**Archive Reference 2015\_esch\_VoLe\_15**

*Ok, so its recording, so first of all can I just ask you to tell me your full name and spell it for me please.*

OK, Full names, including the middle bit is Roger Neil Geffen, R-O-G-E-R, N-E-I-L and then Geffen, G-E-F-F-E-N.

*Fantastic, thank you. And if you are happy to can you tell me the date of your birth.*

Ah yes, 22nd of January 1966 as I say, 50th this Friday.

*And um, can you tell me where you were born?*

Ah, West London.

*West London. And today’s date is the…*

19th of January

*19th of January 2016 and we’re in Roger’s flat on Southwark Bridge Road.*

Yep.

*So to start with can I get you to tell me a little bit about your grandparents, whatever you know about your grandparents.*

Ok, so my, I’m a kind of part English, part Eastern European mongrel. On my Father’s side my family is part mix of Polish and Lithuanian Jew, Jewish ancestry. We can trace our way back via the family tree which has been compiled by a classic American Jewish mumma who is related somewhere along the family tree and she has compiled a family tree with thousands of people on it that all go back to about the 16th century somewhere in Poland. And um, I have er, great great grandparents, various great, great grandparents who came over from Lithuania and Poland in the 1890s Jewish Pogroms, met in East London and um, my family, myfathers family is sort of the result of that. My Mother’s family by contrast is probably East Anglian. My mothers parents, Grandfather, was from Norfolk, Grandmother was from Suffolk and their ancestry is probably East Anglia back to, I don’t know, before the Northen conquest? I don’t know. Not sure but probably. They’d been there for a very long time.

*And do you know how your parents met?*

They met playing tennis. They both joined the Rothampton (?) tennis club, which is near where they were both living at the time. Yep, met playing tennis. My father had probably seen my mother before that cos he would go to ballet perfromances at Convent Garden and my Mother danced with the Convent Garden ballet but he cant quite claim to have said, yeah, that one! (Laughs) But yeah, they met on the tennis court.

*Fantastic. And did your mother continue to dance after they were married?*

No. She had by that stage given up dancing. She loved being a dancer when she was going through ballet school but when she joined um, when she started doing it professionally and then discovered that professional ballet dancers bitched like hell at one another she decided she didn’t really want to do that so she dropped out of doing that and went and had a second career for a little while as a Cordon Bleu cook. I’ve always said that her second career was much more, much more useful from my point of view. I got, I was not very appreciative probably of the sheer quality of the food but I wanted quantity!

*Fair enough*!

And I wanted it now. Always! (Laughs).

*And you got it presumably!*

No – I had to wait! Which I groused about endlessly!

(Laughs) *And how about your father, what did he do?*

He trained a s a doctor and then decided that he didn’t actually want to deal with the practicalities of patients so he went into doing medical policy work, he worked as a civil servant in the department of health for most of his career, um, doing sort of administration of hospitals and err, communicable diseases. He was involved in the World Health Organisation team to confirm that Smallpox had been eradicated worldwide, and that yes, he basically did health policy stuff.

*Excellent. And er, you were born in West London.*

Uh huh.

*And did you live there… how long were you in West London?*

Uh, well. My mum is still there in the house in where I grew up. So er, they put down their roots. So before where… they moved in to where my mum’s still living 6 months before I was born and they have stayed there ever since.

*Wow. And where, where exactly was that?*

East Sheen (?) near Richmond Park in South West London.

*Ok. And what are your early memories of growing up there?*

Early memories … er, well I s’pose one that’s still relevant is that er, cycling round, it was a cul-de-sac, and I would cycle round in a kind of little U shaped thing from one side of the cul-de-sac to the other side of the cul-de-sac, then my territory… I was allowed into the slightly busier main road that the cul-de-sac came off when I got a little bit older and then there was one of the grumpy old men in one of the houses who came out one day and decided I was obviously disturbing him because he took the bell off my little bike, or trike, I can’t remember if I was on my trike or on my first bike with stabilizer, and he just took my bell off me! Waaaaaa! (Laughs)

*That’s horrible!*

Quite! So yeah, that’s one little early memory!

