

Julia Ball, Elspeth Owen, and Gerd Browne

Right, first of all then, how did you all come to be part of the peace movement in general before Greenham?

Well for me, for me I think Greenham was almost the start.

The start of you being active in the peace movement?

Yes. That's not true. No CND marches to Portland Down.

Well, we were, we, there was a special women's group in existence wasn't there, called Women Oppose the Nuclear Threat.

Oh yes.

Which we were all in in Cambridge, I think before Greenham. Unless, unless it came after Greenham?

I thought it came after Greenham.

Yeah.

Well, I became active with Greenham, but I was part of CND before that.

Yes.

So did, you were you at Greenham from the beginning, or did you hear about it later and join?

Well, Elspeth and I...

Julia and I...

Went, we went to Cardiff to the start of the march.

Oh yes.

So we went on the march through to Greenham. And so we went. Er. This is a little map of the whole thing. We walked to Newport, and then Chepstow, and then Bristol, Bath, Melksham, Devises, Malbrorough, called in at the US tactical nuclear weapons store in Welford, and oh, and Hungerford we'd been, and Newbury, and then we arrived at Greenham common, on the 5th of September, at lunchtime. So they said.

I don't think it was the 5th, but...

Well, that's, this is written on here. I can't remember

This is this is something I wrote, actually, yeah.

That's yours?

I made this before we went.

Oh, right.

And then that is a, is a more sort of official - was it the 5th? I've always thought it was the 2nd.

This says the 5th.

How long did it take you?

10 days - 27th of August, we started. Have you not spoken to anyone who's from the march?

No, no, we haven't. Have you?

I haven't.

Yeah, we were there the first night. Yeah, we were at the gate. Well, Julia wasn't actually there.

I wasn't at a gate.

But you were there for the whole walk.

So was there only one gate at that point?

Yeah. Well, we went to the main gate. Yes. I mean, there was no presence of anybody. We turned up. I was thinking today, I was thinking today how, how I forget how absolutely terrifying it was. I mean, that I - that suddenly came back to me that how, how that goes, how you don't remember that after many, many years. But actually, I was shaking. I remember...

When you arrived?

When we arrived, I had this, I was given a job to go and try and contact the press, because no one was taking any notice, you know, we'd walked all this way and no one was taking any notice.

Well, we're only women!

Yes. And I was in this, in this, there was no mobile phones of-course. Nothing like that. I was in these phone boxes near to the camp, ringing these news desks of these papers and I was, I could feel myself shaking actually. And it brings it back. Do you remember feeling frightened? Physically frightened?

No. I was more excited, I think. I can remember The Morning Star turned up at one place for...

At the bridge.

The only people who supported us were The Morning Star. That was at the bridge.

That was at Bristol.

Bristol.

Yeah. Sort of on the Bristol side, yeah. And there was a Russian, there was a Russian radio station. And then I think that was the only thing that did get into the papers was 'Oh, these women have been speaking to Russian media, you know?'

Oh, right.

Was that organised by CND, the walk?

No, it was organised by a group of women in, in, in Wales. And they had - on that card, I think, the banner said Women for Peace on Earth, didn't it?

Yes, that's right.

That was you know, there were several groups as they were like early environmentalists and peace together, combination.

So did you join it in Wales, or did you join on the way?

Yeah, we joined in Wales. It was advertised in The Guardian, actually. And in, and in Cosmopolitan, and we only, went very spontaneously at the last minute, didn't we?

Yes, yes.

A week or something before we heard about it.

Were you expecting the long walk?

Oh, yes. That was a plan. Yes, that was announced.

So you went ready for the walk?

We did. Yes. And CND, local CND had provided places for us to stay, they fed us - all our stops, we were given huge meals, weren't we?

Yes, yes, we were really welcomed.

And we slept - places, we slept on floors, in the school halls.

Village halls. It's so surprising to hear you say 'Gosh!'

I don't think - I haven't heard anybody who's on the walk, before really.

Well, there were only about 40 of us in total, I think.

So was it a shock when you got to Greenham, and there was nobody there but you?

It was. Yeah.

Well, sadly, I, I was I didn't actually get to Greenham. I had to come back here because I had an exhibition that I had to set up, so it was a real kind of political question. Did I not go - I couldn't not go to the exhibition, it was all other people were involved of-course. And so I left, so I missed the very last day.

So did, once you were there, did you stay then?

Yes, I think, I think probably there was a huge - we were really disappointed and, and angry at being ignored, I think. And we only

decided on the spot to stay the night, we chained ourselves to the, to the fence, to the fence near that gate thing - they kind of refused to speak to us, or you know, we tried to speak, we tried to get entrance - entry, obviously, and they wouldn't let us.

Yes, I can remember the last night I was there, there was a lot of talk about chaining yourself to the railings...

Yes.

...and could you do it for your children. And of-course some people did.

And was that in '82, '81/'82?

'81.

'81, okay.

