

Catherine Leyow

Um, Catherine, maybe we could just start off, you could tell us something about your background, where you came from, what you were doing in the run up to Greenham?

Okay, I was born in East London - in Leytonstone. My mother was of Jamaican descent, my father of English and German, and, um, working class family - didn't go to university or anything. And I first heard of Greenham, my family moved up to Norfolk when I was young, but then I got married when I was 17 or 18, and moved back down to London, and my husband had a friend who was more of a middle class educated sort of person, and they were all in their 30s. I was quite a bit younger, so she kind of opened my eyes to feminism and reading the Guardian, and politics and things, which I kind of absorbed like a sponge. And joined CND, the local CND with her.

When was this roughly? 1980...?

This would have been... I got married in 1980, so I think when I was 21, so 1980...yes, would have been 1982. The first time I went to Greenham was December 1982 for the Embrace the Base.

Did you go on your own, or were you with a group?

No, I went with this friend. We drove down in my car, and um, I was just amazed, it was so powerful, and to be with other women like that. And then I started visiting whenever I could. I would go down on a weekend, maybe stay over one night, or just go down for the day. I had lots of fights with my husband about it.

Did he go to Embrace the Base with you, or did you just go...

No, it was a women's thing - women only. I mean he wasn't, he was left wing, again not you know - very sort of working class guy. He supported the idea, but it was very much, I was this young wife who he thought he could mould into some housewife, which I told him, when I got married to him, I'm going to change you know, I'm not grown yet - I'm going to change. And I changed into somebody who was independent and had her own mind, and he didn't like that, so he tried to stop me going down to Greenham and doing that sort of thing.

Were you going to any women's groups before Greenham?

No. No. Mostly I was getting information from a friend, reading books - I was always a big reader, so I'd get a lot of feminist books and just learnt that way, and um, yeah.

When you arrived at Greenham for Embrace the Base, what was your first, what is your memory - the first thing you saw?

I can't remember the first thing I saw.

What was the impression you got?

We'd made, um - we'd taken tampons, and we'd dipped them in glue and put glitter on them, and we wanted to hang them from the fence, and we decided to walk all the way round.

It's a long way.

Yes. And it was just, seeing so many women, just expressing themselves, and the whole thing - I think at the time, my first thought when I joined, well when I heard about nuclear weapons and the whole situation, I think my husband at the time was trying to say, 'oh no, we need them, because they've got them' sort of thing, and I thought, do you know what, if I was going to die in a nuclear explosion, I wouldn't feel any better if on the other side of the world other innocent people were dying as well - and that was my driving force. I thought you know if I'm going to die horribly, I want to at-least have some moral indignation! (Laughs). So then I learnt more about it.

Were you actually afraid? Did you live in fear of the nuclear holocaust?

No. No I didn't. I'm the sort of person that feels I'm meant to die at some point, and I'm not going to avoid that, and in the meantime I just better live, so I'd never feared death in that way, but I had that energy when you're that age to really fight, I was angry. I think I was very angry about what they were doing in my name, and how they were spending the money. I think particularly later, after I went traveling - before I went to live at Greenham, I think I just connected it much more with the amount of money that was being spent on these weapons, when the National Health was suffering - when people were living in poverty - the robbery worldwide that comes through the British Empire - the wealth that had accumulated here, and how it was being spent, just putting all those things together - especially as a black woman, that I was just furious at the injustice of it, and just wanted to do something.

Powered by anger?

Uum (agreement), and at that age it's very physical - you want to do something physically and I enjoyed, when I was living there, and when I was taking action, I enjoyed it. It was tough sometimes, but there was a thrill in actually doing something.

And on the Embrace the Base, what were the police like that day - the military? Did you have much interaction with them?

I remember...yeah, I remember hanging the tampons on the fence, and one of the military coming over and saying 'what's that?' And I can't remember if we told him, or if he realised, and kind of went 'weeeurgghh!', and rushed off! (Laughs).

He's probably never got it!

(Laughs) Yeah! And, but I wasn't ever one to chat with them in a friendly way - I didn't ever want to build any relationship with them. I didn't like what they were doing. My main thing I'd tell them to do was to go and get a proper job, at the time, this wasn't the job they should be doing.

Before you went back, because you did Embrace the Base, and then you went back to London.

Yes.

What did you do then in the interim, before you went back in...

'88.

'88.

So, I was working in London, um.... I went down - that first year - a few times, whenever I could. In '80...over the next few years I'd go...

Did you stay overnight when you went? On visits to Greenham?

Not at first - I'd go down for the day, but after a while I started to stay overnight. But, um, I remember one occasion my husband took the rotor arm out of the car to stop me going, and I hitch-hiked instead! (Laughs). And I think, which year was it? There was another encircling of the base, and I'd gone down, that might have been the year I hitchhiked, and I was there with my friends Mari and Aiyo, and it was when we still had the benders.

I was going to ask you about that.

Um, yes, and my husband turned up with my mother in law. I just saw him across the road, and I told Mari and Aiyo, and they hid me in one of the benders! (Laughs).

Like being caught in the pub by your dad!

(Laughs) Yes! I just thought 'aaargh', I don't want a scene with him here. Yes, he was trying to stop me going. We split up in 1985 - the beginning of 1985 and then I started going more often - staying over more often at the weekend. I would do, um, night watches, so that the women who were there all the time could get a proper sleep, because there were vigilante attacks, so they tried to have someone...

Did you witness any of those vigilante attacks?

Well, no, I mean people going past yelling, and sometimes throwing things. From a distance - cans and bricks, but er - too cowardly to get close enough to hit you, sort of thing.

And did you meet any of the locals? Other than the ones throwing things out of cars?

Um,

Did you go into town?

When I lived there.

Or when you were visiting?

Not so much when I was visiting, I would stay there so women could go off and do other things. Yeah, but when I lived there we'd go into town - we'd go into the Friends' Meeting House.

Oh, Quakers.

They'd have a shower there, and there was another friend who would let us go to her house, and we'd go and do the shopping, and people generally kind of avoided you - but they weren't friendly.

Yeah, I've heard mixed.

It was very much a sort of middle class, country folk, town, and um, I think we were the eyesore and the pain in the neck. So yeah, we weren't very welcome.

