

Memoirs of a Wrexham Activist

Rowena Thomas, now in her eighties, was an active and committed peace campaigner in Wrexham from the late 1970s and is still campaigning today. Here, she recalls her involvement in the Peace Movement and talks about the causes that are close to her heart.



*Nia Rhosier and Rowena Thomas
Greenham Peace Garden, September 2006*

In the late 1970s a notice was given out in my church (Trinity, Wrexham) that Father Owen Hardwicke, the Catholic priest, was starting a Peace Group in Wrexham, and asking whether anyone in the church was interested. Out of a church membership of 400, only myself and one other was interested! I attended the first meeting of the Peace Group in Wrexham library because, although I had never met Owen Hardwicke, I had heard a lot about him and it was all good!

I joined Wrexham for Nuclear Disarmament, affiliated to National CND, on the spot. Out of the group grew Wrexham Women for Peace and Wrexham Christians for Peace, both of which I joined. Later, CND Cymru became autonomous, and I became a member and got involved in national demonstrations all over the UK. I also joined Cymdeithas y Cymod yng Nghymru (Fellowship of Reconciliation in Wales), the only Christian pacifist organisation in Wales, founded originally as British Fellowship of Reconciliation at the start of World War I by a British Quaker and a German Lutheran priest, who vowed with a handshake on Cologne station: "We are ONE in Christ and can never be at war."

In 1983, Wrexham Women for Peace joined in the Star Marches to Greenham. Six marches set off from all over the UK to meet at Greenham

Common on August 6, Hiroshima Day. We walked from Wrexham to Greenham which took us 11 days. Three of us were over 60 years of age, one of whom used a sit-up-and-beg bike, and insisted on riding it home over four days rather than ride back on a bus like the rest of us.

I became involved in the Snowball Campaign, which quickly grew into a national one, as small numbers of people began 'cutting' fences around nuclear bases. This was non-violent direct action, which drew a great deal of publicity as well as support and, as would be expected, animosity from some quarters. We from Wrexham joined like-minded activists from North Wales, Chester, Birkenhead, Liverpool and elsewhere on Merseyside. We met weekly outside Capenhurst (near Ellesmere Port), leafleted workers and people delivering goods.

Every three months, we 'cut' wires, and many of us were arrested and appeared at Magistrates Courts. We either paid our fines or refused, and those who refused went to prison. I went twice. We gave each other moral support at Magistrates Courts in Chester, Birkenhead, Prestatyn, Wrexham and Caernarfon. In spite of the seriousness of our testimony, we had a great deal of fun and there were many humorous anecdotes which we delighted in hearing over and over again!

I spent many weekends at Greenham and travelled there in my Mini, mostly in order to take young mothers without cars. I baby-sat in caravans or tents while younger women attended meetings – plotting new schemes to embarrass the 'powers that be'.

I heard some wonderful people speak over the years – Paul Oestreicher, Bruce Kent, E.P.Thompson and many others. Interesting to note that one of the most compelling women speakers, Joan Ruddock, onetime leader of National CND, stopped speaking once she became an MP, much to the disappointment of all genuine anti-nuclear protesters.

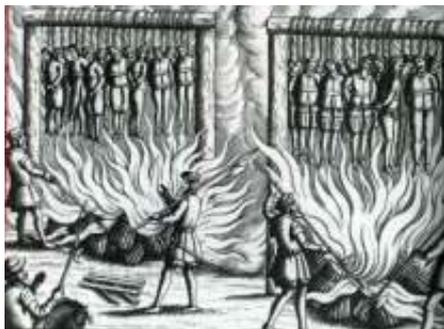
I look back on those 20-odd years as among the best of my life. I am now in my eighties and still as active as I can be, mainly, these days, in letter-writing and giving financial support to as many peace and justice organisations as I can afford. I haven't the breath to go on marches any more, but was delighted to be able to attend the 25th anniversary Greenham Common party in 2006 with my friend, Nia Rhosier, onetime General Secretary of Cymdeithas y Cymod. I can truly say that I became 'alive' during my campaigning years.