I think it was '81, I've always said it was '81.

Yes, says the date.

Ah, okay.

So then did you stay then, or did you go back?

Well I stayed one, I stayed the first night. But you know, no one - there wasn't a plan at all. And I had another immediate plan that I liked, like Julia, you know, I had to get back to something, or go on to something. But people stayed. There was a then a presence - a continuous presence from then on.

So a lot of - some of the 40 women did stay right from the beginning?

Yes. And some of the men actually, there were a few men on the walk. And some of them stayed, I think. I mean, there were really were only a

few men. But it wasn't kind of women only very, very not strictly right at the beginning.

What, what was...

There was quite a lot of talk about making it so.

Yes.

For the men to go.

Oh was there?

Yeah.

And did they object or were they quite...

I think on the whole they went. I've got some photographs here around the campfire, and the men, the men are actually doing the cooking on that occasion to make themselves useful.

Yes, somebody said they ran a crèche as well.

Yes, yes.

Yes, 'cause there's lot - there are quite a number of small children.

Did the children stay all the time? Or did they...

Well if their mothers were there, I suppose they did, yeah.

So were they, were they young enough not to need schooling, or did any of them get any help schooling?

Are you talking about the whole time now? I mean, I don't know.

In, yeah, in general really, did it develop into a place where...

I don't think so, I can't remember...

I don't think there were small children - there was a baby born, you've probably got that?

Yes, I heard of that.

But I don't remember above school aged kids there, or until, well Gerd's, Gerd's daughter...

Yeah. She was in her early 20s.

Was she? I thought she went from school?

No, university. She left, dropped out, actually, art school...

So there wasn't any organisation to school children or anything like that?

I don't remember that at all.

I mean, the lovely thing about it was that it grew. It wasn't organised.

Yes.

The whole thing - we set out, and these things happened on the way and more people came for the day, or for longer if they want, felt inspired or could, and um, it just, it just grew in a very organic way.

Yeah, so there was nobody who was in charge, there wasn't a committee running it?

Ann Pettitt, who wrote this book. She was one of the original people in Wales, and she made an amazing speech at the big CND rally that in - I

think it was October or November, after this September. And it, I remember it because she had this wonderful metaphor - do you remember, about the - she said, there were only a handful of people and it was only one camp, you know, at Greenham, and she said 'We're like a mint plant, it's going to die right down over the winter, and you won't, but actually underneath the roots are spreading and it's growing.'

And that was the beginning wasn't it?

It was a huge - I mean there were it was an enormous march, that one wasn't it? And so lots of people heard that speech and heard new people within CND, and their followers.

So were there fewer people staying when it was winter, or did that not make any difference?

Well, um this winter was the first winter - there were very few people.

Right.

I'm sure it must have made a difference.

No, it was after the big march in '82 that...

More people came?

Yes. And different camps at different gates. Yeah.

Was there most much difference in the approach within the gates? Did they have a different way of being? Did they do more more active, or you know was...

I think there probably were differences. Well, the main gate was the main gate, and obviously that was the hotspot in terms of outsiders noticing, and press.

Right on the road, the main gate, of-course.

Yes.

I think it might have sort of been the kind of - you chose the gate you wanted to go to, and I think maybe the colour of it had an influence - whether you went to the Red Gate or the Green Gate, because it was all in the rainbow colors.

Yes.

But I think gradually they got character - well we used to go to the Green Gate, didn't we, and that was where most people from Cambridge went. So it was like...

You gravitated?

Because you all went together, or something. The gate where where Cecilia lived was very much young people - wasn't it?

Yeah.

Very much young people who were making these big decisions - leave, you know, leaving home and living there, and they were really young.

So, the people that stayed for the longest were probably the younger ones, were they?

No, I think...

Not necessarily.

There were some much older people who stayed a very long time.

Yeah.

And how did the women get on with the the military, and the police, and people around? Were there interactions between those?

Well, more I think.

More interactions?

No, war.

Oh, war!

Quite a lot of abuse, I mean, physical. Not, I don't mean I don't mean sexual abuse, but a lot of...

Verbal abuse?

Anger.

Yes, yes.

I think, I think there were all sorts, you know, there were a huge range of interactions because, you know, eventually there were a lot of people, and a lot of soldiers on the other side, and there were individual conversations, I'm sure. You know, where people actually spoke to each other like human beings in the course of a day, you know.

Yes.

But there was always the fence between. I don't remember any stories of anyone actually, you know, becoming friendly with a soldier.

No. No.

And I never had anything to do with making formal, um, interaction with people, with the officers. You know, I don't know who conducted those.

It was just...

Causal.

To get in.

Yeah.

Well, it was also very hostile, of-course. I know there were some people who believed you know, there was radar being come out, and people said they were getting headaches and this sort of thing. I don't know what substance, well there was substance, and that was people's experience. But I don't know that was...

That was the cause?

The stress of being there, you know? Yes, I don't know what the cause was.