Did you meet anyone from RAGE - the Rate Payers Against Gresham....

Oh yeah! Yes, but I don't think I met them personally.

But you knew of them?

Yeah.

I can't remember the name of the guy who ran it, but let's say he was a one off...out it like that.

Really? (Laughs). Yes, I just kept going down.

And did you go to Yellow Gate every time you went back?

Yes.

What attracted you to Yellow Gate?

Well, I think the first time I went down to Embrace the Base - that was the main gate - it was where all the traffic was coming in and out, so it was where you were going to get the most encounters with the base. So, I thought that was the point of being there - to confront military, what was going on in the base, so it made sense to me to go to Yellow Gate. And then of course I made friends with women there, you know Sarah and...

Is that Sarah Hibson?

Sarah Hibson. Oh, what's her name - the Japanese woman...I can't emend remember her name now... Hero. The nice Japanese woman as called Hero.

Yellow Gate was quite international, was it?

Um...

Or am I exaggerating?

There was a Swedish woman. There were a few people from Europe. I remember one black woman early on, but other than that it was very white, and I think when I

first went down - in the first few years, it was very - again that very white, educated, slightly older feminist, who I didn't have a lot in common with.

Were they welcoming?

Um...not altogether, no. Some, I mean Sarah was, Mari and Aiyo were, Hero was. Katrina, um, but not all of them. I remember - because I was about 21/22, I had long hair, I couldn't drive my car without my high heels, I'd change into my boots when I got there, but I couldn't drive in my boots, so I remember arriving at one time, and some women remarking on my high heels, and some other women telling me that my long hair was to please men, and that I should cut it short, and me thinking well, 'I like my long hair'.

How did you respond?

I just said, 'but I like it'. But I did feel maybe I wasn't a proper feminist or something. I did like my hair, I'd always had it like that, and also there's, you know, not conscious racism, but we grow up in a racist society - it's always there. So, there would be some incidents sometimes I'd feel uncountable, just an outsider, really.

Would you be happy to tell me what...

Um...

You don't have to.

I'm trying to think. I think when I went down - because I'd always tried to give the women there a break - before I went to live there, you know I would be at the camp fire and talk to visitors, and I remember some people having a discussion on this social - people getting on this social leaning wasn't very political, and they were talking about the visitors coming down for these social visits, which you know - well I also thought they're coming down to give support, but...

And presumably they're working, as well?

Yeah, yeah. And you know - but again, it's always - people kind of young, and you feel the cause is everything, you know some people would feel that everyone should be doing what they're doing - it's like that at that age. It's this thing 'if everyone just came and did this, we would win!'

More black and white?

Yes. Yeah. So they were having this discussion about these social visitors, and um, I think they said something to me about 'yes, but we understand with you, because you know black people can only relate to white people on a social level'. And I just ... (makes fast 'whaaat' sound)... but I didn't know what to say really.

So they would surprise you with those sorts of statements?

Not really. It's just - you know, I'd grown up in a white society - there was always going to be that.

But you didn't feel you had a ready answer to give back to them?

No. No. Because I was also in awe of them in its of ways, yes because they - there were also younger people there, but they were very educated and political. And then I used to see some women sometimes, and think 'oh, if only I'd been born lesbian, I'd really fancy her!' Because there was always this discussion that you had to be born lesbian, and it wasn't until later on that I discovered more about myself, and my own sexual politics that I thought - ah, actually, this fancying women all those years was because - I can decide for myself. Being straight - at the time - was more of my upbringing and social pressure.

Cultural?

Yes, so - but while I was at Greenham I was straight - I didn't have a relationship with a woman until after I left. I'm now happily married - to a woman.

Do you think Greenham had its impact on you?

Definitely! In many ways. I mean, politically - an eye opener.

I was thinking more in your sexuality?

Um, yes. Um. Yes. To be surrounded by women - or a lot of women, who were out and proud, who were - you know, very comfortable to be in whatever their sexuality was - but a lot of out and proud lesbian women who had real relationships in terms of the nitty gritty was going on. It wasn't 'oh look, this is something special', it was everyday relationships.

Normal?

Yes, and it wasn't just this isn't pretend or anything.

How many women were there at Yellow Gate? When you actually lived there?

When I lived there..let me think. There would be people who would come and go, people who had been like I used to be - people who would come down for weekends when they could. But living there permanently there...um...not that many, maybe 8.

A small amount.

It was small. Let me try to think - Katrina and Beth and Sarah, they were there. Oh, um, Annika, Alison - I think she left just before I left, I think. Um, me, of-course. Err, what's her name. The Swedish woman...Janet. And then, some who would come, so yeah, probably about 8.

So how did the day go, when you were living there permanently?

Well, yes, because I went - I was going there in 1980...'87, I went traveling - I met someone there who'd gone to Nicaragua, and I wanted to go. And then my sister had gone on holiday to India with her next door neighbour and had met someone, and was going to go and get married, so I thought oh, I better go to India then. And then I wanted to to to China, because I thought that was the most different place on Earth. So I did. Sort of round the world solo traveling for a year. I came back when I was 26 - I came there in the June of '88, I think. I went down there, so. Sorry, what was your question?

...(inaudible)

Yes, so we'd had a donation of these red pop up tents, sort of triangular ones - they were meant to be one person tents, and some people had their own tents which were a bit more solid. But I had one of the red pop up ones, because we'd have evictions quite frequently - at-least once a week or something. So I'd sleep in there. I'd have a lot of bedding underneath me, because the cold would come up through the ground, and then I had a small thin sleeping bag, and then I had an old army sleeping bag which had been my dad's when he'd been in the Territorial Army - which was quite handy. And then I'd wear a wooly hat and pajamas - like these thermal, thermal, and then like gloves and socks in bed. This would be winter time. So I was quite snuggly in there.

And how would the day pan out? What would you do? Was it a long day?

Any time - but winter. I used to like getting up early and being the first down, so um...I'd get up and I'd light the fire first and boil the kettle, and then we had one of those white enamel wash basins for washing in. So I'd heat the water, pour it in, put

the kettle on again for a cuppa, go back to my tent with the hot water, and then I'd do my bits - washing the bits. So it'd be face first, then take your clothes off and do your armpits, then put you clothes back on that bit, then do your feet and your bum - put the clothes on that bit, so I had a thorough wash every day of all the crucial parts. I couldn't do a day without having a proper wash. And then I'd take that out, throw the water away, and the kettle would have boiled, so I'd make the first cuppa, and then other people would start to get up.