Part of my letter-writing has been in support of Mordechai Vanunu, and also in backing the struggle for compensation – after 50 years – for nuclear war veterans, and for what they suffered due to nuclear tests in the 1950s on Christmas Island and other places. I support Amnesty International; Campaign Against the Arms Trade; Emmaus – a Christian organisation for homeless people whose patron is Terry Waite; CND Cymru; Christian CND; Cymdeithas y Cymod; Save the Children, WANA – Welsh Anti-Nuclear Alliance; World Development Campaign and War on Want. While I am still able, I shall continue to write letters to the press and to Members of Parliament in an effort to get them to see the futility of war as a means of solving disputes.

I live in HOPE!

Tony Blair: Lord High Executioner?

by Siôn Aled Owen



Public executions were abolished in Britain in 1868, capital punishment was, de facto, abolished in 1965 and, in 1998, Tony Blair very proudly announced the complete abolition of the death penalty - which had remained a theoretical possibility in the case of a very few offences such as high treason - to bring the UK into line with EU human rights legislation. So what was the UK doing collaborating in an horrific public hanging at the end of 2006?

I refer to the execution of Saddam Hussein. Of course, it wasn't public in the way hangings were in early nineteenth-century Britain, when an execution was entertainment for thousands. (Incidentally, one of the crimes punishable by death in those days was picking pockets, and guess what was a regular occurrence among all those crowds? Yes, the deterrence argument was as futile then as it is now!) Yet, owing to the sharing of graphic detail of his death on mobile phone footage on the Internet, Saddam's hanging must have been the most public in history.

Yet all that the Government's mouthpieces, such as Margaret Beckett, could do was to express some pretty muted criticism of the 'manner' of the execution. Certainly the way it was done was medieval, with the condemned taunted right up to the moment the trapdoor was opened, but it was the *fact* that was the greater wrong - here was a country committed, with the rest of the EU, to absolute opposition to the death penalty, collaborating in its shameless imposition. And that is undoubtedly true: until immediately

before his execution, Saddam Hussein was in the custody of the United States of America, proudly proclaimed by Blair to be the UK's 'coalition partner', so to connive in the handing over of a prisoner from coalition custody to the Iraqis to be killed is to endorse his execution without reservation.

Saddam Hussein was a tyrant - yes; he ensured far worse deaths for thousands of his opponents - certainly; he had scant regard for legal propriety - without a doubt. Yet it is what the UK Government did which is the crucial point here, and that was to collaborate in carrying out the death sentence of a puppet court in the case of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent executions of his co-accused, no doubt to be followed by others in the near future.

The result, of course, has been to make martyrs of murderers and to ensure that the vicious circle of sectarian vengeance in Iraq has become an even more destructive vortex. Had Saddam and others of the former regime been tried at The Hague without the possibility of the imposition of primitive revenge, it could have been so different. But Britain did nothing to ensure that common sense prevailed and instead bowed to the American re-interpretation of justice as pure retribution.



Congratulations, Mr Blair, on putting in place another cornerstone of your 'legacy' - reversing an almost 150-year trend against capital punishment at the behest of the master executioner, first in Texas and then across the world, George W. Bush.

Quakers on Torture

For many years Quakers in Britain have been troubled about the prevalence of torture in the world and the difficulties of opposing it. At one time some British Quakers thought it sufficient to focus efforts to abolish torture through Amnesty International (AI). It was felt that AI had the expertise and standing to act most effectively. Now a lot of us feel that though AI's work should be supported, a strong Quaker voice should also be heard.

Quakers believe that there is something of God in each human, however deeply hidden it may be. Torturers as well as victims need to be rescued from the evil of torture. How Quakers should focus future efforts may become clearer after a conference this September. But we will continue to want to work with others to abolish torture. Perhaps you, as an individual or as a member of an organisation, wish to do so also.

Michael Still

A US Quaker initiative is also addressing these issues:

"There have been too many stories of American torture involving children and women, civilians and soldiers, abductions and disappearances, and the use of medical professionals to 'improve' torture. These reports have brought North American Friends together to support a renewed effort to oppose torture as policy and practice in all places, at all times, for all people.

The Quaker Initiative to end Torture (QUIT) begins in the United States where we have learned that much of the responsibility for torture around the world resides...

Our greatest dangers are denial and inaction... the work is large and will take more than good intentions or a mere generation. We are hopeful because such work strengthens our spiritual muscles and disciplines our listening for the Divine in all."

John Calvi, original convenor of QUIT
www.quit-torture-now.org