*And when you say it’s still relevant, what do you mean?*

Well, it’s still relevant because now I work for CTC, which is the UK national cycling charity so the fact that cycling is an early memory has kind of come back… it’s become kind of an important part of my life in a roundabout way.

*Mmhmm. Excellent. And so did you continue cycling throughout your childhood and youth? Were you always a keen cyclist?*

Well yeah, yes. Yeah… I mean it’s kind of … it’s a strand that was always there. I went off to a boarding school at 15 and my first year, I was ..the first year boardhouse I was in was about a mile from the main school building. So um, each morning we got on our bikes and rode into the main school, so I was regularly using the bike as a way of getting in to school. Um, then at university it was my standard way of getting around ‘cos that’s what students do, and um, I’d also been for a bike trip when I was in my mid –late- teens, probably about 17 I went for a bike trip with a couple of school mates and went right from London over to the Forest of Dean and discovered that you could cover quite a lot fo ground on a bicycle, far further than I had realised. We weren’t exactly going fast on our crummy schoolboy bikes, but yeah discovered that you could cover a lot of ground so after leaving university going forward a bit, I decided lets try cycling to work. I was still living with my parents after uni, um, had my first job in central London ummm, and decided to cycle. Partly to save money, partly that the sheer activity of it appealed to me, and I rapidly discovered that I wasn’t doing something crazy but that the people going somewhere in all the little metal boxes were doing something far crazier than I was. Then I came across something called the London Cycling Campaign and I was in London, I was cycling, I could kind of see why you needed to campaign for it, so I joined it, a year later I got active in it and it was really through the London Cycling Campaign that I came across Road Protests, so that’s relevant and links in to probably where we want to go next!

*…Where we do probably want to go next! Well yes, we do want to go there, almost next!*

Alright!

*But I would like to hear a little bit more about your boarding school days and maybe a little bit about your university first.*

Ok.

*Can we just do that very briefly?*

Sure.

*Where, where were you at school? Where did you go to school?*

I was at a school called Bryanson (?) in Dorset, which is a quite progressive public school. Um, it was one of the first schools to go co-ed. At the time it was still at a 4 boy to 1 girl ratio but now its fully co-ed. Pretty much all schools are now. Um but the fact that it had started to go co-ed at that stage was quite progressive by public school standards at that time. I think we got a very good, liberal arts education. I went there first and foremost because the thing I thought I was going to do with my life at that time was something in as a classical musician. I used to play piano, I was playing all sorts of instruments, I was conducting a bit, composing a bit and doing that side… my degree was a music degree too and Bryonson had a very good music department so that was my reason for being there as I say but I got a good liberal arts education from it too.

*And did you grow up in a fairly liberal, progressive household as well? Is that your experience…?*

Yeah…Liberal rather than radical. My father and his older brother, so my uncle, had been hardcore lefties in their youth and my uncle stayed a hardcore lefty. He worked a lawyer for the National Union of Miners and he’d done all sorts of bits and bobs voluntary stuff for the national council of civil liberties, which is now Liberty today, which was more of a progressive organisation then than it is now. Um, so yeah, he was …but my father had a more kind of middle-of-the-road Liberal view but uh, yes, I guess some of that rubbed off on me but I think I probably got more of my progressive political thinking from school friends. But um, yeah, it was echoed by my father but he never really … we didn’t really do a lot of political chat, but he was left of centre leaning.

*But you discovered politics at school rather than at university?*

Yeah, yeah. I decided round about aged 12 that I was, I was a lefty and one of my friends at Bryanstone he was definitely in to being a lefty, and uh, the 2 of us dreamt up an idea to write a musical on the life of Trotsky, we didn’t get very far…

*When you were 12?!*

Yeah, well we were probably about 15 by that stage and um, we wrote a few numbers for it and yeah, it was just taking a lot longer that either of us had really bargained for, and we’d bitten off a bit more than we could chew, but hey that sort of tells you about what I was thinking about at the time.