Oh right, because people were um, cooking there and everything weren't they? And people were bringing food, we heard?

Yes.

Yeah.

Lots of - well Newbury, local Newbury CND and women's... were fantastic.

Very supportive.

Fuel as well and food.

So were the local residents mainly supportive of you?

No, I think there was a lot of opposition actually in Newbury. Regarded us a nuisance! (Laughs).

Well, there was a petrol station - quite near one of the nearest places where you could get some food, and that banned women from the camp game from going.

Gosh.

They banned them, I guess they were bad for trade, or you know.

Pretty scruffy! (Laughs).

Yeah. They were presented as, yeah mucky, filthy you know, lesbians.

Because there was no washing facilities...

Exactly.

Insults, yeah, a lot of insults, and, and lads in the dark as well - coming out and intimidating people sleeping and...

Waking them up?

Yeah. Crashing about and shouting. I don't think there was any - did you ever hear of any actual legally...

No. Have you heard about anything?

I haven't.

So there was no sort of sabotage going on or anything like that?

Um...

Do you think that the collective nature of the camp, and making decisions collectively, was a good way of moving forward?

Well, I, I think it was central. That was the experiment in a way. In some ways that was the most fundamental thing that happened there, I think. That that's how the decisions were made. And it was very, very lengthy, of-course, it's such a slow way to make decisions.

Did you feel it worked for the people in general in the camp?

Well, it produced the camp. (Laughs).

Well, yes, that's true. What were the particular challenges of having children there, did you see, or...Did the children stay for a long time?

I don't think so. I mean, I don't remember children.

We, none of us had small children at that time, or er...

So were there children - you've heard that from other people?

Yes, apparently there were children there with, but I haven't talked to anybody about how they got on in the camp. I don't know whether Christina...

We can't, I can't really say about that.

Um. How do you think been Greenham has affected you in your life in general.

Now we're into the... (laughs).

Very important at the time. I think I respected the police before, and I lost my respect for the police during that time.

So they didn't treat you very well then?

No it wasn't that, they're just ordinary people, you know - young men. So that was very important.

How did it come about that you lost your respect?

I say just because you know men in uniform, and I felt a respect for before, and that's a complete - we were talking to them, definitely. And I did feel they were hostile, like you said. We were talking.

You just felt they were ordinary men?

They are just ordinary man in the streets, happen to wear a uniform normally. Well, they did there too, of course. And I feel I treated police differently since then, if I've been in some sort of trouble. They are friendly young men, actually, that was quite important. But I mean, as far as Greenham is concerned, that was women together, wasn't it? That was so powerful.

You felt, you felt it was powerful?

Oh, fantastic. Wonderful. Just want to go back. (Laughs). Yes.

So how do you think it's affected your life?

Well, um, I think for me one of the most, well, the, the group, the sense of - like you're saying...

Community.

Community, being all together - the power, the powerfulness of the women, the Embrace the Base day, for instance, was just incredible.

The joy. There was so much joy there.

Yes, singing. But I think there was another more long term - for me personally, it was a long term, um, excitement - growth that came out of that, which was to do with the camping and the sleeping out. And I think it was probably something I'd been always wanting to do, maybe - to, to live out of doors. And it gave me the the courage I guess. Yes, this thing about - what I said before about feeling very frightened, I think it helped - the presence of everyone else helped me overcome that fear, or go through it, you know, get beyond it or something like that. And since Greenham I've done a lot of sleeping outside on my own basically.

Oh, have you?

And that's, that's, yeah, that's changed my life really.

Gosh, do you think it to changed your approach to life in general as well? Having the background of the community?

Life in general - um, well, of course, one of the one of the things that it's done for me is it's something I can say that I'm incredibly proud of being part of. Would you agree?

Greenham?

Yes.

Oh yes.

To have been there. And then to tell the story, you know numbers of numbers of times, it's very, very rewarding, I suppose, and gives you confidence and courage yourself. And you sort of spread it.

Yeah, and people want to know all the time. People who didn't go - women who didn't go.

Yes.

So people are still interested in finding Greenham?

Well, not so much now. I'm talking about more as it was going on, and my son was...

Did you go there?

One of my sons was at university, and I realised that his friends wanted to hear about Greenham, you know, which was very unexpected sort of role to be playing, to be the cool mother who was at Greenham, you know! That was, that was wonderful.

Yes.

Very glad to have had.

It was also a place where I think you didn't, you didn't talk about it very much unless people asked you. It wasn't something that you could personally claim pride in. I mean, I know, I thought I had to be careful, not careful, but I was aware that it was something deeper than that. You weren't just being a heroine, or hero, it was more fundamental. And um, that sort of boasting about it would be detrimental to the whole thing.

It wasn't boasting, it was just part of your life.

Yes.

And you talk about things that are part of your life and it wasn't boasting.

So do you feel...

That's what I'm saying, it wasn't about boasting.

No. So do you feel it's changed your life from then?

