, millions of women who went back and refused to be women posing at home cooking dinner, basically. Tens of thousands anyway.

Yeah.

It changed lots of women's lives, huge amounts of numbers of women decide to go to university erm, to do other things that they wouldn't have dreamt of doing. That obviously had a knock on effect for some men as well, who, who decided it wasn't right to treat women as a little chattel. So, but also, you know, in terms of direct action against the state and what was possible, and what wasn't its incredibly empowering to do things that stop the eight tonne sort of armoured trucks that make you realise that human beings are equal in terms of things like the police, and they just you know for a lot of women meeting different people that they've never meet before or otherwise, so of course its empowering but erm.

I noticed that you've got XR stuff on the window and you're still obviously very involved in movements now. Do you think there's lessons from Greenham that relate to that? Or is it, is XR doing similar things to some of the stuff that came out of Greenham for people?

Well there's obviously a level of direct action. I think, I think XR is wonderful. I think it's its so all encompassing, that it's its muddied its own waters, it doesn't really know where it's going, I don't think. I haven't been that involved in it. I've been involved in the last few months and for the last year, on and off, because I've been in a situation of flux, which has nothing to do with anything else. I had been very uninvolved in things in fact. I think it struggles with doing anything, which doesn't seem like direct action to it, because it considers it too, too un-radical. That's pretty bad English.

(Laughs).

So it struggles to actually - local groups struggle to, to strategise what they want to do. They decide they want to do something somewhere and they don't even really know why, let alone how, or have a timeline or timescale or a set of ideas about who they need to influence and what they need to get in order to achieve it. So a lot of the spontaneous stuff happens anyway, and really wonderfully, but I struggle with working with people who don't really think it's important to er, do the strategy stuff to have aims and objectives and strategy and tactics. So - I think that'll come in time.

Yeah.

Not that we have any time!

No.

(Both laugh).

Who do you feel is doing that then? Are there other people involved in your life that you can strategise with?

No, not really. No. Not in terms of NVDA anyway, non-violent direct action. No.

Really? So where's that gone do you think?

Oh, well I think well they're doing the direct action. So they're, they're the show where it is. The other things that are happening are not necessarily practical action things. There's you know, huge amounts of research going on, there's huge amounts of alternative art and theatre, there's Dark Mountain and all things like that going on, which are not about direct action.

So it's almost like the two worlds where perhaps Burghfield and Greenham, places there might have been strategy and NVDA together - the practical and the aims and objectives. And perhaps, in your impression, with what you're seeing at the moment, this feels like they've separated out into two areas.

No, not really. I don't really think so. And I just think there's a there's, there's, there's a lot going on. Yeah, climate change is it. Climate change and species extinction is, its everything.

Yeah.

It's economy and history and geography,

And patriarchy.

Culture. It's everything and even, you know, horrible party politics. So it's obviously going to take place in lots of different - or we hope, in lots of different places and in lots of ways and means.

So what do you - if you, just thinking more generally about perhaps not just Greenham, but the kind of action you've been involved in in the wider sort of scale, if people are going to make that into art or fictionalise in some way, how would you want that to be portrayed? What are the important premises?

For me, all the best things were funny.

Oh really?

Well, the fact that yeah at Greenham our little group of us had a laugh. We had a really good laugh at Luxulyan, we had a really good laugh, and I'm only interested in things that aren't too serious. Perhaps, perhaps there could be a sitcom, it would make a hilarious sitcom, although it would probably be bad.

(Both laugh).

There was a very serious part of Greenham where there was a lack of humour which I found very difficult.

Was that particularly Greenham? Or is that activism in general? Because the issues can be so -

It was, it was... it was Greenham. You couldn't make a joke about feminism -

Oh right.

Or women. You could joke about anything else but not women. (Laughs).

I'm saying Greenham as if it's one thing, but actually it's lots of different gates isn't it?

Course. Yes, yes.

So which gate were you at?

Well, when I was there it was only really well, it was, it was the main gate, which was Yellow. Yes. Yeah. So the the, I don't think was called Yellow then though er.

No I think it's still Main from the beginning wasn't it.

Then Fran, my mate Fran, sat at the Green Gate. But I think there was already called Green - where was quite near to Yellow Gate? It was very near. I can't - I think it was, sort of West. I can't really remember the layout. I can remember where Main Gate was but yeah, so the colours of the gates I think only came with Embrace the Base.

Oh really?

I think, I can't really remember. Yeah, there wasn't anybody else then. I think on the day of Embrace the Base the men were told to go and do things at the Purple Gate, 'Go to the Purple Gate and make a sandwiches.' Or something like that. I can't remember because I might be wrong on the colour of the gate.

I have definitely heard about the sandwich making though. From my Dad I mean, I mean you know my Mum and Dad?

Yes! Yes, yes yes yes.

And my Dad was definitely a sandwich maker. He was making sandwiches and part of the creche.