

Angela Akehurst

Angela, can you start by telling me how you first became involved in the peace movement?

Um, I can't say that I was hugely personally involved. Um, I was very sympathetic. I went on some of the big CND demonstrations in London. Um, I certainly went to some of the events at Greenham common, but you know, they never got in the way of the rest of my life. I wasn't a activist or, or somebody who was incredibly involved.

How did you first hear about Greenham and get involved there?

It was just something everybody knew about, I think. And when the opportunities arose to - I think there were CND organised demonstrations in the area weren't, they around from Aldermaston and along beside the base there, I went with friends on those demonstrations. It's just what we did (laughs) in the early '80s, you know! You weren't in your early 20s in the early '80s, without doing those sorts of things - in my circle of friends so, so that was just what we did.

And were you at Embrace the Base?

Yeah. Yeah.

What do you remember about that?

Not much! (Laughs). I'd probably remember more if I looked at some of the photos I've got, but I, you know, I, I think that was one of the days I probably drove a coach there. Maybe wrong there, but I probably did - because in the early '80s, I worked for a coach company. So um, I remember the photos more than actual memories, you know, I can see myself in my yellow wellington boots, and my student bubble hat, and my treasured sheepskin coat from some junk shop in Islington!

(Laughs). And the Greenham, Greenham beige knitted socks that my sister in law gave me (laughs). Yeah, but that's because I can see those in the photographs that I've got (laughs). I don't have very strong memories actually, of those.

You drove coaches to Greenham?

I did. Yeah. Because I worked for coach companies. So groups, and I drove coach, coach trips for CND as well. They used to take the office staff, I think down to the seaside for summer days out. And you know, Bruce Kent used to sit on the front seat, chat along on the way and we went to the seaside. (Laughs). Yeah. So yeah, I drove probably just you know, small groups who would get together and book a coach to get them to Greenham. I drove coaches. And yeah.

And what do you remember about about being at the base when you were there?

Well, that's what I mean, not a lot. Mud, mud. (Laughs). And being on a great day out with lots of other women.

Was it important, do you think, or how important was it that Greenham was a female only campaign?

I - from other demonstrations I have been on, um, I think there is just such a different atmosphere when it is only women. Um. There is none of this sort of shouting slogans, and they sang nice little songs. You know, they didn't aggressively shout slogans, or not when I was within hearing distance. Um. And it was just an atmosphere of people coming together and sort of having fun, with a serious intent. You know, it's sort of that, that mix of not taking yourself too seriously, but taking what you're doing quite seriously.

Yes, it seems that art and craft, and creativity were very important to the Greenham activism.

I'm sure, yeah, I'm sure but you know, I was I was never there for that long. I was always just a passing visitor. They were very close to one of the finest bits of art in this country, the Burghclere Memorial Chapel by Stanley Spencer - a memorial chapel painted as a memorial to somebody who died in the First World War. And that was literally just down the road. If I'd been camped at Greenham I'd have been down there every day to see it! (Laughs).

You never actually stayed overnight at Greenham?

No no, I never stayed overnight. No, I was it was always just as a day visitor, and only ever for the demonstrations. It wasn't just ordinary, everyday life visits.

What do you remember about encounters with the military or the police while you were there?

I never encountered any military. Um. As somebody who was driving a coach there, I remember the police directing traffic. On one occasion, in-fact, when I dropped people off, I think I thought, oh, this will be a good chance to go and see that Stanley Spencer chapel while I'm here. And I asked a policeman to direct me, and he sent me off miles in the other direction. (Laughs). He clearly wasn't local. He clearly hadn't a clue what I was asking about. I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt, you know, that he didn't do it on purpose! (Laughs). Um. But no, I, I have no memories of anything but the police responding to the general atmosphere of the demonstrations. But that would be because I was only there on the demonstration, the big demonstration days and no doubt they were told, you know, to be nice, (laughs) which they generally were, in my experience.

Now talking about driving a coach, tell me how you came to be driving a coach of Greenham women to Russia?

