

Evelyn Parker

So can we first of all start by you telling me a little bit about how you became involved with the Greenham common experience?

Right, well it actually started at the end of 1979. And when, if you were in Newbury at the time, you might have been aware of this, um, we were told that the cruise missiles are going to be coming to Greenham. And the then Secretary of State for Defence who Frances Pym, came down to Newbury to a public meeting, to reassure us that we're all going to be very safe. It was difficult, not the easiest. And, and what he was saying was that um, Newbury is, would be no more in danger than anywhere else, I think he said in the south of England, because at a time of, anytime of international tension, that the missiles would not be at Greenham, they would be put on lorries, and they would be dispersed from Greenham, in all different directions, and they would melt into the countryside. So that Newbury would not be a target. And um, I think the options for local people um, it was put to us that as our, it was our patriotic duty basically to accept the missiles. And most people realised that we couldn't do anything about it, so we better just sort of get on with it. And, and I think the, obviously people were still afraid. And that fear just went underground. It was internalised as they say. Um, the only resistance at that time was the Newbury Campaign Against Cruise Missiles. And that was started by the Labour Party. And I did join it quite early on with some reservations, because I wasn't party political. But I joined it, really, on ethical grounds. I'm a Quaker, and, and therefore, it's the peace angle. And the moral angle that made me decide that my choice was between turning a blind eye like everybody else, or not. And that was my only not option. In fact, the Newbury campaign was run as a Labour party - as a left wing political organisation. It actually, the campaigning was - it was focused on stuff like whether nuclear disarmament should be unilateral, multilateral. And really we could have been a peace group somewhere in the Outer Hebrides! It didn't, it didn't take up on the actual localness of it, because

Greenham, being in Newbury, you will know - it's about less than a mile from the town centre.

Uh huh.

Yeah.

So, were these, was CND very much involved then in this Newbury campaign?

Yeah, we affiliated - we affiliated to CND, but we worked independently, and we did one or two marches, and that sort of thing. We leafleted, we were out in the, in the square.

Uh huh.

But they were that sort of leaflets, it was all political stuff.

Uh huh. So was it the Labour Party, um, centrally that were taking up this movement, or involved with this movement? Or was it the local Labour Party?

It was the local Labour Party. Yes, and Joan Ruddock who - was she an MP? Anyway, she certainly has been an MP. And she was the lead figure and the public persona of it. And um, it supported pretty well for a while, but at that level.

Um hum, um hum. So that takes - that sort of was in '79. Sorry, '79/'80. So then, at what point did the focus then go towards Greenham itself - Greenham common itself?

This is where the women come into it. So, that was 1981. We did in fact, um the Newbury campaign, one of the things it did was host, quite a number of pilgrimages to Greenham. Oh, yes, and the women weren't the first. And most of our energy actually went into baked potatoes and that sort of stuff! And the, but what they did when they came on their

pilgrimage, they waved their flags, and then they went away. But what was different about the Women's March from Cardiff, they didn't just go away, they stayed.

Right.

And I was quite scared for them at first. We supplied them with tents, because they hadn't come prepared - not to camp. And they were chaining themselves to the fence and that sort of thing, really daring stuff to me. And so we came up with tents and blankets, and food, and so that was, that was our main - the local women who were supporting it, but it wasn't women only at the time.

When you say 'we', was this actually the Newbury campaign, or was this the Quakers, or was this an informal group of women within Newbury that were supporting them.

I'm wrong, it wasn't women-only at the time. It was mixed.

Right.

And it became women-only after about 6 months, something like that. There was a big meeting at the camp, and the men were evicted, basically. Asked to leave. Yes, that's when it became women-only. So the support, the local support was from the Newbury campaign. But, and one of the things that that we did was um, get people from quite further afield involved, like Reading, Oxford, Swindon, Southampton. So they were coming up with foods and things like that, to support the women.

Right.

Yeah. But it was 1981 I think before it went women-only.

Yes.

And then after that, a group of local women materialised, you know, from the people who were already active.

Right. So this group of local women who materialised, did they continue to live as residents, or did some of them, actually move up to the camps themselves?

No, I think mostly we stayed at home. We were much more useful there. Because of-course the women needed stuff.

Yeah. Right. Okay. And so, the focus of the local women's group was very much to support the women in the camps.

Yeah, yeah.

What was the feeling about these, this particular local women's group towards the um, the camp, the camps, and the issues that they were standing for?

Well obviously we were supportive of the issue. And um, in varying degrees as it became more feminist, supporting that side of it as well.