And who, I mean who would decide what actions would take place, if any? Was it all sort of non-hierarchical? And how did it actually work - what you were actually going to do?

I was trying to remember, and I can't really remember how we'd have ideas. I mean there was basic things you did, so the missiles had been there for years, and they'd exercise verbally once a month - they would go to Salisbury Plain. So the idea was to make sure they never had a successful exercise, which they didn't. I think that was one of the biggest victories for Yellow Gate - that they could never successfully claim to have had the missiles there and had an exercise. So, you'd always be looking out for signs that they might be going out - because they would try to take you by surprise. And er, once they went out, they would spend two or three days on Salisbury Plain, and then come back. So once they were there we'd go to Salisbury Plain and try to track them there.

Did you have a car?

We had the van. The white van. Sometimes I think people would come down with a car, and would do. Things like this, I need to look through my papers and try to remind myself.

Did you get onto Salisbury Plain?

Oh yes, many time. Every time it went out we got to Salisbury Plain.

You actually got onto the Plain?

Yes, so we'd um - I mean we'd have also supporters who would get messages to us to say it'd been spotted in different places.

Is that Cruise Watch?

Yes. Oh, I used to go down with Cruise Watch in-fact, when when the missiles first arrived.

Did you meet Lynette Edwell?

I did, though I can't remember.

I'll bring her up a little bit later.

I remember the name.

But she didn't live at the camp. She lived in the town or the outskirts. I think she was involved in Cruise Watch, and she also went to Russia for one of the international women's things going on there. But I'll get onto that a little bit later if that's okay.

Yeah.

Were you arrested on Salisbury Plain?

Yes, yes. More than once - I'm sure. And we used to..

By? Who would arrest you? The police or the military police?

Thames Valley. Is that right? Yes, I'm sure it was Thames Valley, but I could be wrong. Thames Valley we're outside the fence and the military were inside the fence. But Salisbury Plain I guess it would still be Thames Valley. Yes, so we'd drive down and then we'd park somewhere and then we'd walk across the Plain. It could take a few hours, and sometimes we wouldn't find them on the first night, but we'd find them in the end. So we'd just crawl and, up to them, and then go right in the middle next to the convoy, and then pop up and start singing. Which they..

And the reaction would be?

They didn't know what to do because they're trained, you know we were lateral, and they'd been trained in this really military way, and they'd not been told what to do if women jump up and start singing at you! They'd been told what to do if people start shooting at you.

Were you afraid they'd start shooting at you. Or did you feel fairly confident?

Again, I thought they might, but I didn't have that fear, it was like 'this is what we're meant to do', and if I die here that's because I'm meant to. But in the meantime, I'm going to cause trouble.

So after they'd arrested you, where did they take you?

You'd be taken to portacabins and um, yeah, was it there? I remember being in a portacabin - it might have been on Salisbury Plain, yes it would have been the same Thames Valley police...hum.

So they'd process you there?

Yes.

On Salisbury Plain.

Yes.

And then what?

Then they'd release you somewhere. So if you were caught on the base they'd release you miles away, so you'd have to walk back, or find your own way back.

They didn't take you off to, um, under arrest, to Newbury?

I can't remember now. We were definitely taken to Newbury at various times. If you were arrested on the base you would be taken to Newbury. I can't remember for Salisbury Plain. Maybe they just dumped us somewhere.

Made you walk a long way home?

A long way back to the car. Um.

So when you were taken, arrested, presumably for criminal damage?

Trespass.

And you were at Newbury, what was that like? Were you held in the police cells at all? And then released awaiting a court appearance?

Yes.

And what were your experiences like in Newbury police cells?

Oh they were pretty...yeah...not at all friendly. (Laughs). There was one, they used to just hold us in the portacabins on the base sometimes, and then chuck us out round

the other side of the base. I guess Thames Valley must have had some portacabins themselves. I'm a bit foggy about it. But we used to, the actions would be when the convoy were leaving, we'd try and anticipate them going out. So we'd wait with paint and everything ready, and when they were going out we'd grab the paint and throw it over the convoy, and then when it was on Salisbury Plain we'd track it, and when it was coming back we'd try and anticipate coming back, and we'd wait for it. And you'd know because the base would get all excited. So, I remember this one occasion when we were waiting in the bushes alongside the road, before the entrance, and I think Katrina and Janet - because they were tall - they had these long trench coats, and we'd got these um party hats, policeman's party hats, and in the dark they just looked like police, but they were idiots to stop, but they did! The convoy stopped and they stood in the middle of the road with torches and these party hats and log coats, and waved the torches and the convoy stopped, and then we just jumped on it - threw paint over the windscreen and over the top, and because the Thames Valley police would line the road, but we'd manage to get through - sometimes we couldn't - they'd grab hold of you, but we managed to get through. And one of the occasions that was happening, one of the Thames Valley police got hold of me and bashed my head into the windscreen, and I had a cut here. I was kind of stunned.

Very deliberately?

Oh yeah. Yeah, get hold of the and then bashed me against the vehicle, and then threw me. I was stunned, I remember I was taken off to hospital, but I was okay. But shortly after that, when I was arrested on the base, I think, I was held with Abigail - oh, Abigail her name was, I was trying to remember her name earlier - I was held in a portacabin with this woman Abigail, and there were four of the police in there, and he was one of them. And he was just throwing me around the portacabin, because I'd put in a complaint about him.

That was my next question.

Yeah. Yeah, so they just thought it was amusing to keep picking me up and throwing me around, yeah. Which um, I meant the fact I was wearing so many clothes - because it was cold - was good, because I kind of bounced mostly (laughs).

Did you make a later complaint? About that, or did you just...

Can't remember. I can't remember. Actually, the case - oh yes. When I was thrown by him against the windscreen, they had called an ambulance, and I was laying there still. And my friend was there, and she was - I could see her being arrested - she was being arrested, because she was trying to get towards me, or to make the police go, or something, and then she was - they charged her with obstruction, or something

like that. And we went to court, and um, they had all these Tames Valley witnesses against her, to say she had pulled him. But one would say 'oh yes, she pulled his left arm', and the next would say she pulled his right arm, and the third would say...so we were doing the hokey kokey game - 'put your left arm in', and um, and it was thrown out. Which was great, because we actually had a defense lawyer for that, and she was going to call the ambulance driver the following day, and he was going to testify on our side as well. So that was quite a victory.