I think it confirmed my life, actually. I knew I wanted to be a painter, and I went on doing it - not necessarily, I didn't necessarily do, um, take my painting in a political direction in terms of figuration. It's always remained rather abstract, um, but yeah.

I think, I think, maybe we've, in common, we're saying it gave us some kind of confidence, and sense of solidarity, um, with, with our, with our own self, and with other women you know. So we carried on, as it were. We didn't give up.

It reaffirmed what you felt anyway?

Yes.

There were quite strong women's groups in East Anglia, weren't there?

Yes. Well there was another camp at Molesworth, which is fairly near here, which also had nuclear weapons. And we went there as well.

What did you think of the art that was in, as you're an artist, that was going on in Greenham?

Well, it was um, it was very, it was very strong, and very, very clear what it was about. And there was a lot of, a lot of, I loved a lot of the decoration, of the, the flags flying in the wind, and I don't know - it was quite spontaneous. It wasn't 'art'.

No, it was an expression?

Yes.

And what about the music? There was a lot of, there were a lot of songs.

Yes, I'm very deaf. (Laughs).

So did you stay over the whole period? Were you there on and off all the way through?

I wasn't. I just wanted to get a little painting I did.

I suppose you've seen this? (Shows something).

Oh, yes. That's one of the banners.

I should think it was probably, well, I think we were on and off until the nuclear weapons were removed, but the camp went on actually longer than that.

Yes, it did.

But um, I think after the weapons were gone, I didn't, I didn't go back.

Can you get past? Sorry, I was in your way, wasn't I? Did you do that while you were there? (The painting)

Sorry?

Did you do that one while you were there?

No, not when I was there. I did it when I came back. The very first time, almost the first time, there was a, we sang around the base, and the sound got picked up. Somebody started, and just the singing and it went right round circle. And that was a painting I did. The music, the sound started there. And it went all the way around. I did it as soon as I came back. It's just a (inaudible). But I called it Greenham. It was winter. (Laughs). I mean, just the whole thing.

Yes, it's evocative of the communities, the circle around them.

Yes.

Beautiful colours.

Thank you.

So how do you think you were portrayed, that Greenham was portrayed by the media at the time and since?

I read The Guardian! (Laughs).

Well, you couldn't avoid the headlines, could you? There was a lot of...

Lot of hostility.

A lot of hostility from the Daily Mail, the Daily Express, and the Telegraph. A lot of just derogatory person - sort of personal derogatory stuff, particularly about everyone was a lesbian, which was an insult. And...

Stupid women singing.

Yes. And I think probably there was a lot of stuff if the were children seen there, that was something that was that was then denigrated, you know as a disgrace.

How did they cope with washing and cooking and sleeping?

Well, it was very basic, wasn't it?

Very basic.

Very basic. As I say, that's one of the things I've really taken from it. (Laughs).

You liked the outdoor living?

Well, you know, what do you actually need? And it's very exciting to live with very little, actually - very stimulating, isn't it?

You make do.

Living outdoors, yes.

Everything, you know, you've got to sort everything all the time. It's not - there's not a tap or a switch.

So where did you get water from, then?

There was a - I remember one of the main taps was on on the other side of the main road from the main gate, wasn't it?

Oh yes.

That was a tremendous hazard to get, because it was like a dual carriageway main road to Andover, or somewhere, I think Basingstoke.

I don't remember. But I remember the tap! (Laughs).

I think there was, there was, there was a cafe somewhere near. Where people went to to wash.

Yes.

Fill up water and, and, and, what was it, it was something - the guy who owned it negotiated with the camp, um, can't remember what it was, but but something went on that they were able to use the showers, or the loos, in return. But I can't know what.

We weren't there for - none of us were actually there for, for weeks or days, or even days on end, you know, so we don't - we can't really give you that.

Have to ask my daughter who went there a long time.

Yes, we didn't live there.

Yes.

Do you think many people stayed through that?

She didn't stay throughout.

For a long time?

Well, some people did. Yes. Had - there was a woman, I mean, they've probably been in touch with you these women. Helen - Helen... what was her name?

Johnson.

No, that was Rebecca Johnson. Helen...Helen was from South Wales wasn't she, and she left her job and, and really devoted herself, and there were a few, but I don't remember everybody's names who did that.

There was talk that some of the women would have joined, and they were escaping some sort of domestic abuse. Did you come across any of that?

I think, well - this woman Helen, I don't know whether it was domestic abuse. I think she was ending a very, quite a long marriage, certainly - by, by what she did. But I don't know, I don't know if I ever knew, and I certainly don't remember the reasons.

No. So you didn't come across that, in general?

Not directly, but I certainly heard of people that that's what some women had done. Had got there.

Because it'd be very life affirming, wouldn't it to be surrounded by women?

Well, you feel perhaps protected. On the other hand, of course you're not - it's not really a very safe place to go beside a...

Physically?

...a nuclear base, is it?