*Ok, yeah! Do you still have them, the numbers that you wrote at the time?*

Um, they’re probably still somewhere yeah! I’m still in touch with the guy that I was working on that with he still round there somewhere…

*Maybe that’s something that you could re-take up again at some point?!* (Laughs) *I’d love to see that!*

Oh crimes! Yeah! …

*Excellent. And university, where did you go to university?*

I was at Oxford. Funnily enough I was at the same college as Phil McLeish (?) but he was there a year, or two years, we’ve never quite worked out how much, what was the age… I think he was two years later. I didn’t know him then, it was pure chance. We’d discovered later that we’d actually been at the same college at the same time but we hadn’t known one another.

*Wow. Ha! And um, what college was that? I should know that because I probably…*

St. Catherines, Oxford.

*Yeah, I think I did know that. And ah, are there any standout memories from Oxford , or relevant memories…? Were you involved in politics at all when you were in Oxford?*

Not really. I actually kind of went through kind of a phase of getting a bit disillusioned with my own kind of naïve teenage lefty self. Um, I still remained someone who is kind of anywhere to the left of centre but wasn’t sure quite how far. I think is probably where I was at and um yeah, I was mainly getting involved in music stuff. I had quite a number of friends who were doing political things and I enjoyed political conversations but I wasn’t really quite sure where I stood myself.

*And what were you doing musically?*

I was… well, I was doing a music degree but the main thing I was doing was conducting … well I set up a college orchestra at St. Catherine’s and then got to conduct one or two university orchestras for a year, so that was the main stuff I was doing and the main thing I learned from that was that, how you, if you want the best musicians to come and play for your orchestra it’s not, it doesn’t really matter if you are the best conductor or musician, it’s actually organising the party after the concert which really matters, so I ran that orchestra on a homebrew kit, which was very good for the orchestra’s budget. That worked well.

*Excellent! And so did you learn to brew as well? Were you a brewer? Or did someone else do that?*

No I was doing the brewing but just using a bog-standard home-brewing kits from Boots or wherever.

*So is it fairly easy to do?*

Oh yeah, I wasn’t ..you can be very sophisticated about home brewing, I wasn’t. I was just bog-standard kits and add water, and add water, sugar and yeast, let it brew and then let it brew for a bit longer, then drink it!

*It’s obviously, a completely different end of the musical spectrum but part of the focus of this project … the young people I’ve been working with are interested in the protest music…*

Oh yeah!

*So, if throughout the interview you have any particular memories from a musical angle, that would be great.*

I think you’ve probably heard other people say The Prodigy when we were on the street at the start of the climate thing, yes! No, I don’t particularly… that whole kind of, the musical culture, as a die-hard classical bod… I wasn’t taking much interest. So I just sort of let it go on around me – its fine! Whatever! You only have to look at the CD collection behind me to see where my musical tastes lie! Pure classical! Out and out. There’s a few jazz thing dotted around in there but basically it’s classical.

*And are you still… are you still involved very heavily in music?*

Um, I still get to a lot of concerts but its no longer part of my working life or anything like that.

*But you still play?*

No, no. No… I kind of… what happened was, I worked for a while as a classical record producer, where my job was telling other classical musicians who could play much better than I could, when they’d got it wrong and when they needed to do better and um… making them do things again and so my work was basically my critical fangs and they got far too sharp for my own playing, so uh, practicing just got, piano practice just got really frustrating because I couldn’t measure up to what my critical fangs were demanding of other people I couldn’t deliver it myself so I just thought I’d rather be listening to other people who can play better. So I stopped.

*That must be a hazard of critics in general.*

Hmm yeah! Ah yes. Yeah.

*Ok. So shall we move on to road protests?*

Yeah, sure.