A good feeling?

Yeah. They tried to do her, but ended up...

How did you get into the base - on that occasion when the policeman pushed you around?

Oh that was when we were outside the base, when the convoy was coming back in.

But you said you went into the base at another time, and the same policeman who had thrown you around...

Ah, yes. On that occasion - how did we get in? Yeah, probably we'd have cut the fence. Cut the fence and went in.

With your bolt cutters?

Yes, always had bolt cutters (laughs)! They were taken away a lot, and they you'd get some more (laughs)!

Did the bailiffs remove them?

The bailiffs received anything they could, but would leave any rubbish there for them to remove.

Did you bury anything?

No, what we'd do, we'd put everything into the van, and then drive - when the bailiffs were coming. So every morning I'd pack up my tent and put it in the van, just to save time - because it was very quick - I'd just roll my bedding up and collapse the tent, put it in.

How did the bailiffs treat the women?

Oh they were really horrible. They would just be nasty - they'd try and grab everything.

Physical?

Um, can't really remember. Very verbal. I think after a few years it just became this silly routine, and we'd pick things up and carry them to the other side of the road, which wasn't the same land. Or we'd put stuff in the van, and someone would drive off a couple of times, and come back. It was just, yeah, it was tiresome, and sometimes you'd lose something valuable. I remember we lost the water pipe at one point, and had to get another point, because there's a water stopcock down the road, which was how Helen got killed.

Yes, I was going to ask you about that. Did you say you'd just left Greenham?

Yes - I was going to say something else....the convoy coming out, so yes, sometimes we'd go into the base to do actions. We'd generally go to a certain part and cut the fence, and go in. I remember going in, and we went into, we'd just go and look around and see what was there. We saw a warehouse with bombs, and they were about this big.

And there was no-one around? No-one stopped you? You just walked around?

Well, we sneaked around, I mean yeah.

You would have been visible, presumably?

If they'd looked - if they'd not been thinking in a very military way. But they didn't think like women. (Laughs). So we'd be able to sneak around and get in places. But they weren't nuclear bombs. They were just general - I don't know what bombs, and we painted them with women's symbols and peace messages and things.

And then you were arrested? Or did you just leave the base?

I think that time we stuck some potatoes up some exhaust pipes. I think we were arrested in the end - caught and arrested. Another time, when I fully expected to be arrested - they'd put this big new sign - there was the fence, and there was the guard house at the main gate, and then just inside they'd made this big fancy sign - like a concrete wall - 'Greenham Common US Airforce Base' - or something like that, and we thought 'oh, we've got to have that'. We cannot leave that like that, so we were having a cup of tea, and we had the red paint ready, and me and one other women - we'd decided that we'd just cut the fence, come in, try to get as close as possible, and

the moment we were spotted just run for it and throw the paint over it, but in-fact we got all the way in, so the fence was there, and the guardhouse just behind it, and the sign there, and we came from this - behind, and got in right behind the sign, and we hadn't expected to get that far so we had the pain and we eased the lids off, and just kind of reached over the top and tipped it, so it just poured down the front. And still we weren't spotted! We thought 'what do we do now?' And I said, 'let's just walk out', so we got up and walked out the front of the gate.

And that was it?

And they didn't even notice us. And then we went and sat at the fire, and made a cup of tea, and after a little while we heard 'aaarrghh!' (Laughs). When they actually noticed it! So that was really good - when you're expecting to be arrested and end up doing time, and you don't - you just have a cup of tea.

Did you ever have a prison sentence?

Yes, I had two. They eventually came up in the following year - '89, I think - after I'd left. So the first one I was sentenced to two weeks, and the second one I was sentenced to a month.

On the charges of?

Um, I think they were all trespass - I think.

Quite a difference in time of sentences - if one was two weeks, and other you said was four?

Yes, four weeks or a month. But I think first offense was the two weeks.

Oh, so then they thought more kindly.

Yes.

Where were you in prison?

I went to Holloway. It was in Snaresbrook Magistrates' Court I think. I remember - I think it was the first time, I remember giving a whole speech about how we weren't the criminals, they were, and talking about the military industrial complex and the money they were spending. The worldwide poverty.

And how did they respond? Did they respond?

No, not really. But you felt, you know, you'd have a voice..

Got two weeks inside!

Yes, two weeks inside. And again, you go inside Holloway Prison, and 99.9% of women there were there for crimes of poverty. There was a woman who had been claiming her social security and her student grant, and the amount of money they spent to keep her in Holloway was so much more - probably ten times what they lost. It made no sense at all. And she had been picked up shortly after she had given birth to her child, and kept in the er - I think there wasn't space to keep her on remand in prison at the time, so she'd been kept in the police cells for a few days, and her child had been taken away. And you know, there were so many tales like that.

Cruel.

Yes, and it was really about controlling women, to about that you'd stolen some great amount of money, or that you'd committed some huge crime. It was crazy to have women in prison for the things they'd done.

Can you remember much about sort of arriving there, and how you felt?

Yes. I remember being in the prison van, going from the Magistrates' Court, and there was the glass where people couldn't see in, but you could see out, and going along streets that I knew, thinking oh - there could be people I know, and they could see the van, but wouldn't know I was in here. And then when you went in through the corridors, and your stuff was taken, and everything noted down - that thing of not being seen - it's like you hardly exist. You're nobody as soon as you're in there - people didn't look at you - they'd say 'sign here', or...and then we had to go to - there was a strip search. That was all about making you feel very small. I remember the women before me trying to cover themselves up, and the wardens just staring at them, and I thought 'nah' - so I just stripped everything off with great aplomb! 'Tah-dah!', and then stood there with arms akimbo like this. Which felt - y up know.

And the response?

Yeah, they didn't stare at me. Obviously the intimidation wasn't working, so they didn't really bother to try to make time feel small. So that felt good.

And then you must have shared a cell?

Yeah.

With other Greenham women?