Um, well, the first thing is however I came to be driving coach to start with, which was one of those just little accidents that you fall into, that

then helps to shape the rest of your life, really. It - I met some coach drivers, one of them taught me to drive a coach, for a few years I worked for a coach company, coach and bus company driving and in the office, but it sent me out in a, you know, a career - that's the wrong word, a lifetime's work in tourism. So I was working for a coach company. They were were approached by somebody looking for a coach with two women drivers to go to Russia. Um. One of the women involved in that trip was actually a coach driver herself. And I believe she worked for Welsh National, her name was Anne. And originally, she thought that she was going to be able to set this up, and drive herself. But the company she worked for thought, again about sending one of their vehicles to Russia, because it was quite a big undertaking. Um. Whereas the company I worked for was really up for anything. It was a big company, it was very well run, but you know, they, they would do anything. Um. So they took a look at it and decided, yes, we've got two drivers, one of whom - me, they would have known would be more than happy to go. The other I don't know why she was chosen - possibly, seniority, possibly because she was the only possible other choice at that particular moment. Um, was the complete opposite to what you would have expected. She was um, somebody who would have had no sympathy whatsoever with the aims of the women at Greenham common, and agreed to go - I don't know why she agreed to go, to be honest! (Laughs). Maybe because it really did, you know, it did seem like a chance of a lifetime. She, she was probably quite, she was a very spirited woman. I don't know whether she was very adventurous woman, but she was certainly a very spirited woman. And, um, you know, maybe it just struck her as well, I won't get that offer again, so let's go for it. So it was simply one of those historical accidents. I was - happened to be working at that particular moment for a coach company that was happy to rise to the challenge, because it was a challenge, you know, it was - it took a lot of getting paperwork, because it was communist Russia. There was a, I think, quite a lot of office work to do, to get the visas, the paperwork. Also the visas for paperwork for the breakdown van, just in-case there was a problem, because we took a brand new Volvo coach, which it was very clear in Russia was the star of the show. They'd never seen one like that before (laughs)! They were a

real eye catcher. But yeah, so the breakdown - the garage staff had visas as well. We were given some lessons in the garage on basic mechanics - how to fix a coach at the roadside. And if all else fails, you know, the instruction was to wait there 'til the breakdown van gets to you! (Laughs). Because the network of, I suppose, breakdown companies, and facilities just wouldn't have stretched into communist Russia. So it was, it was quite an undertaking, I think, for the company involved, but er, the people in the office who dealt with it was, were very enthusiastic about it. So yeah.

And what was the purpose of the trip of the Greenham women going to Russia?

So their purpose, I think, was on the surface of it, it was partly fact finding. If I remember right, there were a lot of - lot of them worked within healthcare. And so they wanted to do things like visiting health care facilities. I may be remembering this wrong, but I think that was right. But I think also there was just a sense of, well, we've demonstrated at the gates of Greenham common, let's go and demonstrate in Russia, or at least see if we can get away with it. But I think it was. Yeah, I think - I mean you'd have to ask them, but my impression was that it was at least in part, a fact finding thing. You know, what is this big threat? What's going on there?

What do you remember about the trip? How long were you away for?

It was about 3 weeks. (Sound of door opening). Sorry. Well, I suppose you know, on a day by day basis, I've got three 3 worth of memories. But the things for me, driving the coach, the things that stood out were odd things, really. Um. The immense long, straight roads surrounded for tens, if not hundreds of miles by forests. And I came back with a sense of, you know, this is where the fairy tales of Europe come from. Not specifically those roads, but these forests and the sorts of things you don't see in England. I remember the sheer mischief (laughs), of the women. Um, doing things like singing and dancing when we were held up for too long on borders, they'd all just get out of the coach and

start to sing them dance. And woe betide any border guard who tried to get them back on the coach, you know. I, I think we did a little sit down protest at the gates of one campsite where - or threatened to. There were some problems in, I think in Kiev, maybe, and I can remember some poor campsite manager who clearly his neck was on the line, you know, trying to negotiate with these women about what they could and couldn't. (Laughs). Um, I, I can remember mischievous things like realising that they were being followed, and just saying 'Well, what the hell you know, if these people have got to spend the day following us, they might as well be our tour guides. So let's strike up a relationship here.' I - it's all stupid stuff I remember, you know. The fact that in one city - and I'd have to look up which one in my photo album - but in one city um, it was like a lot of of council estates here today have a centralised heating and hot water system. So central boilers, and it seemed like this city worked in exactly the same way. The whole city had central boilers. That's the impression I had. And we arrived when the central boilers were off for maintenance. It was the middle of the summer. So we were told that there would be no hot water for showers or anything. But here was several crates of pink champagne as compensation! (Laughs).