*Was the M11 your first encounter with road protest or was there something else first?*

No I had been doing other bits and pieces before that.

*Ok, so take me back to the beginning.*

Um, so there are two strands to it, that ran in parallel but were actually completely interwoven. Um, Reclaim The Streets had two incarnations. Not a lot of people remember the first incarnation. Um, Reclaim The Streets was a little group that was set up by people who had also been involved in setting up the Earth First thing in the UK. The Earth First direct action movement had been doing stuff in The States, defending forests, and a couple of guys, one of whom is still a professional colleague and a very good friend, Jason Torrents (?) and one of his mates from college, Jake Burbridge (?) both grew up in Hastings and they sort of went through local Greenpeace and Friends Of The Earth groups and wanted something a bit more radical and then he heard about all this Earth First from the United States and they thought lets have the Earth First in Britain and um, as a spin off from that they then… well, Jason and another his mates, a guy called Shane Collins (?) set up a group called Reclaim The Streets. They decided to have a first action, to sit down on Waterloo Bridge. As I said, at this stage I was involved in the London Cycling Campaign and one o fteh things I was doing was arguing for decent cycle lanes on Waterloo Bridge. Now I just happened, although I was a volunteer and I wasn’t usually in the London Cycle Campaigns main office on weekdays, I was popping in there for volunteers meetings in the evenings. I just happened to be in there on a weekday when a phone call came in from Shane to say, we are a newly formed group, we want to do a sit-down on Waterloo Bridge and the staff member who took the call sport of said, well, the guy who is campaigning on Waterloo Bridge just happens to be here right now, do you want to take the call. So I went off and sort of went and met Shane and Jason um and um, so that sport of got me involved in Reclaim The Streets right from its … right from the outset. And, what then started to happen is that Jason in particular had already been involved in some of the early skirmishes at Twyford Down, which was the first big road protest in Britain and had already started up by this stage. And um, so Reclaim The Streets, having gotten going, we were doing, we were doing a variety of things. Apart from sitting down on Waterloo Bridge we were editing car posters, we were painting in bike lanes and we were effectively acting as a London support base for the Twyford Down campaign. So we were regularly organising regular mini-bus trips on Saturdays. Whenever they were calling a day of action at Twyford Down, we were taking people down there. Um, and quite a lot of people like myself who had been in –like myself- who had been involved in London Cycling Campaign, we were getting a bit disillusioned by the London Cycling Campaign at that time – its revived itself a lot in the mean time- but there was a bit of an exodus to do some more exciting things like Reclaim The Streets and the Twyford Down campaign. The couple who I was referring to earlier in this leaflet, who are now…they were both LCC activists who started getting involved in Twyford and then the M11 campaign.

*Tell me their names again for the tape?*

So that’s Chris Hurdley and Brenda Pesh (?)

*Excellent.*

And so yeah, among the – there were others who bailed out of LCC and then we started finding other people and started doing, like I say, Twyford Down particularly.

*But still under the auspices of Reclaim The Streets?*

Yeah. I s’pose, Reclaim The Streets was effectively acting as a London support group for the Twyford Protest.

*And so were you just visiting Twyford or …*

Yeah.

*Or did you ever spend any time ..any sustained time there*?

I never spent more than a night or two at a time down there. Mostly going down at weekends. I still, I still had a regular day job at that stage.

*And um, when was this?*

That was… I first went down there in late 1992. What had happened was that there had been some early skirmishes in the Spring of 1992, which Jason had been involved in but that was before I got stuck in, where they were trying to … what they… The roads required, basically it was gouging out chalk from a chalk hillside near Winchester, taking the chalk and moving it half a mile to the left, to create an embankment across some water meadows. So there was an initial defence of the water meadows of some of the kind of initial sort of land clearance. And then, there was a tribe of new age travellers, a group of new age travellers, who called themselves the Dongus Tribe (?) basically camped on the land, for several months on Twyford Down to defend it. They had nothing physically to defend. All the stuff that we later did at other Road Protests, of either defending houses at the M11 protests or defending trees that we started to do at the M11 but that we did more extensively at Newbury and elsewhere… they just had an open Chalk Downlands so they just waited to be kicked off. And when they did get kicked off, I thought well that’s the end of that. Except that then, some people started saying no, we can go and invade the work sites and jump on the bulldozers. Particularly when they are working on Saturdays. That’s what really kicked the Twyford project off.