Well, hopefully they wouldn't set them off while you were there. (Laughs). What um, if there was one sort of thing that would be very evocative of Greenham, and what would it be for you? A song, or a sign, or symbol, or an emotion?

A feeling of togetherness, I think, for me, it was most powerful. We are all in this together. (Laughs).

Yes.

You think of anything? If somebody said 'Give me an one idea of Greenham', what would it be?

It's difficult, because it's sort of diffused, really. Yes.

It was the day - in the summer, was it - December meeting 6 months after the camp had landed there.

There was, well there was the huge Embrace the Base. But, I think that was March.

No, I think it was in December, wasn't it?

Well, I thought it was in December, and then I, I opened up one of these books...

There were two.

There were two, actually, yes. Yes, there was one in - just before I went to that house in Devon, and that was December. Yes.

Yeah. And then there was one in the summer I think. But well, you know, the - I remember December one. I think there was snow on the ground, the lights, the candles.

Yes.

Whether it was starlight, I can't remember, but you know, the evening drawing in. It was good. I wasn't there - I didn't stay there very much. I went for a night or 2 every time, but not not, you know.

I was reading one testimony and a woman said she'd kept a journal when she was there. And she read it recently, and she said she couldn't believe the amount of emotion that she'd felt at the time about the camp.

Yes, yeah.

I think we have forgot, like I said about the fear, I had forgotten that, actually.

That's true.

I mean it's a hell of a long time ago! Yes, it does. It turns into ideas maybe, rather than the feelings, the what's left is some ideas. And that sensation of holding holding hands at the - on the Embrace the Base. That was extraordinary.

Yeah.

That was very emotional.

And were you all singing at that time?

Well I think there was certainly waves of singing. Yes, it wasn't nonstop, but yeah, it kind of a song arrived down the line, sort of thing.

Somebody told us yesterday that they passed a tampon all the way around, and when it got back to the beginning they knew the circle was complete.

(Laughter).

That's a very good story. Sounds like it might have been made up afterwards.

Walked into eternity. (Laughs).

So if there was one visual symbol that you could say was Greenham now, what would you think that would be?

Well, I've be looking at photographs that I took there, so that's rather different. With those it's the backs of the women in front of me, going on forever, as it - there were huge crowds.

I think, for me, it's that very famous photograph of the dancing on the top of the silos. I think that's an incredible picture.

Yes.

Um, so, it's so evocative and powerful of the, the difference between the women and the concrete and the fence. It's such a powerful image of what it was like, actually, and what what the confrontation was about.

Gosh, they were brave, weren't they?

Yes.

And the women were on top?

Yes, they were dancing and they, and it was dawn in the winter, so they were - they're just silhouettes, aren't they?

They're silhouettes.

Have you...

I don't think I've got a photograph of it.

It's been reproduced so many times.

There's a postcard.

All these lovely clippings.

Be careful opening these, they get so frail.

There's another one which is not at Greenham, but came out of Greenham of the woman lying down in the street outside the courts of justice. I think, I think yeah, this one on, this kind of picture is just amazing.

Oh yes.

The sort of combination of women's imagery, and the male part...

What about this?

'Scuffles as women seal off base'.

That makes me emotional, I recognise Martin's handwriting.

Have you, have you all remained active in the peace movement since?

No, I can't claim to have. I can't, I can't.

No. I suppose we're, we're feminists, with you know, we would still describe ourselves as feminists very much. Still - I mean I've never.

I went on an Aldermaston march. When was that Julia? That was after?

Yes.

After Greenham.

I suppose the thing about Greenham was it did seem so spontaneous. It just grew. And it wasn't, it wasn't organized. Which the CND marches obviously were. It was, it was, it was a women's expression.

Yes.

And it did go on being without leaders, didn't it?

I think it did.

Yeah, which is pretty remarkable. This, this is something that Julia and I took part in - another march. Have you come, have people told you about the Star Marches? They were from all these places in the country to Greenham, you know, when Greenham was very well established. I don't know if this has got the year - oh, '83, the summer of '83. And there were thousands of us, you know, eventually, we converged you know, on the same day, on...

There were actually very few of us who went from here.

Yes, never mind! (Laughs).

Well, in as much as people had prepared, and were always welcome, and this little trickle of women turned up.

Why do you think the Suffragette movement has been remembered more than this Greenham community? Or do you think it has?

Just a different time, isn't it?

Do you think it's just a matter of timing of history?

Maybe it's a...

It's a different issue, of-course.

Yes, it's a different issue. It's a more - it's a universal issue. But I mean peace is obviously a universal issue, but it doesn't traditionally have such large numbers of people supporting it. Maybe - I don't know. Maybe the patriarchy would prefer us to, to remember the Suffragettes more than Greenham because it's less - it's more orderly, I mean the outcome is something sort of orderly and controllable. And 'Oh, now you've got the vote, so you can be quiet'.

And also it's further back?