No. No I think at the time there was no-one in at the time. But there were some nice women. I made some friends. There was one woman, actually, who was a kleptomaniac, and she was the only one I'd say who was definitely a criminal in terms of what the law says a criminal is - Everyone else is crimes of poverty, but then of-course she had a justifiable illness. So, but she was there saying - yeah, this is how you shoplift this, and giving me all the tips and everything! She was amazingly interesting. She said she had her whole apartment decorated with Laura Ashley wallpaper, and the lining, and she'd never spent a penny in Laura Ashley. She was such a regular face there they gave her mince pies, but she'd never actually spent a penny! So it was just really fascinating. So she had her whole appeal going on on medical grounds, which I hope she won. But generally it's just really crimes of poverty that should never have ended up in prison.

And the second time you went, did you feel more a sense of foreboding because it was the second time, or just the same?

No, just the same. At-least I knew what I was going to. You know, I think I was a bit more worried the first time I went - would I get on with people?

Tell me, what had happened to the husband? The husband was an ex-husband by this stage?

Oh yes.

He wasn't coming to visit you in Holloway?

No, no, I'd been married from 1980-1985, so by the time I went to live at Greenham, which was '88. After I split up with him I went traveling in '87, and then after traveling - you know going round India, I'd done some voluntary work in a Leprosy village, and just seen a lot of people struggling, and so I couldn't come back to the 9-5, I had to come back and do something. And I'd wanted to come back and live at Greenham. That's what I'd thought I'd do - but it made me much more determined. And then going to Nicaragua as well, and seeing the struggle there. Because it was a couple of years after the revolution. The Sandinista government were in, and the whole embargo by the US was making it very difficult for people there. People were just trying to survive and have this very nice socialist country, and they'd been doing a lot on terms of health care and education and women's rights -to improve the place. But just really struggling because this big capitalist power was trying to crush them

because it was there backyard. So yes, so there was all that - so I was determined to go.

So you were very much on your own? Not married - divorced.

Yes, I was on my own.

Did friends come and visit you and things.

Yes. In Holloway no - I was only there for a short time, and I didn't see the point. But I had a boyfriend when I was at Greenham - he would come down occasionally.

Was he - to visit during the day, because it was still women only?

Yeah, during the day. No he would just come down, he would drop me off sometimes, because I would maybe go back and see him nice very couple of months for a weekend, and then he would drop me back.

What do you think the big difference was by having it as women only - Greenham?

Oh, there's a huge difference. I mean, I wouldn't have wanted to be there if there had been men there.

Because?

Just that whole hierarchy of the men telling you want to do. It would have been very different. I mean there were the social politics there, and I think any organisation that goes for more than seven years it starts to fall apart really - I mean that was happening as well, but the way women do things it was...I can't imagine if men had been there. It wouldn't have worked, it wouldn't have lasted.

And it was a different landscape in the 1980s compared to now.

Yes.

Or would you think not - if Greenham was happening now, would it still be women only?

Yes. Definitely. And it's interesting where we, you know - I think now, there's a lot we struggled for, which younger people now are able to take for granted, which is good. But in some things I think what happened? Just simple things like this pink and blue - what is going on with that? In the '80s that all stopped - you dressed children in

whatever, but now you go into a shop and everything is either pink or blue. And toys - all the girls' toys are pink. I think what happened - how did we slap back to this? But I guess it goes in those cycles - two steps forward and one step back. But yes, it would still I think, definitely be women only. I think young women are much more aware - the whole lgbtq movement is much more visible and accepted, but homophobia and racism is not accepted as much as it was in those days, which is great, so yeah - we have come a long way, but there's still a way to go (laughs).

Um, you mentioned earlier - we both did - the death of Helen Thomas. Could you tell me more about her?

I didn't know her that well. I think she was just there for a couple of weeks before I left, but very nice young woman. Again I think she had decided she wanted to spend some time, and put some work and energy into Greenham, and I think probably what happened was the police horse box saw her and knew she was a Greenham woman, and thought they'd give her a fright, and veered towards her, and then she was sucked under. I went down - after it happened, to visit and give condolences, but it was just terrible really.

Were there any memorials made to her at Greenham?

Well there is now.

Yeah, but was there anything at the time - floral or?

Yeah, I think people were sending tributes and visiting, but I think they'd wanted to be fairly quiet about it. They didn't want - if I remember rightly, any big thing going on.

And probably take the lead from the parents, as well.

Yeah. Yeah, probably.

It must have been awful for them.

Yeah, I can't imagine.

And...Wilmet Brown, and the Wages for Housework - Kings Cross Collective - did you meet her, or know her?

Yes, yeah.

Tell me about Wilmet.

Gosh!

Suddenly segued into something very different!

Yes. When I left there I came back to London and I joined - I volunteered at the Kings Cross Women's Centre - so I worked very closely with Wilmet. She's an amazing woman.

Is she still around?

She's still alive! I was really sorry to hear that Sarah had died - I wish I had caught up with her in recent years, and I didn't. But yes, Kings Cross Women's centre, I was involved for - let's see, that was '89. I was involved for about three years, maybe longer.

Because Wilmet went there in '87 to Yellow Gate.

Yes. Before I went away there was a big event, and um, at the base, at the camp, and um the Kings Cross Women's Centre came down and were doing a workshop. So I'd met them then, and that was about '86, probably. And then I went traveling in '87, and while I was in Nicaragua I heard they'd been this split from the gates, and that black women had taken over Yellow Gate, and I remember saying 'and what would be wrong with that?' Because again, on the Nicaragua solidarity brigade there were various politicians - some Trotskyists, so all these political thoughts going on, and they disapproved - or the people telling me at the time, they disapproved of black women taking over Yellow Gate. So anyway I was very eager to come back and see what was going on. And I came back, and it was the same people there - Sarah and Katrina and Beth, and everyone was still there. But there had been some argument over some racism.

Do you know any of the details of that? Because I've read bits and pieces, and contradictory reports.

I'm sure - yeah, and because I wasn't there I can't remember the details, but the crux of the matter was there had been some racism at whatever the meeting was, and the people who were called on it didn't like being called on it - which still happens now, of course. But there are people who are conscious enough to realise there is institutionalised racism, therefore if you're brought up in this country, you're going to be racist. And the have maternal racism. I think nowadays more people understand that, but I think in those days they didn't, and I think for maybe someone who was left-wing, feminist, political, to be called racist - they felt very hurt by that. And

couldn't take it. Whereas I'd like to think nowadays people want to hear it, and want to know, and what to grow from it. So that's probably what happened. The crux of it.