*Was that really a novel idea at the time?*

Yeah. Absolutely. Um, Im trying to think of any protests where people had done that site based direct action. We didn’t know of any antecedents. We knew that the previous direct action movement o anything related to what we had been doing had been Greenham Common. There were a couple of women from Greenham who were sort of involved but not heavily. Um, its not… I think one of things that we felt was that we were having to make it all up. Its not as if we had people from past direct action movement that we could look to for experience and learning. Whereas, if I could jump forward a bit um, from, ah, we did have a really good hand over process from the road protests and Reclaim The Streets movements to the Climate Camp movement through … 6-10 years later. Climate Camp was an excellent 2 generation movement. There were a whole bunch of people of kind of my generation who had had all that experience of Road Protest and there was that next generatiuon who were coming through with fresh ideas and much more kind of… well, so, media savvy, of the early, early social media generation. And there was a fabulous fusion of that kind of new, new communicating plus the sort of experience we’d got of what works, what doesn’t work but a willingness to try things a-fresh. Because, just because it didn’t work before, doesn’t mean that y’know, add some new comms skills, and new ways of doing things, it might work differently this time. So there was a really useful; there was no sense of the youngsters saying, oh you old gits, your time’s moved on, get out the way. Or the older generation saying, oh you young whippersnappers don’t know what you are on about. We just got on, really really well, handing on experience but renewing it. Whereas with road protests we didn’t have that kind of sense of a previous generation to learn from. We really felt we were having to find our way and do new things and do things that hadn’t been done before. I mean actually, they probably had done similar things over in Australia, we just didn’t know much about it.

*So were you aware of any mentors or lineage, or … ?*

Well the one that I did, that I was aware of, that I tried to bring into the M11 campaign was an Australian campaign to try and stop a dam being built in Tazmania, called the Franklin Dam. And what I was aware of… the reason for that lineage was that, there was a guy who had been involved in that campaign, it was in the early 80s and um, they succeeded. They had… what they had done and we had attempted in a small way to copy in the M11 campaign was not just to have a little bunch of hippies that do all the protest. What they’d done we’d sort of said..they’d said take some time off work. Come and we’ll give you some direct action training and then off you go. You’ll get arrested, you’ll get support but we want a constant stream of new people coming in. and we’ll clog up the system with mass arrests. Because generally, a mass thing, rather than relying on a few hippies to get arrested several times and then get burnt out, it actually meant that they were able to demonstrate sheer diversity, ssheer weight of numbers, clog up the legal system, to the point where they could not dismiss the protesters as just a bunch of mindless trouble makers. They made it an election issue in the national general election in 1982, the then opposition Labour Party in Australia was committed to ending that dam, even though construction had already started. The direct action was, send people out on boats to get in the way of the construction of the dam. There are fabulous photos of people doing this and y’know, of all the training that they gave to people so we sort of copied that on the M11 campaign. We had this idea of a rota and we ran it for a month even though, unlike the Australian campaign where they had prepared for a whole thing and prepared for a year beforehand, we started preparing for this whole rota even in the midst of doing direct action so we weren’t able to give it anything like the preparation but the idea was a really interesting one. At one point we also looked like we might even be about to go back to it during the Climate Camp movement as well, when we thought they were about to build a coal fired powerstation at Kingsnorth, we started making preparations for exactly that kind of campaign but then they dropped it.