Yes. I wonder, do you think there'll be a 100th anniversary of Greenham? I - it maybe not?

Well I think you're helping to make...

Yes...

We're attempting to record it.

Yes. I do remember the shock when I first said to someone, I just said 'Greenham', you know, referred to it in an automatic sort of way and it was a young man, actually, and he said 'What's that?' And it was probably maybe about 2000 - year 2000 or so.

Yes. Whereas if you say Suffragettes, everybody knows, don't they?

Yes.

Gets forgotten.

It is a different issue.

Yes.

Fighting against nuclear...

Lots of people are not involved in that. Half the population...the vote, you know.

Has anyone else said to you about the fact that some feminists were critical of Greenham, because they said it isn't a women's issue - peace is not a women's issue. Feminists should be fighting for things which are specifically for women.

No, I haven't heard that.

It was quite a strong challenge, I guess.

At the time?

From radical feminists basically saying - do you remember that, Julia?

Well, I do. And also, I think another aspect of it was that it, it was seen um, from a lot of women's point of view, that it was a very middle class movement, and mostly white middle class women.

So that was a criticism?

Well, yes. Which is why you know that that's the tea towel, obsessed about the tea towel!

You are obsessed about the tea towel! I can understand that though. It's sort of left on a tea towel, which has lost its importance.

Yes.

And it's commercialized, which is a really strange feeling.

Yes.

That people could be making money out of Greenham tea towels!

Yes.

(Edit in recording).

My Country is the Whole World, which is an anthology that we made of women's peace, women's writing about peace and war, since from Sappho to Greenham, basically. And that very much came out of, I mean, we were working on that - well, it was published in '84. Actually it was published at the end of '83, wasn't it? And they...

Were you working on that right from the beginning?

Yes. And there was as, there were ten of us, I think, all of whom, were also involved with Greenham or connected to Greenham. But we were - it was a Cambridge group. Cambridge Won't - Women Opposed to Nuclear Threat.

Oh, right! (Laughs).

Cambridge Women's Peace Collective we actually called ourselves for this, yeah. And that I suppose, that was very exciting to, to, well to get it published.

To record.

Yeah, to get it published from a group of people that weren't, you know, none of us were writers or anything. It was a hell of a lot of - it was about collective, I'm sure you two remember me?

Yes.

I was - the difficult, the difficulties of, you know, producing that with ten people having to make a decision.

Did everybody - was everybody involved in the writing of it, or?

Well, it, it's an anthology of other people's writings, women's writings, but there were - each person had a little biographical bit, and then there's an introduction. And we had - but we had to make decisions about what to include, and what editorial, like editing.

Collective decisions?

(Laughs). Yes! You can imagine! But that's a, I don't think that would have happened without the background and the current, you know, Greenham existing was a, was a sort of stimulus to carry on doing it. Make it happen. And it came out of just after the Embrace the Base.

Do you sell, do you sell a lot of copies?

Well, it was launched at my shop, wasn't it?

Yes.

We sold a lot, yeah.

Is it still in print?

Yeah, we sold out. No, it's not in print. I think it sold out, though. But no, they didn't, interestingly, it probably took 5 years to sell / 4 years. You know, things had changed by then as it were Greenham.

That's an interesting point - you came to me, I didn't know Elspeth, I got to know her through the book. Er, but you had been to Hefner's (spelled phonetically) first, which was a big bookshop. And er... She was told the woman who was in charge of the Women's Studies, I suppose - Sociology, I think, and got to know and said 'We can't have that, it's too political', that's what you told me.

Well remembered!

So you came to me instead.

Yes.

But you didn't know me, you just just turned up.

Just turned up.

Did I?

No, you must have known me, but I didn't really know you.

No.

Greenham gave you the courage to go?

Yeah. Yes. It certainly did.

(Edit in recording).

Well, I think my memory's a letter in The Guardian, written by Ann Pettitt.

I don't remember it as a letter..

Or an article?

But something in there was a statement of some sort in The Guardian. Very shortly before, wasn't it?

Yes, it was.

I think it was only a week or something.

That's right.

So then you did you get together as friends to go then?

Yes. Julia and I did.

We went together on the walk. Nobody else came.

So the first - you mean on the original?

Yes.

So was it an extension of your CND campaigns then, that brought it forward?

I don't think it was connected.

But is that what made you think about going?

Well, it was technically connected.

Because it was - I think we were - the nuclear, the Greenham, you know, the arrival of the missiles it was a big public issue at the time.

We had this telephone tree. Do you remember?

Yes.

That was later wasn't it?

Well there were telephone trees for everything, weren't there?

Yes there were.

Because that was the way we communicated.

We didn't have the internet.

No, no internet or mobile phones. That's what's so amazing about that.

People got together anyway, without it?

Yeah, and how it sort of - I mean it was a complete surprise, wasn't it that, that, that number of people turning up.

The thirty thousand one you mean?

Yes. Nobody knew that was going what was going to happen on that day - before.