Which presumably you drank?

Well, I must say that I as the driver probably didn't. (Laughs). I probably had a taste. But I'm sure it disappeared somewhere. Yeah. I can remember the shops, and just the sheer lack of anything other than cucumbers, cabbages and wonderful ripe tomatoes, but nothing else for sale - fresh food. And when we were on our way back and we were coming through Germany, going into a supermarket and just being (gasps) 'All this stuff!' Even after only 3 weeks - I'd got used to those cucumbers! (Laughs). Um, being served up in - when we were in hotels - being served up day after day with just the same thing, which looking back on it must have been endless chicken Kiev. But I don't know, somebody called them stuffed gerbils and the name stuck! (Laughs).

(Laughs) stuffed gerbils!

Yes, I remember all sorts of silly and funny um, details - and the sort of the patience of these women - the people who had planned it. There was an Australian woman who was a doctor, who I think I can remember saying, you know 'Well, we planned this. And of course, I'm Australian, so I'm used to travelling these huge distances. And it's now clear that nobody else on the coach is.' So they patiently sat for days and days and days on on the coach, on some of these incredible long drives. Um. Just singing and keeping themselves amused, and watching the forests go by. Um. Yeah, and then running riot once we go somewhere.

(Laughs). And you talk about being followed.

Yeah, I mean, personally, I wasn't. So it wasn't my experience, but having worked with Russian tourists in Britain at the same time, there was always the KGB bloke on the coach. And it was always pretty apparent who it was, because they'd been going around keeping people in order and and yeah, wearing black leather coats (laughs), um, looking like KGB. So I assume you know, there was just part of Russian life probably having....

Do you think it was the KGB that was following the coach when you were in Russia?

Absolutely. Yeah. No, it wasn't so much following the coach, because we had guides on coach. It was when we got somewhere, um people got out and scattered, there was a sense that already somewhere in that cafe over there, opposite the coach park, there is a group of people waiting to start following you.

Is that because that's just generally what happens to foreign visitors, or happened at the time? Or do you think it is because they knew you were Greenham women?

Could have been because we left London, we had a coach that also did service works, so it had a blind where you could put the destination and

the route number on it. And so we had 007 on our (laughs), as our route number. (Laughs). But you know we were, I just think we were an anticipated coach full of subversives. They definitely knew who the women were. And everything had to be planned and approved all the way - there was no just driving off into the blue. Everything had to be planned and approved. So they knew where we were going to be at any one time. Um. Yeah, so I just think that was the way things worked at the time.

And the woman on the coach dealt with that in a very mischievous way, it sounds like?

Absolutely, well, why not? I think there's a certain amount of sympathy for the people, you know, on the Russian side who were having to do the following. But that might have been a bit misplaced, and possibly put those people into awkward situations then. But certainly it was clear that our guide, who was called Tania, who had waited, we'd been held up - I don't know, approaching Russia, we must have crossed East German border, and then I think we went quite a long way in the wrong direction because we didn't understand the signs, we were halfway to Gdańsk before we came back again (laughs), on these cobbled motorways, bumpity, bumpity bump. Um, and then it just, you know, took forever to get across East German and Russian borders. our guide I think had arrived at the Russian border at something like 6 in the morning, and round about midnight we pitched up. (Laughs). So she got on the coach and went straight to sleep. And we got lost again. (Laughs). But could have woken her up if necessary. But I think it was clear that she - I don't know how she got chosen for the job, but I think she was probably quite nervous. I think she liked the women, I think that was fairly clear, but also had to be quite reserved at the same time.