Right. Right. And, for instance, when they had um, surround the camp, various, did, did the local women, then go to join them?

Oh yes, oh yeah we were there, absolutely.

Right, right. So very, you were basically very much Greenham woman, Greenham common women, but just living within the community of Newbury?

Yes. Off-base Greenham women!

Off base, yes! That's interesting. What, what, what was the reaction to other residents, um, to both the women at the camps, and to local people supporting them?

Um. Not very positive. My husband was a local builder. And um, he actually didn't really see the positive over my involvement. And I had to be quite careful, I had three children at the local school. And, I had to be quite careful um, not to raise my profile to the extent where they would be affected. And that was a bit of a tightrope walking act, you can imagine?

Yeah. That's, that is interesting. Um, did you feel that you were very much in the minority within Newbury, as supporters?

Yes. Very much.

Yeah.

If there was a silent minority, it was silent. The number of people who actually um, felt like us, but weren't prepared to do anything about it.

Right.

That may have been the case, we wouldn't know.

Exactly. What um, in what ways did the other local residents, and I say "other" in quotes, voice their opposition?

Um, I think it probably started around, it was, it first started when there was the first ring round the base, the big event, which was '82. And an awful lot of disruption was caused by all these thousands of women descending from all over the country. And basically bashing the fence down, and leaving litter, and you know, not adequate toilet facilities. You know, that sort of thing. You can imagine how the local population was affected.

Yeah, absolutely. Um. And so the local people, how did they react to this? Yes, they were in opposition - did they take any actions?

Um. Yes. I've got a lot of newspaper cuttings, um, which you'd be welcome to if you can get hold - come and get them. From the local paper. (Inaudible) correspondence, and a lot of it pretty hostile. Or some of it supportive. But there was an organisation that called itself RAGE, which is Ratepayers Against Greenham Encampments. Um, they started up, and they were - they put cartoons in the local paper, which I'm surprised that the Newbury News actually published because they were fascist - visibly fascist. And I suspect that, particularly when it didn't take off, I don't think it really took off because of the image that it presented. But in the meantime they did throw maggots, and you know sort of physical harassment.

Right, right. Yes, I've I've heard about that actually very recently. The lengths to which they they went to make the women feel very...

Unwelcome.

...unwelcome. Yeah, absolutely. That's interesting. So this movement RAGE was fairly short lived?

I think it was, yes. Less than a year. They were just awful. And I think you know, people, people just basically two lots of awful. Yeah.

But you had these women raising the profile of the fact that the missiles were there. Did, did local people's attitude change towards the presence of the missiles?

I think the, um, it's difficult for me to judge that. Because er, having taken this public stand that I had, I wasn't in with the sort of people that that you're talking about.

Yeah.

But um, I think that the fear just went further and further underground. It became, you know, less and less - people, local people were faced with the awful missiles, and then the awful women, as well. And there

was a definite tendency to pinpoint on the women who they could do something about, and not look at what was behind the fence. And that was a definite oh yes, it was so obvious that that's what was happening. It was you know, a strategy to, avoid talking about the real horror.

So you're saying that that the individuals felt they couldn't - felt isolated in their fear?

(Inaudible). Yeah.

Right, right. I mean, I remember seeing many Greenham women around Newbury at the time. What, what was the response to the women using the local facilities?

Um. This is where the Quakers came into it. Because that did become a big problem. And what we did at the Meeting House, in a way were you aware of the Meeting Houses in Newbury? Probably not. It was at the back of the bus station. Anyway.

I know where you are. Yes, yes. Yes. I do know. Yes, exactly. Yes.

So what we did, we installed a washing machine and a shower. And initially, a payphone as well, but that didn't work. So that went. So that women could clean up as they came into town.

Right. Right. And was this something that was managed by the, by the Meeting House, by the Quakers, or was it managed, was it just a facility?

We installed those in the Meeting House. And, and we were given by - a Quaker had bought us a part time worker who could help to organise things and see that things worked.

Right. Yeah, yeah. What was the perception of these women?

By the locals?

Um.

Probably mostly negative.

Um um. Were they prevented from using local facilities?

I'm not aware that they were prevented, I haven't heard that.

No, no, no. So for instance, shops, pubs, um, facilities like that - they not necessarily were welcomed, but they weren't rejected?

I think they weren't prohibited, but they certainly weren't particularly welcome.

Right, right. And what about the local police, what was their response?

Well, they were obviously much involved with the evictions. And the roundabout '84/'85/'86 - the middle of the '80s, the Thames Valley police were involved with the cruise convoys, policing the cruise convoys.