How many people do you think were there? The maximum number of people were at Greenham at any one time?

Well, that on that day, there were estimated thirty thousand, but that wouldn't staying. I have no idea, because it was very fluctuating.

(Inaudible)

Oh gosh.

Could you pass me that card?

It's beautiful.

Thank you very much.

Very similar.

What do you think was the average age of the people there?

Is that the woman who had twins and was a rapper?

They all look very young in these photographs.

That looks like Jane.

Yes.

Jane who's in, who's in the anthology. Jane Ricard.

That's right. Yes, that's what it was.

What do you think the average age was of people?

I'm sorry?

The average age of people who were there

Grannies for Peace.

It was huge, I don't know what the average would be. Every age.

Look at this one - 'Flaming women'.

May I take the poster?

Yes. This has been on my wall in the workshop. It's very - I, it's amazing it's survived actually.

Is this part of the ring round the camp?

I think it is yes, yes. I think we're holding, holding hands.

I've got a funny hat on even here!

Do you want this book?

Yes, yes, that's really interesting.

Terrible photographs! (Laughs).

They're recording the the event, aren't they? Symbolic, really isn't it?

(Edit in recording)

People tell us the word organic is - they relate to the the running of Greenham really, that just evolved with everybody - nobody in charge?

And no sense of an end, really. I mean, it was quite strange in a way how long it went on after the weapons weren't there anymore. It was like it did have another function as well as the getting rid of the weapons.

Yes. How long after they'd gone did it carry on?

I don't...

Must have been a few years.

I think so.

And now there's a peace garden there.

Yes, there is. Because it was a common anyway to start with.

Yes, and it's reverted to being a common.

Yeah, I want to go - I haven't been, actually. I really want to go back and look at it.

Some of the bunkers are still there, it's quite strange.

It's all open to the public?

Yes. Dog walkers everywhere.

Because Molesworth isn't. If you want to go to Molesworth, you need a passport and vetting.

What are they hiding there?

I know that through The Wildlife Trust, because there are a lot of special plants in there.

Oh yes.

Sorry, did you say Molesworth?

Yeah.

Right.

And they went to look at all these plants in there, which is not being looked after, really. But they had, it was quite a thing about getting in, it I mean those missiles have gone too, haven't they?

I'm sure they have. Yes.

Lot of American bases around here.

Do you think the Greenham women's count was instrumental in the missiles being sent back?

Yes.

That's a very big question.

I'm sure.

Yes.

Well, we all thought that. Because we wanted it to be!

We thought that.

Because it was there a long time.

It was there a long time. And it's quite unusual for weapons to be removed once they have landed, been put somewhere. I'm sure there were other influences - like changes in military policy, you know, which maybe aren't affected by things like our camp.

But you don't know whether they are or not really, do you?

No. It's difficult to say categorically what effect of them was, but as Gerd says, we'd like to think, it was...

We won in the end!

But I think Greenham's more important than that in a way - for women.

Oh yes, definitely.

More important than whether it did actually - was, I mean, it wasn't single handedly the cause, I don't think.

Well, the nuclear threat in Germany is still there, isn't it?

Yes.

Yes.

So the legacy of Greenham...

For, for women, as opposed to for, for peace say, I think is, is as important.

Yeah.

(Edit in recording).

She was arrested at Greenham?

Yes. Because I think she climbed onto the...

She was old at the time. Yes, much older than us anyway.

Because she'd been in a previous demo.

I wouldn't have thought she's much older than us!

No, not than we are now, but she was in her 60s at-least.

She'd been in the postwar demonstrations of CND.

So why did she get arrested?

She climbed on, she climbed the fence, I think tried to get on to the dance - that wonderful photograph you were talking of earlier.

And so she was, did they put them in prison for long? Was it a sort of overnight stay?

There was a lot of...

I think it was probably only a week or something.

But certainly it had an effect. I know there was one woman who was so furious and angry at the way she was treated, and women were treated in prison, she tried to do something about it. And what was the other thing?

Treated by the the officials or by other prisoners?

Through the whole prison system, I think.

12th December '82.

'82.

And also, it turned out that they should never have been in prison. What if the, um...

Civil disobedience?

Or whatever it was, that they were accused of, or couldn't, it should have been fine, not, not a prison sentence.

I was, I was fined for cutting the fence at Molesworth, and the charge for that was criminal damage.

Oh was it?

Which I don't think had a prison sentence.

How much did they find you?

£67 and some number of pence, it came to! I do remember, and I've never paid it. I never paid it. And they never pursued me, actually. I was rather annoyed.

You were looking for litigation.

Because, well, I thought I'd got a criminal record. And recently I had to have one of those CBR checks because I was working in a context where you needed it, and I thought, oh, hooray, it's going to come upon my record. And there was absolutely no mention of it at all.

I think they lost all those old records.

Yes, I think, I think there was a decision, a political decision not to, not to pursue those because they didn't want making heroines out of people, basically.