And this meeting in Moscow - the workshop there...

Ah right, yes...

International Women's something or other, I think it was '85 or '87 - I'm hopeless on dates, I should write them all down - and during that workshop there were accusations....

It would have been '87.

...that Wilmet Brown was taking over the meeting, she was using it to promote her book, and then everything got really heated. And Lynette Edwell was there even though she wasn't a Greenham camp women that lived there - she was living nearby and helping out and stuff. So there was a big hoo-hah there, and then when they went back to Greenham they had a meeting about it...

And that's when the split happened.

That's when the split happened, because people - as you say - possibly couldn't recognise that they were racist.

Yeah. Which, you know, you talk about if you had men there, those sorts of issues would have come up with men as well. I think they would have been sexist, and they wouldn't have been able to accept it. I think that happened a lot with CND and various groups, that you would get to this point where sexism that was institutionalised would become a problem. But anyway, yes - when I arrived there black women hadn't taken over, but there had been this split, but I was determined to be at Yellow Gate anyway - that seemed to me to be where the action went on - that's where the work was happening, and that's where people I cared about - people like Sarah were. And um, yeah Kings Cross Women's Centre would be very supportive, and would come down and do the night watches and bring supplies and that, but yeah - that's why I think there were only 8 of us there, we were much more isolated after that. But again, in retrospect it's an inevitable progression of any political sort of movement, that after so many years you can't hold on to the same thing - it does crumble. It's like relationships, usually it's because you have one argument over one thing, but in-fact that's not the whole issue. People have got tired, they don't want to do it any more, they're - they want to move on and do other things, but they don't know how to leave, so therefore you have an argument. And then you have the permission not to be there any more.

Did it become exhausting and tiring?

Yes, I think sometimes people would get burnt out and they would leave. But I think generally the women who were there at Yellow Gate, when I was there, maintained it well. You would have your bad days, but I think they maintained it well - they kept the energy going and the actions going, and they were creative and tried to get the message out there. I think I evolved into the next thing, which was coming into London and being more active there. I think as a black woman that was my next step - my political growth and what I wanted to do, but I was glad they kept going down at Yellow Gate.

What date was it - 1999 or 2000.

2000, I think the missiles left.

2001?

Yeah.

Because there were all the other issues of returning the Common to the people of Newbury. Did you get involved?

No. I was involved in other things. I had my daughter in 1994, and then got involved in her! (Laughs).

Did you tell her stories of Greenham or do you talk to her now about it?

Yes!

Or is it something that's in the past?

Yeah, no - I do talk about it, and where - just before I came here I was involved in a play in Malaysia because there was - in the North West - Terengganu - the state of Malaysia which is, um more Shariah law - under Shariah law much more fundamentalist, whereas most of Malaysia is very moderate. There was this case where two lesbian women had been caught in a car and had been sentenced to six strokes of the cane, which was the first time that had happened in Malaysia. But it was definitely - you know - that again, control over women's bodies. This message had to be sent out that women were not allowed to control their own bodies, and the whole anti lgbtq thing. So the caning happened, and it was quite shocking, and one of the responses was this young director wanted to make a play - kind of inspired by

that incident, because just people's reactions - how it affected us as a community etc. I went to, there was a meeting the following week at an LGBTQ venue where kind of a support group meeting, and there were a lot of young lesbian women there - Muslim women, who were very afraid, really afraid, and there I talked a bit about my experiences of how the laws have changed here, and it wasn't just that we had these laws - that they appeared, it did get worse before it gets better. There are attacks, there was the bombing in Compton Street, things like that that happened, and people went to prison for their beliefs - but it does get better. And you know, don't be defeated by it. And then I heard this play was happening, so I auditioned for it, because I love acting. So I thought 'oh, I may as well audition', and I got a part, which was wonderful because I was this older woman. Mostly it was like 20-26 year olds, and there were ten of us, and four people in a punk - LGBTQ punk band, and we were devising the play. So everyday we were workshopping, talking - sometimes we'd talk for like two hours about our experiences, so I talked quite a bit about Greenham and other political actions I'd done.

Were they aware of Greenham?

Er, no. No. No. So it was good to be able to say, look we did this thing - at the time we were totally out there, and vilified, and arrested and beaten up and sent to prison, but it did change. The weapons were taken away, they never were successful in their exercises. And the laws around age of consent and homosexuality and the whole what's it - Section 28...

Oh gosh...

...Because that was all going on at the time as well. I said we got rid of it - it did go. The whole of the Section 28 was this dying beast, getting worse, and I think that's where Malaysia is at at the moment. They're really targeting LGBTQ people a lot more, and there have been a couple of transsexual women who have been murdered, and things like that. But anyway, to be able to then share my experience was good.

Was your daughter there? Yes, she lives in London, doesn't she?

Yes. I was telling her about it. And then when I was telling my sister I was coming to do this, she said to me 'you always said it was important, when you were doing it. I said 'oh did I?' She said 'yes, and you were right, weren't you'. And I thought yes, it was important, but you didn't know how and in what way at the time, but you knew you had to do something. It was important, and um, yeah.

What do you think you've handed on to your daughter - consciously or unconsciously? That you took from Greenham.

I think...ooh, if you believe in something, you should just do it. And it doesn't matter what anyone says. Don't let someone else define you - anyone, really. Even the people you're with, who are on your side. And that you don't always know why you're doing something, you just know that you need to do it, and you know it's right, but you might not be able to explain it. Even now it's hard to explain. But don't worry about it, you don't have to justify yourself to anybody. Justice and laws are two very different things at times.

Have you taken her to Greenham? Sort of driven around the fence or anything?

No, I was going to - if we finished the decorating in time, but we ran out of time. But I took my wife, and we came back - she's been here three times - the first was when we got married - she's Malaysian, and um, so yes - we were going to go down to the Cotswolds, so we drove that way and stopped. That was the first time I'd been...

How did you feel?