She was in a difficult position?

I think so, yeah. I mean, you know, all these people like the campsite manager at Kiev, you know, they, they wanted to be friendly. They wanted to appear to be nice people. They maybe even had some

sympathy with what they understood about the women of Greenham common, but they still have their own lives to worry about. So yeah, it was...

I imagine many people in Russia were concerned about the arms races.

I'm sure - what they knew about it. Yeah, I'm sure.

But not as able to...

It's I, I would wonder, you know, with the state control of media, what exactly people would have known about it. Um.

And you mentioned the other driver who wasn't - pardon the pun - onboard with the aims of the Greenham women. Did you reach any sort of understanding, or change her mind after the 3 weeks of being on the coach with them?

Um, some of them absolutely got to her as people. I know that she really, really liked some of them. Um, she didn't need to have any sympathy for what they were doing. And I can't - it wouldn't surprise me if she wasn't ex military herself. Um. But I'm not sure about that.

So would you say being in Russia was an adventure both for you and your colleague, the other coach driver?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, it was an adventure of a lifetime. And even for my colleague, who probably wouldn't have ever imagined herself in such a situation, I'm sure she'd have remember it forever, as the adventure of a lifetime.

And even though she may not have shared the political aims and ideals of the women on the coach, she certainly liked them.

She, I think she became very fond of a small handful of them, you know, really did like them. I'm not sure she would have had a great deal of

time if she'd met them in any other context - for quite a few of them. But given that she was with them for 3 weeks, there was certainly women amongst them who she was, you know, very, very taken by, very fond of.

Were there ever any times on the trip to Russia where you felt anxious for your safety, or well being at all?

Not from - no, not for safety. Absolutely not. Apart from anything else, if you're being followed, and there's a problem, you know, there's somebody behind who's gonna come and rescue you! (Laughs). And we weren't doing anything as coach drivers that was going to get us into trouble. Whether any of the women individually were doing anything that might have got them into trouble, I've no idea. If they were, I didn't see it. But I you know, mostly they were behaving like holidaymakers who er, you know, had got a little bit of added extra interest to their, their holiday. And no, didn't, didn't feel in any danger or potential danger at all throughout.

Whereabouts did you go, if you can remember?

Um, well we we crossed from Dover, we drove north into Holland to pick up a couple of women - I don't remember where we picked them up. And then we just, you know, went in a straight line across to Berlin. And we kept driving, we did a detour towards the Gdańsk before we turned around came back again. (Laughs). We crossed the border of Russia, and headed towards Minsk. We stayed overnight there, we stayed overnight Smolensk, we went to Moscow, and then we turned south to Kiev, Lgov, I'm seeing these with an English accent, I don't think you say Lgov that way. Kharkov - we went to the ballet there (laughs), that was a lesson. And then Odessa on the Black Sea. And then we headed back into Germany and sort of up fast and wonderful motorways. (Laughs). Back - I can't remember where we crossed back. So it was a circular trip, but we didn't backtrack at all. It was a complete circle. But I can follow that better by looking at the photos. I could tell you, if you

want a more detailed where did we go I'd just go through the photo album.

Oh lovely yes, we'll have a look at those, definitely.

But just in terms of the interview, if I'm turning the pages 'Oh, and then we went there...' (laughs).

Do you think the women on board accomplished what they set out to achieve by going to Russia?

I have no idea. I hope so. I suspect it was also the adventure of a lifetime for some of them. I suspect some of them had never contemplated spending 3 weeks sitting on a bus. (Laughs). Because as I say, it was very long drives. And some of them were long in terms of distance. And some of them were long, just simply because the roads were very poor. So there was one occasion where it took us all day to 200 kilometres. It was basically sort of dodging round potholes all the way. Um, and I don't know whether they realised that it was really going to be - that's quite gruelling, 3 weeks on coach, with just, you know, a couple of days here, a day there, a couple of days somewhere else. But for all of us, who would have, who of us would have been to communist Russia before? I doubt if anybody had. It was it was not an obvious holiday destination (laughs) back in mid '80s. I've been since, so that even today, you know, it takes a week to fill in the visa applications. Um. But then it, it was it was like going to the moon, really. It was, it was going to something completely other. And I found it absolutely fascinating. So I'm sure they must have done. Yeah, just just to see how people lived. What it looked like. The high points the low points, you know, the beautiful buildings of Moscow, the almost Mediterranean style city of Odessa. And then the ugly buildings of Moscow (laughs). And, just in some places, the sort of administrative chaos - taking a 12' 3" coach under a 10' 6" bridge that was clearly about 30' above our heads, but had - I don't know it would have been meters - a sign on it, stuff like that. (Laughs). So administrative chaos at street level.