So what way were they involved, the Thames Valley police?

They were charged with ensuring the safety of the convoy.

Right, ensuring the safety of the convoy, right.

So from the local point of view.

Right, actually, I'll just - so when you say ensuring the safety of the convoys, I'll come back to something else in a moment, you mean, the safety from what aspect?

Public safety, so that they had a safe passage, and that they weren't causing obstructions, or anything that they would do with normal traffic. Except of course they had to supply export for each convoy.

Right. And was the fear for the convoy's safety because of protest against the convoys, or just a general accident safety, insurance safety?

Oh, no both! Yeah, the convoys, they only started in 1984 when the all the missiles have been landed. And they, and all the the launchers, and the support vehicles - there was quite a lot in the convoy - they had to practice, practice nuclear war was what they would do in the event of having to disperse into the countryside. And they had to do that regularly. And this is where Cruise Watch comes into it. Because of-course, they were going off base. And the women did the protests on on base. Cruise Watch did the protests off base.

And how who organised Cruise Watch? Was that done, was that initiated from the Greenham women themselves? Or was this a local initiation?

It was a local initiative. And they way it worked, a group of maybe half a dozen of us, got in touch - again with all the surrounding peace groups. Again, talking about Reading, Oxford, Swindon with west, Southampton, and even further afield than that. And set up a telephone network so that when the convoy left Greenham, we would be informed by the women. And we would alert people further afield, and then on the trunk roads, and report back if they started a convoy. And that worked extremely well. In fact, it worked so well that we caught them every time.

That you?

We caught we caught the convoy every time. The whole object of the exercise is to make nonsense of this idea that they could go out and secret and melt into the countryside without anyone knowing, which of course is rubbish.

Right. So when you say 'caught the convoy', are you saying that you actually prevented them from doing what they were, what they intended to do?

We prevented them doing it in secret.

Right, right. So for instance, supposing you come, you know, you caught or identified a convoy. Um. And they got to whatever site they were intending to arrive at. So then your local peace groups, they would then just hang around, or were they able to be more disruptive than that?

Oh yes, more disruptive than that - within all the confines of non-violence.

Right. So what kinds of measures did they take?

Er. If you could stop the convoy, that would be ideal.

Right.

If you could climb on the convoy that was even more ideal! (Laughs). On one occasion, one of the, actually one of the women was able to put a potato down its exhaust pipe! The exhaust pipe of one of the launchers which are - they're pointed upwards, they're not like a car exhaust pipe. I don't think she knew what she was doing. But anyway, she had a potato in her pocket, she climbed up there and popped it down, and it stopped the whole convoy! (Laughs). It's wonderful!

Wonderful! Supply potatoes all round and you just sorted the whole thing. Were you or your husband, I mean, what what roles did you play in this, in the Cruise Watch?

Um. I made it my business to...

(Dog barks). Excuse me. Sorry.

...Each time we got advanced notice from the women, because they - it didn't take them long to spot when the preparations were happening on the base.

Right.

So we would get a few hours notice. And they always went out around midnight - all down at night. I made it my business to pick up a van load of women and be somewhere in the first 3, 4 miles of their journey. And as they - in hiding, but as the convoy came, we would jump out and wave our banners, and throw our paint or whatever we were doing, just so that they could not get away from the fact that they have been spotted. And they were not going out in secret. That was my mission. I just did that month after month.

What, what - I mean, you must have been being confronted by the Thames Valley police.

Yes. (Inaudible).

(Laughs). I mean, were you arrested?

Um, was I arrested for that? I don't think so. Not for - not on the Cruise Watch.

You clearly arrested for something else. What was that? Was that for other protests?

Yes. Oh, that's going into the base.

Right.

We all did that, that was just bread and butter.

(Laughs). So was that very much part of the peace camps when you went into the bases through the fence. Was that with the women themselves?

Oh yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So were the Newbury police, were they a part of the Thames Valley police, or were they separate?

No, they're Thames Valley.

Right, right. And when people were arrested, er, were they just cautioned and freed? Or where they kept in prison - in the cell or confined?

Both - horses for courses, and that. I think it very much depended on the situation. But this is where the bylaws come into it, because - have you, have you had the bylaws story?

No, no, I don't know that at all.

Oh my goodness!

Sorry, sorry! (Laughs). Please tell me.

The women just habitually broke into the base. And it was it constituted a civil trespass.

Right.

