

Looking back - the Snowball Campaign

by Genny Bove

Snowball was a campaign of mass civil disobedience in the 1980s, in which participants each cut one strand of the wire fence at military bases all around the country. During the three-year campaign, there were around 2,500 arrests and many activists were sent to jail for non-payment of fines. In this area, the campaign focused on BNFL Capenhurst, near Ellesmere Port, where illegally imported uranium from Namibia was being enriched for use in Trident nuclear warheads and to power the submarines which carry Trident.

At this time there were three strong peace groups in Wrexham: CND, Christian CND and a Women's peace group. While demonstrating in London, members heard an announcement asking for supporters for an action at a military base in Norfolk and a group from Wrexham decided to go along.

The story was this: three Norfolk pensioners had got up early one morning and had each symbolically cut one strand of wire of the fence at a military base near Fakenham, then handed themselves in at the local police station. The police refused to arrest them and told them to go home. Anxious that their protest should be taken seriously, they vowed to bring more people with them for successive actions until they could no longer be ignored, hence the 'Snowball'. The campaign snowballed very effectively and eventually spread to 42 bases across the country, the aim being to demonstrate through symbolic direct action the overwhelming desire of ordinary people nationwide for peace and nuclear disarmament.

Rowena Thomas describes what happened in Norfolk:

"We were planning to go to Greenham Common, but after hearing the request for help in Norfolk, we decided to go there instead. A whole group of us from Wrexham went along. I was in my sixties and I had never done anything like that before. We were put up by a local solicitor who gave us helpful advice about the legal side of things. In the morning, we got up early, cut the fence and were all arrested. I'd expected that we'd all be in the police station together,

but they took us in two-by-two to question us. Our Welsh names, addresses and birthplaces gave the police real trouble! After all this, I was released - "in view of your tender years, Madam" - with a warning. Others had to return to Norfolk for court cases, and we quickly realised that travelling up and down the country wasn't going to be very practical, so we decided to find somewhere nearer to protest."

Capenhurst was an ideal choice. In the first place, the highly enriched uranium produced at the plant was integral to the Trident nuclear weapons system. Secondly, sanctions should have prevented the UK from importing uranium from Namibia - at that time under the administration of apartheid South Africa - but were conveniently ignored. Thirdly, radioactive waste was being discharged from the plant into the Rivacre brook, which ran between two nearby school playing fields.

Rowena explains how the campaign was organised:

"We teamed up with peace groups and churches from across North East Wales, Cheshire, the Wirral and Liverpool. Every Friday morning we would go and leaflet workers at the base, delivery drivers and local people, and once every three months we would cut the fence. We held religious services there, had walks around the base, held candle-lit vigils. Once, we even held a 'Wimbledon', with tennis, strawberries and cream."

Lib Rowlands-Hughes, who also took part in the campaign, described



other imaginative actions. On one occasion, a mock-up of a section of the fence was erected and decorated in the middle of Ellesmere Port to raise local awareness. Back at the base, one protester fashioned a giant hacksaw which allowed a large group of people to all help cut a single strand of the fence together.

The maximum damage done to the fence at any Snowball action was one strand of wire per protester. Many protesters, like Lib, used instruments so obviously blunt they could barely penetrate the plastic coating of the wire. But arrests were made and people processed through the court system, attempts were made to collect unpaid fines via bailiffs, and eventually some protesters were sent to jail for non-payment. Janet Tyrrell notes that *"Damages were always awarded in court to Capenhurst for repair of the fence, even though the actual damage we caused was so small that no repairs were necessary or ever, to our knowledge, carried out."*

The police weren't always too keen to arrest everyone taking part in a Snowball action, particularly those who could gain extra publicity by virtue of their prominent position in the local community. Rowena recalls an incident where an obviously unbriefed police officer was just about to arrest one of the protesters when another police officer rushed over and whispered urgently: *"Not him. We don't want the Canon!"* The Canon in question was Ben Roberts, then Canon of Chester Cathedral. One of Ben's fellow protesters tried to help out with a citizen's arrest but the police didn't want to know. Ben did eventually get arrested though, witness the photograph opposite.