It sounds like it! Can we get under that one?!

Probably! (Laughs).

Did you go back to Greenham again after you'd driven the coach to Russia?

Oh my word, I don't know. Probably. Possibly once I'd, and again I, you know, I'd have to look at look, but Greenham common for me was an occasional thing - like going on a Brexit demo nowadays. I'm pretty interested in the future of the country, but I'm not there organising all the opposition to Brexit and everything, I just turn up for the demos.

Yeah. Is there one particular memory of any of the time that you spent there that sticks out in your mind as being the kind of defining memory of Greenham for you?

Not particularly, no. No. Um. I mean the defining memory would be working with these 45 women or whatever, and getting to know them and the wide variety of backgrounds, and the huge sincerity in what they were doing, and the, the range from total naivety to really clued up political outlook. Um, yeah.

So even just on the coach there was a huge range of women?

Absolutely.

I mean that as well as the camp?

I don't know, you see I never visited the camp in that way. I only went for the demonstrations, but on the coach, there was such a range of people, and outlooks, and understanding.

That's lovely. And is there anything else you wanted to tell us, or that you remember about that time, that you would like us to know about?

Um, no not particularly. My main focused memory is of that trip to Russia, and just the patience, the joy, the creativity, the enthusiasm, the energy, the - of those people. (Laughs).

Why do you think it's important that Greenham is remembered now by subsequent generations?

I have no idea if what those women did achieved anything. But I can't imagine that it didn't at least inspire the way some people thought. You know, politicians who maybe had the power to do things, whatever they thought they were facing, or whatever aggression they had in themselves, um, and from an aggressive point of view, the Greenham women just represented an easy target. But for those who wanted to fight for a more peaceful world, I'm sure that it must have encouraged, inspired, you know that, that - not just that they were prepared to take that time out of their lives, but just the sort of who they were and the way they went about it. Um. Yeah in the end sitting down in front of the gates of a base, if, if army bailiffs whatever aren't going to respect your symbolic helplessness, then you've lost haven't you? You're an easy target. But the fact that they were respected for at least some of the time, that, that the people acknowledged and honoured their sitting down and spreading spider's webs of wool and you know, that sort of stuff. And said to me at the time, at least as much about the country we live in, that, that it was somewhere where you could be gentle and peaceful. Whether they achieved anything beyond that, I mean, for me that was, that was inspiring. But, but, I don't know. (Laughs). Yeah, yeah, but it does take people to respect the position you're putting yourself in, and not just trample over you, because if you go into something that gentle and helpless, you could get just trampled over, you know, and if you 'Alright,' - I think they did, on one occasion sit down in front of camp gates, maybe they just threatened to on the Russian trip. And I think that they would have got away with it there as well, because we were being treated with kid gloves in a way. Um. But certainly I sensed amongst the Russians that we dealt with, that that's not something they would have done. (Laughs).

I'm sure.

So, it's sort of - it said something good about this this country, I think, that they were able to do it.

Do you think that, that wave of campaigning that sort of political activism has, has much to teach the future generations of activists who are going to have to fight for their ideals?

I don't know, because, I absolutely don't know if 700,000 people turn up on a demonstration, you know, last year - does it affect anyone's way of thinking? As far as I can see demonstrations don't do very much, except encourage other people who are like minded. Um, I don't know. Don't know, but it's probably, you know, probably better to get involved in politics than to just demonstrate on the sidelines, but but, then that involves getting involved in a dirty business, doesn't it? (Laughs).