Um, very moved. I think um, first of all I couldn't get my bearings - with the fence gone and everything, and I wasn't sure where we were. At first I couldn't even find where Yellow Gate had been, but then we found it because of the peace gardens there, and just looked at the memorials and yeah. I was very moved. I cried I think. I just stood there and sung, which is what we did.

You sung the song?

Yeah.

What did you sing?

You Can't Kill the Spirit.

You can sing it now! (Laughs)

(Laughs). I don't think I could. I'm nearly going to cry. (Laughs). Yeah, and yeah. It was a good feeling, though. I just felt it was right. Yeah.

So Greenham is up there with falling in love, getting married - big life moments?

Yeah.

One of the most important things?

Yes, yep. Yeah, I think people went there for the right reasons, and they achieved some amazing things that no-one would have thought they could do. When I saw people, I mean women. And changed minds; opened minds. Inspired a lot of different things that we'll never even know about - as we were inspired by many others. I was inspired when I was traveling around - the way women were making a difference where they were. Um. Just fighting small battles.

How did the women in your own family feel about you going to Greenham?

My mum was always amazing. My mum - yeah. She left school when she was 14, but she was very emotionally intelligent, and just an amazing mother and very encouraging. She said to me - I think when I was going to go to prison - she said 'I don't always understand the things that you do, but I know the fact you're doing them means they're the right thing'. Which was so supportive and so just an incredible thing to say, and that's how she felt - for her children if you ever, if you say 'what do you want?' She'd say 'I want you to be happy', and she meant it, and that was her only ambition for us. So my two sisters who kind of went the conventional route. None of us got an education early on - it was difficult, but they went back to university and graduated, and got into professions, and had nice husbands and nice houses and everything - everything they wanted. And I - throughout my life - have really done what pleased me, and um, I have been happy, and yes - my mum was quite happy with that. My first girlfriend - I think it was shortly after I left Greenham - I fell in love with a woman, and I phoned my mum up and said 'I'm in love, and it's with a woman', and she said 'as long as you're happy, dear' (laughs). So yeah, she was very supportive. My younger sister, who didn't live so far away - she lived in Reading, she came and visited a couple of times. She's very different from me, but again has always been supportive.

And your dad?

My dad, I hadn't - he wasn't a very nice person.

So he wasn't around?

No he was, he was. But he was, I mean we say now - looking back - he was more of a sociopathic personality - quite violent, and um, I decided to disown him when I was 25. Yeah, just before I went off traveling, I decided - I think my mum and dad had come to visit, and he for some reason called me a bastard, and I thought what a good idea - I could be a bastard. And after that I spent a period of time - when people would ask me - I'd say 'oh, he's dead', or I'd say 'I never knew him'. But I decided to cut him out of my life, so that's what I did, and my mum left him late in life. But

unfortunately got Alzheimer's, which I think was to do with the way she had been treated. She had to cut herself off because he would nag at her all the time. And she used to love to read, but I remember her saying to me 'I can't even read a book - he interrupts all the time'. She said 'I'm determined, I'll pretend I'm still reading - I won't let him know, but he's like in my ear all the time'. So she eventually ran away. She came to stay with me, and we had a good few years, before she got ill.

She never went to Greenham to see you?

Oh yes, I think my sister brought her down once.

You didn't get her cutting the fence or anything?

No.

Mum with a pair of bolt cutters!

Well, you know (laughs). A little encouragement, she might of. She used to come down when I used to volunteer at the Women's Centre in Kings Cross - she used to come down and join in.

She was in London?

Yes, she was living with me then, so she'd come and join in some things. I left there - is as bringing up my daughter and looking after my mum, so I had a full time..and I had some political differences with them in the end. After Wilmet left. Wilmet was a very clever woman, and I think she had the right ideas in many ways - another organisation that after so many years, the hierarchical sort of set up started to crumble.

Nothing can stay the same.

That's it, yeah.

It has to move and change.

And if it doesn't - I think if you're stuck with the same people at the top it just goes wrong. But it doesn't mean that they don't do good things, I think they've still got a women's centre in Kentish Town - I'm sure they do. A lot of good things, but er, I think there has to be movement. I think so.

Did the press ever go down to Yellow Gate, or had they lost interest by that stage?

I think we'd get freelancers, I sent a picture to Rebecca.

Oh, I saw that.

I think it was a young freelancer took that. The convoy was actually going out at that point - or was it going back in? And I was shouting, telling them to get a proper job!

I saw the piece.

(Laughs). He'd taken a few photos, I must find the others. But yeah, no I don't really remember the press coming down.

Because there was extensive coverage, um, sort of '90 sorry - '81 to '83.

Ooh, yes, I've got a nice press clipping that I must scan and send when you're ready. It was in the Guardian, and I was working at the hospital at the time, but I'd gone down for whatever the action was at the time, and we were blockading the gate and the police had lined the gate, and we were sitting down. I was right by the gate, and somehow I managed to get behind the police and I climbed up the fence, and they were pulling at my legs trying to get me down, but some, the Guardian photographer took this photo, and it looks like I'm on the fence quite happily, because you can't see the police pulling at my feet. So I hadn't told my place of work that I was going there at the weekend, and so Monday I'm coming in as usual thinking 'eerugh', and we always had the newspaper in our tea break, and they opened it, and there was me! (Laughs). 'Is that you?', 'Oh yes, it is!' So that's quite nice - I've shown my daughter that, and a few other bits.

Was there a big difference between the tabloids and the broadsheets - how they represented the Greenham women?

Oh yes, yeah. I mean we were all just 'smelly dykes' (laughs), as far as the tabloids were concerned. We were, sometimes! Yes, but yes definitely there was little in the press after a few years - I think that was general policy - to ignore us and pretend we'd gone away. But we hadn't!

Still there.

Um-hum.

Um. Well, I've just got some general questions at the end, really - some of which we've covered. Um, it's a bit of a sound bite, but if you had to say one thing, what do you think Greenham achieved? What would be your answer on that?

Gosh, so much.

It can be more than one thing.

(Laughs). Well it disrupted and defeated an important part of the military complex. I think the whole basing cruise missiles here never worked because of the women there. I think they like to hide that fact and talk about other things. And just the inspiration.

Do you think it had a big impact on feminism in the UK?

I'm sure it must of, though I don't really know what that would mean. (Laughs).