The Snowball Campaign continued

Rowena describes the protesters' strong network of mutual support: "We all turned up at each other's court cases. If people were unable to go to prison – some had small children – then we clubbed together and raised funds to pay their fines."

Scenes in court were farcical at times. On one occasion, supporters were very nearly ejected after laughing at one 'Exhibit A', a pair of blunt nail scissors with a deflated balloon hanging like a shrivelled prune from the handle. On another, retired vicar Alf Willetts was cross-questioning a policeman while defending himself in court. He asked the policeman what, if faced with a question that required him either to break the Official Secrets Act, or perjure himself in court, he would do. The policeman went pink and couldn't answer. The group used the issue, like so many others in the campaign, to sustain media interest and thereby keep Capenhurst in the public eye.



Canon Ben Roberts, under arrest after cutting the fence at Capenhurst

Everyone I have spoken with about the Capenhurst Snowball campaign has commented on the tremendous camaraderie amongst the protesters, about their enthusiasm and energy, and those involved have said how positive it was to work alongside other groups from across the region.

It is unfortunate that, 20 years on, we are still in a situation where we need to protest about nuclear weapons, but we can learn a lot from the dedication and creativity of the Capenhurst Snowballers.

Looking ahead - more protest at Capenhurst?

by Genny Bove

There are many good reasons for re-launching a campaign of regular action at Capenhurst.

The Trident connection

Now that the government has managed to force through its plan to replace Trident with a new generation of nuclear weapons, we need to be looking at all the different ways we can protest about this. Capenhurst, now privatised and owned by the Anglo-Dutch-German company Urenco, still does the same work, and is inextricably bound up with the Trident programme. Firstly, it has produced highly enriched uranium for Trident warheads. Secondly, it undertakes the first stage of uranium enrichment in the production of nuclear submarine fuel. Thirdly, it enriches uranium for the magnox reactors which produce weapons-grade plutonium, also used in Trident warheads.

Uranium mining

The apartheid regime in S. Africa has fallen, Namibia is independent and, in any case, our uranium is now imported from the US, Canada and Australia. But wherever it is taking place, uranium mining is a disaster. As a Nuclear Energy Agency report points out, "*Uranium miners ... are routinely among the most highly exposed workers in the nuclear fuel cycle.*" They are at risk of contracting cancers and other diseases from exposure to gamma radiation, as well as alpha radiation from inhaling uranium dust. More generally, the public in a wide area around uranium mines are at risk from the "tailings" – the crushed rock left after uranium has been extracted. The Anti-Nuclear Alliance of Western Australia writes that "*Uranium tailings contain over a dozen radioactive materials which are all extremely harmful to living things... If this radioactive sand is left on the surface and allowed to dry out, it can blow in the wind and be deposited on vegetation far away, entering the food chain. Or it can wash into rivers and lakes.*"

Depleted uranium

As reported in Issue 16 of WPJN, Capenhurst produces depleted uranium (DU) as a waste product. DU, with a half-life of 4.5 billion years, is used to make weaponry, and has polluted forever large areas of the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq as well as parts of Scotland where DU weapons have been tested, and illegal nuclear dumping sites in Russia, where vast amounts of excess DU are sent illegally.

Risks to local people and workers

The main risk of nuclear accident in uranium enrichment is 'criticality', where a nuclear reaction starts in the enriched uranium. This would put the 300 workers at Capenhurst at high risk of injury or death and could result in a radioactive leak into the local environment.

The pollution of the Rivacre brook which concerned the Snowballers in the 80s is still a problem today. Last July, a leading scientist on the effects of radiation on health, Dr Chris Busby, called for an inquiry into the levels of childhood leukaemias in a three mile radius of Capenhurst, which are four times the national average. With the blessing of the Environment Agency, the plant discharges uranium and its derivatives into the brook, and also emits airborne pollution across a densely populated area. Busby says: "*The discharges across Ellesmere Port are a scandal – disgraceful beyond belief.*"

Proximity

I often travel to other parts of the country to protest, but there are strong arguments, including environmental ones, for 'thinking global, acting local.' Capenhurst is on our doorstep. We should be campaigning with other local groups to have it shut down and break this link in the nuclear chain.