So that, and they couldn't be arrested for it, they could be asked to leave. And um, and be made difficult. And so the MOD responded to that problem by instituting bylaws. And which made it a criminal offence to go on the base, and a different kettle of fish altogether, and then you did get arrested, and then would have to go to court. And you

would have to either pay a fine or go to prison. I'm amazed that you've spoken to all these women and you haven't heard this story!

Well, I mean, the, the, the, people I spoke to, they haven't gone in, they didn't go into this detail, which I find absolutely fascinating. So did the Ministry of Defence did they actually change the description of the base because it was ostensibly, I presume, still common land?

Ah! That came a bit later. When two women in particular, Jean and Georgina, who took it upon themselves to look into the history of the base. And they worked together with a local person called Leslie Pope.

Right. Yes.

And Leslie was au-fait with it. He was happy looking at Acts of Parliament and stuff like that.

Yeah.

And, and he worked out the history of the base, and that in-fact it had been commandeered for the war effort. But when the war regulations terminated in 1960, the MOD forgot that they handed the base back temporarily, that they didn't extinguish the commoner's rights. So the commoner's rights, they attach to property and not a person. And they attach to a number of properties around Greenham and Greenham Common.

Yes.

And Leslie, bless him, discovered all this, and together with the woman they worked on - in-fact what Jean and Georgina did was when they were charged for trespass, infringement of the bylaws. They pleaded not guilty on the grounds that the bylaws were illegal because they excluded the commoners. And that went backwards and forwards to the magistrate's court, then it went up to the county court, then it went up to the High Court, appeals in the meantime on both sides, and

eventually ended up in the House of Lords. And The House of Lords ruled that in-fact those bylaws were illegal. But this wasn't until about 1987/'88, possibly even '89. And all those arrests, in-fact, there had been hundreds of arrests made in the meantime. They all were illegal, and had to be overturned.

Right. Now. Yes. I was aware that it had gone to the High Court, I hadn't appreciated um, the implications of the finding that it made all the arrests, actually illegal.

Yes, yes. They were allowed to claim compensation.

Excellent. Thank you for clearing that up. There were so many aspects of it that I was aware of, but hadn't put the whole picture together. So yes, that...

Yes, I'm amazed.

Yes, I've sort of, I've been told bits and pieces. But er, yes, that, that is really interesting. There is something before that I really wanted to ask you. I probably come back to something else in a minute, but um, there has, some of the women, and we have asked women about illnesses that occurred as a result of being in the vicinity. What, what are you aware of?

Are you talking about radiation?

I think that, I mean, I'm going to interview somebody about it, but this is what um, they're suggesting. Um, and then having its implications there after.

You're talking about zapping.

Exactly. Now, how did that happen?

Um, I became aware of it at Green Gate, which is the only gate that's actually not on the road. So it's way off road by about quarter of a mile. And so it doesn't affect the general public. But the women there started having headaches, menstrual problems. And they became convinced that they were being targeted with microwaves from inside the base. I'm not sure that was ever actually proven.

But that was then, as far as you understand it was very much confined to a particular area of the base, ie the Green Gate.

Green Gate, yeah.

Interesting. Just move on to um, commons, again, the returning of the base to common land. Were you involved in that?

Oh yeah, very much so! (Laughs).

Right! (Laughs),

It was quite a small group. And what happened was after The House of Lords ruling, of-course the MOD had to do something about it. And they had to do something quite quickly, because the Americans at that time - 1987 was the INF Treaty. So the Americans at that time, were thinking about their next Greenham common. So they had to move fairly quickly to get rid of the commoners. And the way they did this was they offered to meet - there were two commons: Greenham Common, and Crookham Common. And Greenham Common, and the base straddled them both, or parts of both. So the MOD wanted to call the commoners together. One meeting for Greenham, and one meeting for Crookham commoners. And the initial response from the communist was no way are we prepared to sell our rights. But that slowly changed. And the, what Commons Against was, a group of local people supporting three or four commoners who, despite the change in attitude, and the, the growing preponderance of commoners who are prepared to accept money for their rights, to support the ones who were

sticking out. And, and that got quite hairy. And that really was, they were subjected to some considerable pressure.

In what way - how?

By the Commoners' Association. And by the MOD, because it involved court actions. And those commoners were given an ultimatum at-least twice that either you accept the money, or we will have to compulsory purchase the whole lot. And everybody will lose their rights and they won't get the money. So that was the pressure. And they did stick it out. And in the end, the MOD did give in.

What - those who were prepared to accept money, they were prepared to surrender their rights?

They were prepared to sell the rights that were attached to their property.

Right. Right. Which would then have become the property, well, the owner, owned by the Ministry of Defence?

