

NORTH WALES TO FASLANE 365

Mid-November, around 100 activists from across Wales travelled to Scotland to take part in the rolling, year-long Faslane 365 campaign of civil disobedience. A diverse range of groups from across the country and beyond are taking on 48-hour stints to maintain the pressure of an ongoing blockade at the base in protest at the Trident nuclear weapons system and government plans to spend an estimate £75 billion of our money on a new generation of nuclear weapons.

We arrived at the base early on the morning of November 14th, along with the South and Mid-Wales Faslane 365 group, whose second day overlapped with our first. They had a contingent of the Rebel Clown Army, two red dragons and assorted politicians, while our group included a dozen or so 'Merched Beca' (Daughters of Rebecca), complete with voluminous skirts, bonnets and blackened faces. The actions of Merched Beca in 1839-44, where protesters disguised themselves in women's clothes and destroyed much-hated toll gates in Wales, led directly to a Royal Commission to examine the issue, and by 1844 most of the remaining gates had been legally removed, abolishing the toll tax (sorry!) and allowing ordinary people to move freely along the roads. The 21st Century Daughters of Rebecca hope that their non-violent direct action as part of Faslane 365 will bring about the decommissioning and dismantling of Britain's nuclear weapons, allowing taxes to be diverted to more useful purposes. One of our Merched Beca, Jake, explained the theme very eloquently: *The link to Merched Beca is that the toll gates were a method of collecting taxes, then used in the further subjugation of the populace. Nuclear deterrents are a vast sink of tax, causing the intimidation of foreign nations and limiting the betterment of local populations.*

Each Faslane 365 blockading group overlaps with the previous and next groups by 24 hours, so there should be two groups at the base every day. Just in case you're thinking about coming along next time and are put off by the prospect of being cold and wet for two solid days, I should make it clear that the 48-hour stint doesn't necessarily mean that people are standing at the gates for anywhere near the whole 48 hours and they certainly aren't blockading for that long. A recent blockade by some of the most experienced 'lockers-on' - activists from Trident Ploughshares and Faslane Peace Camp - was broken after a couple of hours. We didn't even manage to get attached to our chains although the gates of the base were shut briefly while the road was cleared. A couple of arrests were made and the rest of us got to have another go half an hour later, which secured a nice warm police cell for the next 24 or so hours. There is a very large police presence around the base - by the beginning of December after just two months of Faslane 365, the policing had already cost over £1 million.

It's up to each group how they want to organise their blockades - our group was at the gates for most of the first day and for the morning of the second, after which the minibuses had to set off to retrieve people from police stations. Those of us who were arrested got to see more of the inside of a police cell than anything else, sadly, as Strathclyde Police are responding to the blockades by holding people for court the following day. This is not unusual procedure in Scotland although there is

undoubtedly an element of preventing a second day's blockading by keeping people until the following lunch-time when, at the last minute, the Procurator Fiscal decides that you will be given a warning letter instead of being prosecuted. This has happened to over 350 blockaders so far, with only a few who have undertaken repeated blockades being formally charged with Breach of the Peace and referred to court. These cases will allow the legality of Trident to be brought into question in a courtroom, and there will undoubtedly be more of them as blockaders return for second and third visits.

In all, 19 protesters from Wales, including eight teenagers - some as young as 14 - were arrested for blockading the nuclear base on the 13th and 14th November. Those under 16 were almost immediately de-arrested by the police, but those aged 16 and over are treated as adults in Scottish law and were detained overnight in police cells along with everyone else. Having such young blockaders ensured fantastic coverage in the Welsh mainstream media - 'schoolkids arrested' is very newsworthy! Big thanks to the media team back at home who helped get the story out.



North Wales Faslane protesters with banner

Why civil disobedience? Hilary Wainwright, in an article in the Guardian (9/12/06) about her visit to Faslane, outlines the rationale:

It was as clear as the glaring light of my police cell that nothing within the political system was going to change the government's decision. Democracy in the Labour party has all but been destroyed by Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and sickening opportunism from many who should know better. The response of the Lib Dems has been pathetic. Civil disobedience is the only way to give voice to the majority of people who want the UK to champion, not undermine, the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and who want the billions being sunk in the Clyde to be spent on ending the poverty that feeds violent conflict. Civil disobedience is not an end in itself. It is leading to pressure on the Scottish parliament to rid Scotland of nuclear weapons. With the SNP strongly against these arms and likely to become the majority party at Holyrood in May, the fact that defence is not among the devolved powers is not going to protect Trident. The Scottish parliament can use its transport and environment powers to make the base unworkable, and/or it can appeal to the international laws - now part of Scottish as well as English law - that make nuclear deterrence illegal.