This woman is trouble!

Yes.

Heroines or martyrs.

Yes, or martyrs, like Mabel, and um, there was a woman, Helen, Helen Johnson, I think her name was, who got sent to prison and there was a big hullabaloo, and they - I think they decided after that not to, not to put out prison sentences - well it probably costs far more than it's worth as well.

Yes, probably. And they're only going to go back anyway.

Yes. It wasn't a deterrent.

What are you going to do with all this precious stuff, Julia?

Well, just put it back in the cupboard.

Have you got - no you haven't got stuff?

I gave my stuff to Celia.

Oh right.

Wasn't as much as this.

She had much more. She doesn't keep things. She will keep this.

Yeah, I mean, I haven't got any, any pictures or I don't think I took any pictures. And I haven't - didn't keep any cuttings or anything.

That's Karen Silkwood that's at...

I never saw the film. Did you see the film...

With Jane Fonda, was it?

I don't know.

I didn't see the film, I don't think.

What's the film?

Karen Silkwood film.

I saw that. I saw that on the long flight.

Oh really?

Flight to India or something!

It was that time.

Do you think having less things in Greenham taught you to have less things about you since, or are you, do you collect?

Certainly on the road. I mean, certainly I think like I said already, I think for me it was an inspiration to be able to travel light. Maybe not - I have got a lot of stuff at home.

Pretty good, Elspeth.

You are very good at living simply.

Um hum.

Aren't you good at living simply?

Not as good, I've got central heating by choice, for instance.

So you feel as if you're outdoors?

Yes. I just put on more clothes sort of thing. Yeah.

Or without electricity.

Yeah.

No mobile, no telephone. Nothing.

Really?

Yeah. For a whole year?

Well, when you say that it's slightly exaggerated, because I didn't have it in my house. I didn't, I didn't have it any electricity. But I did go to other people's houses for things - you know.

To warm up!

I wasn't at home the entire time. And I didn't, I didn't hesitate to use other people's electricity.

Was it a protest?

Um, no, it was more like an action, I suppose you'd call it - an action. It wasn't - a demonstration, maybe? It was a it was a piece of work for a whole year - for 13 full moons. And I was doing, I was delivering um, small pots that I'd made to a whole range of people in that time. So that's what I mean. I was sometimes in other people's houses, and they had electricity. But I didn't have a mobile or I didn't...

You also described coming back in the dark and not switching on the lights, and cold winter's evening, unheated house.

Felt like Greenham?

(Laughs). Yes

I remember very well you describing it, and you weren't even tempted to switch on the light.

No, I suppose maybe that comes from Greenham or from, from - Greenham was like was like people were dedicating themselves to something, weren't we? It was a dedication. And I think once you've said you're doing, you know, well, we're going to Greenham and we're not moving, it does simplify things in a way - you've got your plan and your structure, and that's what you're doing. And there's - in some ways it doesn't feel like hardship or restriction.

Well, for a year it would for me, I could do it for a month, but not a year!

I'm thinking of doing it again, actually.

A year?

Well, it was so wonderfully enjoyable.

(Edit in recording).

...who was on the original march with us, and when we got to the, to the camp, there was a wide sort of concrete entrance place, and she she cartwheeled up, and the head of it. That was so amazing. Yeah. And, and like Julia said she could walk on our hands as well - just walk along.

I remember she said something like 'Well, who wants to be in the little old island, anyway?' What was the point of taking it over? There was nothing here to take.

She wasn't, was she not English?

I think she was Welsh.

Yeah. I thought she might have been like Nordic or...

Different memories.

Yes.

Well, it's all because it's conjecture, isn't it. You come down in a different place.

I think that is on that banner on the first.

Yeah, this is this is not her veneration.

(Edit in recording).

We were discussing the various age groups of the people who were at Greenham, and Elspeth wants to elaborate on that theme.

Yes, it's, the first thing I want to say is about the age we are now, we three as a group, and how I initially got in touch with you as an individual. And then it sort of came to me that it would be really interesting to do it as a group. And during the interview, it's been even feeling more strongly you know, that, that, that's what Greenham was partly about - us going as groups, and connections and so on. And I just thought it would be interesting for you, all of you listening, wherever you are! You know, that we're still a group...

Still together?

We're still together, and we're really enjoying talking about Greenham together today. And we're 80s - we're in our 80s now, which means we were in our 40s, 50s when we were at Greenham.

Which was sort of probably in the middle of the ages?

In the middle sort of thing, yes. There were a lot of us of our age, I would say - but of all ages. Yeah. older and younger.

Yes. So is that the, is that the thing that you want to bring forward?

I think what I want to, I think that it's about the fact that Greenham is still connecting us if you like, we three, you know, we're here, three of us now, still 40 years 30/40 years later, still talking together about it.

Yes.

And you've given us that chance.

I'm glad. Thank you very much all of you. It's been a lovely afternoon.
Thank you very much.