They would have ceased to exist, the commoners' rights, they would have ceased to exist.

And, and the common itself would then have become the property of the Ministry of Defence?

It would have been deregistered, it would have come off the commons' register.

Right, and then up for sale?

It would have ceased to be a common, and that would render it open for use by the military. Unimpaired use by the military.

Yes, but if they've surrendered, and so if the ministry leased it, who would they be leasing it from?

From the District Council. Newbury District.

Right, right. So, so therefore, was the District Council trying to attain this, or - which side were the District Council?

I think they were keeping well out of it! (Laughs).

(Laughs). I don't blame them, from what you're describing. So I mean, they would just have been the recipient. They actually weren't involved?

I don't think they were the owners at the time, I think actually the MOD was, but don't quote me on that. Because that's a legal nicety, whether it was a District Council leasing it to them, or whether they - probably more like it was a lease - I don't know.

Can I just return to on the common, um the women in their camps, as I understand it, there were evictions, there was a process of evicting, what form did that take and who evicted them?

Newbury District Council, and they appointed a the team of bailiffs, and the job of the bailiffs was to go round the camp at least once every so often. And everything that was on council owned land had to be cleared. So what the women did was pick up all their belongings and put them in prams, and whatever they could. And go onto the highway, which was not council owned, where they could not be evicted. And when the bailiffs had moved on to the next camp, they went back. Which meant that basically, they had minimal, minimal belongings. And um, they lived hand to mouth. And the only way they survived was that they will be constantly supplied with new furniture, blankets, food all the time.

From yourselves?

Not just us, no. From people all over the country, people came. Yeah, constant stream.

Yeah, yeah.

I've actually got upstairs a rocking chair, which was donated to Blue Gate. And evicted, and I managed to save it and put it in the van. (Laughs). And I've still got it.

I love stories like that, and articles like that, that have got such a history. (Laughs). How wonderful. No, that's, that's really interesting. So since then, have you continued your interest and, and support for disarmament?

Oh yes, of-course. You know, yes, if you're for something on principle, you're unlikely to just drop it. We have looked at Aldermaston quite a lot, and I participated in the local group in Reading which took an interest in what was happening at Aldermaston. Didn't do so much of the protests, but rather looked at it as a local thing. Um. The effect it had on the people who live around. So we were worried about the radiation, for instance. Yeah.

And did you think there was evidence of radiation from Aldermaston?

Oh yes. Oh yeah.

And how did that, how was that transmitted? Had they got nuclear er, sources? What, what was creating this?

Plutonium. And that means that the debris has to be got rid of, and it has to either up the chimneys, or into the water. So, and I think the airborne pollution from Aldermaston probably was more significant in the 1960s, around that sort of time - before they really started cleaning up, and I think they did clean up quite a lot. They did at-least two quite comprehensive soil surveys, which did show mini hotspots of plutonium

in soil. That was attributed to atmospheric testing in the 1960s. And definitely it was there, yeah.

Yeah, no, that's interesting. Sorry, just returning - your husband - he supported you the whole way through?

Yes, as best he can.

Yes.

He did go out on a Cruise Watch. And two of my children also continued to some degree. Er. Yeah. The family, they're all sort of at the late teenage stage. This went on over a decade, the whole of the 1980s. So it was right through their teen years, all of them.

Yes. I mean, that is interesting. And I'm quite interested in the legacy, as far as you're concerned, from your actions at Greenham.

(Laughs). I don't know, I'm not sure of how to answer that.

In terms of your own family it sounds as though they've continued their interest?

Yes. It's the values behind it - so that nowadays we don't - we've gone quiet on nuclear disarmament. And we're more worried nowadays about climate change.

Right.

But it's all part of the same picture. You know, it's, to me they're not separate things.

It's a continuum?

Yeah.

Yeah. No, interesting, because what we're finding is that unless people were actually involved in Greenham, and then pass it on through the generations, or involved in CND, er, that actually the sort of generations coming along now know very little about the efforts that went in from the '60s onwards.

I think that's true.

Yeah, yeah. And part of this is to, if we can, um, get some more aspects of it into the um, curriculum.

Oh, excellent, yeah, good idea.

Because I think it'd be a shame for this to disappear. It's all a learning lesson. History repeats itself, as we see.

Yeah.

Yeah. So yes. Er, unless there's anything else - that last aspect was really interesting. Yeah, if there's anything else, please say.

I'll let you know if I think of anything.

Please do, or email me. And it's been fascinating talking to you, it really has. And, yeah, we can keep in touch.

Thank you very much.