BLOCKADING AT FASLANE - EMILY'S ACCOUNT



*“So there we were,
all out in the road,
on our backs
and refusing to
move!”*

Emily on her release

It all seemed rather surreal, sat on a minibus on my way to Faslane with a group of peace activists I didn't really know. There were Gwerin y Coed song books in our minibus and we spent much of the journey singing along to familiar songs and memorising words for our time in the cells which seemed inevitable. The only slightly worrying thing was the fact that none of us had really practised trying to blockade before and our ten minute attempt in the Little Chef car park in the rain just outside Glasgow didn't give me much hope. It certainly stirred up some adrenaline though. I couldn't wait to be out there the next day!

We arrived at the Faslane Peace Camp quite late, after a mini detour to the gates of the base, which resulted in us being followed back to the Peace Camp by a police minibus and accidentally showing off all our blockading gear. They said rather smugly to Awel: *We know you've got a chain.* Well I'm sure you do. What else would you expect? They were just trying to intimidate us.

The Peace Camp was not quite the accommodation we had expected. We arrived to find several 'under the influence of something' hippies slouching on some sofas in the communal area, apparently unwilling to speak due to their intoxicated state. However we managed to strike up conversation with Bob, a trainer for the Rebel Clown army in Aberystwyth and he was chatty enough. After promising each other and Bob that we would enrol in clown training asap, we decided to head to bed. This turned out to be a room for two, which managed to squeeze five of us in. Although it was very comfy, the roof started to leak and it felt like it was a bit too close for comfort after we had all wriggled even closer to avoid the wet patch.

The following morning we all woke up at around 6 ready to start protesting. It was great fun sneaking around the caravans trying to hide from the policemen sat across the road. When we eventually made it over to the minibus, the police sarcastically asked us: *Any idea where you're off to?* Oh, aren't you the funny one!

Waiting for everyone to arrive in the cemetery, I found myself getting slightly nervous and agitated. I wanted to be out there, stopping the traffic. Also, the police kept driving in and out and around and, considering we

were carrying pipes and chains and padlocks, I was a little afraid they would arrest us there and then.

Everything seemed to start happening rather fast after the other groups had arrived. We were marching up the pavement with our banners, ready to start, chanting slogans and waving our banners. I was taken aback by the number of police guarding the gates. It was going to be impossible getting over them!

All of a sudden I saw Awel, grabbing my sister Hannah's hand and leading her into the road. 'Sugar!' I thought I had better follow them, so there we were, all out in the road, on our backs and refusing to move! I heard sirens and looked round to see the gates being closed. From my position lying on the ground, I tried to be serious as I explained to the policeman leaning over me that I wasn't going to move until they closed down Faslane, but I just couldn't help smiling and laughing. It was such a weird situation to be in! They gave me a warning the first time around. Great! I get to do this all over again. I realised that I couldn't see Hannah anywhere. I had to run out again - I didn't want her going to the cells all on her own. We ran out a second time and this time we were arrested, marched up to the temporary police HQ in Faslane cemetery and had our mug shots taken. Then I met Kenny, a rather good-natured policeman who kept us amused until we were ready to be taken to the police stations.

When that cell door closed behind me, a strange suffocating feeling took hold of my body. The reality of the situation hit me. I was all alone for the next 26 hours. Why did I have to take a book about philosophy in with me?! I could have done with something a bit more light-hearted to keep my spirits up. I amused myself by running round in circles, and buzzing the police as often as I dared to get water and have that snatch of human contact. We tried shouting to each other but the cells were nearly sound-proofed. Receiving little notes from my fellow captives helped though.

I slept all night and woke around 8. I had two hours to wait for breakfast. Whenever food came I made sure I ate it all, because I wasn't sure when I would next get fed. Thinking back, I can't believe I ate that congealed mess. Later that morning, we all started singing *Wouldn't it be a wondrous thing.* It's a round, and every now and then I stopped to listen and it sounded beautiful. We were all harmonising and echoing through the corridors. It certainly made time fly and was worth the sore throat. Being released was a wondrous thing too! We all ran outside and danced around in the rain. Being locked up for so long makes you appreciate freedom - being able to go where you want when you want.

I wouldn't have done it differently. It was good fun and hopefully our adventures have raised awareness amongst those who wouldn't normally care.

The North Wales to Faslane Group is planning another visit to the base early in the New Year. We need help of all kinds to make this a successful trip – people to come to Faslane with us; help making props, banners and suchlike; fundraising events to subsidise the cost; people to do media work. Please get in touch (contact details on back page) if you think you might be able to help in any way at all.