At the time did you think of yourself as a feminist?

Yes.

Or did you just love a life where you just were feminist, but didn't give yourself that...

No, I tried to be a feminist. Yeah, so that's what I...and in my own definition, I would say I am.

What is your definition?

More of a womanist - more of the sort of Alice Walker definition of a womanist, that you're pro-women, and that doesn't mean pulling anything or anyone else down. It's about supporting them, raising up each other. Um. So feminists who would be against sex workers - that doesn't make sense to me, and if that's what a feminist is, then I'm not. But also I don't think, you know I think the definition of feminism - it can't be something that tears any women down.

And changes through time?

Yes, yep. I really like speaking to younger women now, and finding out what their definitions are, what it means to them. They're much more all encompassing and open minded and positive, I think.

Do you think, um, young people - I don't know what I mean by young people - I suppose someone under the age of 30 - are they aware of Greenham, do you think?

Umm...it's hard to tell when I'm out in Malaysia, because I'm a bit far away, and then of course my daughter would know about it, so...

Unfair question.

Gosh, we're probably in school books by now! (Laughs).

If not, should be.

(Laughs), us, should be - definitely should be.

(Inaudible) Jackson made it there - Greenham next.

(Laughs) true. Yes, I'm not sure whether they would know about it specifically, but that sort of direct action and I think the young lesbian women who came out of there and came to London and set up women's centres - refuges - a lot of them came from Greenham, and that's throughout the country.

A lot of non-violence aspect of the direct action.

Yes.

Did that have a big impact?

Um.

On the future?

Yeah, I mean that didn't start there - it started - I mean the whole sort of civil disobedience started long before - a lot of inspiration from the black civil rights movement inspired the lesbian and gay movement, the feminist movement - it all came out - Gandhi before that. So there's a long history there - it didn't start with Greenham.

Yes, there's a genealogy of stuff going on.

Yeah, the whole sort of - okay if something needs to be done, we're just going to do it, because that's what we do as women. You know, you don't go to bed and the washing up's not done, the packed lunch is not made for the kids - you do it. You

may be tired, but you do it. These missiles were there that were taking all the money and threatening people's lives, so we had to do something, so we did it. And I think that sort of attitude - a refuge is needed, so we'd better set one up. Just that feeling that you can just get on and do it - you don't have to wait for permission.

When you were living there, where did the finances come from to keep you going?

Oh, well.

Not you personally.

Well, me personally - I was claiming benefits. They introduced - what was it called? There were various schemes under Thatcher to try to cut the um, statistics, so there was one - enterprise allowance, I think it was called, so that you were able to start your own small business, and therefore get off the unemployment statistics, and you just basically had to go in and say 'this is my business I'm starting' and they'd say 'oh okay, you can have enterprise allowance'. So a few of us had enterprise allowance - you were writing a book or you were painting pictures, or what was I doing? I can't remember?

Hanging walls or something?

I think I as giving counselling or some sort of advice, which I did, often - around the camp fire. Counselling and support for people. But yes, so I would go and claim - every two weeks. Go into Newbury and claim benefits. Another thing the tabloids used to get very upset about.

There were legal actions, we're there.

Uum (agrees), but as far as I was concerned I was working full time night and day for the benefit of the country - front line. If they can pay soldiers to go off and kill people, then we should have been paid to stop people trying to be killed, and er that was my attitude with family. You know I thought women have always - over so many generations waved men off to war, and now it's the women going off to stop the war, and we will go and leave our families and do that.

And did people give any, um, financial contributions to keeping Greenham going?

Sometimes people would give a donation when they visited. But there wasn't any...

No formal?

No, not that I remember. People would offer things like the Friends' Meeting House - you could go and use their shower, or whatever.

Did they bring food?

Yeah. Yes, people bring food and fire wood and blankets.

A bottle of wine?

Probably, can't remember. People would bring stuff - it was always nice. they'd have done a jumble sale or done a collection, or...before I went to live there i used to do, there was a period when we used to take hot food down. There was a rota, and the telephone tree would go - there was a telephone tree when the cruise missiles would go out - we'd go down and do cruise watch.

Remind me what the telephone tree actually was?

It was basically a tree, so maybe it would be that Lynette Edwell from Cruise Watch would start, or someone would send out the message 'we think the missiles are coming out tonight', and then you'd have certain people to call. So you would get the call, and you'd call your five people, or whatever, and then in your individual groups, you'd decide - I was always ready to drive down there, so I would call my friends and say 'do you want to come with me?'" I remember when the cruise missiles first arrived, I drove down that night, and we'd drive around. At one point we were in the middle of the convoy! I'd gone over the central barrier in some road and turned round - it was just mad! So yeah, we'd do that, and then we'd take hot food down every so often - there'd be a rota for that. We'd use boxes with straw in and put the food in and take it.

It must have been hard in winter.

Uum, yeah - when I lived there nobody was bringing hot food (laughs). But you know, we'd communally shop and cook, and er yeah - you just wore loads of loathes. But it was very cold. Couldn't do it now (laughs)! Probably freeze to death!

Wither away!

Um (agrees), yeah.

Well that was absolutely great. Anything else you'd like to...?

I'll probably think of a hundred and one things afterwards!

It's always case.

But I will write it down when I do, and then when you're ready to collect more information, I'll just send it.

Did you keep a diary at all?

No, but I have a stack of letters - I think from that boyfriend at the time, and I thought I'd look through here, because I was always telling him what was going on, and then he'd - so I'll look through those. I've got a letter that I sent my mum when I was in Holloway that I'll have a read of - I haven't looked at, and a few other bits and pieces. So I'm going to go through things and see if I can find out, or if it jogs any particular memories, because you know - my memory is a bit hazy!

A lot has happened in-between. A lot of life has gone on.

Yeah, I think - I've done a lot of things and gone all over the world, so I think things come in and other things drop out the other side!

It is amazing the amount of, um, stuff that is around. People kept beautiful diaries, and the newsletters - a lot of those I've seen, but all sorts of things.

There must be some of my writing in the newsletters. Not a lot, but a little bit. Maybe. Because my surname was different when I was there - I was under the surname Wenden then - W-E-N-D-E-N. Catherine Wenden.

W-E-N-D...

E-N.

If I see anymore, I'll look out for you.