*They dropped it. And that’s crucial.*

They dropped it. That was a coal fired power station, we went and did a protest at Kingsnorth and it created the political momentum for basically Ed Miliband who at that stage had come in as Climate Change Secretary, to say Yeah – coal generators, if you want to build new coal fired power stations and you say you can do carbon capture and storage, you’re going to keep this thing below whatever the limit was, and then you can get permission to build it but it’ll cost you if you don’t. And funnily enough, they didn’t want to build it. So, that basically stopped coal fired power stations.

*Wow, so that’s a huge success story.*

Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

*And the… the campaign that you are talking about on the M11, was that Operation Roadblock?*

Yes – exactly! Exactly.The month rota was operation roadblock. That’s the one. And like I say, that really came from me having read this fabulous book about the Franklin Dam campaign, and the reason I knew about the Franklin Dam campaign was because one of the guys who was from the Franklin Dam campaign later came to England and got involved in the London Cycling campaign. He’d left by the time that I got involved in the London cycling campaign but he’d left this whole idea of doing direct action and direct action training workshops. And I went and did one and then went and passed on the idea to new campaigners, including these 2 – including Chris and Brenda- who came on one of the direct action training, the campaign training workshops that I ran that introduced people partly to conventional ways of campaigning for cycling but also to the idea that every so often you want to go out and take to the streets and just be visual, visually disruptive and to get your message across.

*So did that tie in to early critical mass days or – what the relationship between?*

Well, yeah. It was before critical mass started. Funnily enough, it was actually these two who started critical mass in London.

*Oh really?! Aah!*

Yep. Absolutely. So that was them um…

*Maybe that’s another project!*

Yep. Absolutely! Yeah.

*Ok, so when did that happen, just out of interest?*

Critical mass in London, the first critical mass was 94, so it was once the M11 campaign had started.

*Ok, ah. Interesting.Um…And also, Faslane 365, they did something similar didn’t they?*

Yeah – yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s right yes. Yes, absolutely. And um, I’ve no idea where they took their idea from but yes, its the same idea.

*It’s the same concept isn’t it. And it’s a really good concept.*

Absolutely.I long to do it properly one day.(Laughs).Y’know, if we get to know of a permanent Fracking site, or a new open cast coal mine or anything else where we know they are going to be building something on land, then we know that they’re going to be there for some time, it’s the thing that needs doing. It’s basically the tactic. As you say, we’ve done it with Faslane, we did it in a pretty cursory way on the M11 campaign but elsewhere it’s not really happened.

*But that was probably the first – as far as you know – that was probably the first time it happened in the UK?*

Yeah yeah, and we were only really able to do it in a pretty cursory way.

*Well – first, first attempt!*

And more to the point, we were creating – we were creating all of the sort of, the plan for it, in amongst – Oh, they’ve done a site invasion over there, come on, mobilise! – Y’know we were constantly being disrupted. It was not as if we were able to have headspace and time to plan, we were already in reactive – we’ve just gotta go out and stop them building this, chopping that tree, knocking that house- we were constantly on reactive mode. So,the idea of being able to plan and then go out and talk to different groups around the country about this idea, y’know, this is what we want to do… The Tazmania campaigners, as I say, they had planned for it a year beforehand. So they were explaining all the campaign, how they were trying to stop this dam through the legal channels but they weren’t expecting it to work. So they were able to say to people, we are expecting to be come and have to use non-violent direct action to resist, please be ready to come when the call goes out, sign up so that we can let you know what needs doing. So they had done all that sort of mobilising and creating networks, for that kind of sustained, constant rota of new people coming in. The networked the idea for a whole year before hand so, before they themselves were immersed in direct action. And, we didn’t have that opportunity.

*Sure. And I suppose now there all these technological resources that would make it much more straightforward and streamlined.*

Oh absolutely. That’s such an important difference between protest now and protest then. We spent a lot of time filling envelopes! Nobody fills envelopes anymore! (Laughs).

*Yeah, absolutely.Absolutely. Ok, so take me back to the beginning. So, has Twyford has come to an end at the point when you become aware of the M11, when that starts to kick off?*

Yes, I will just briefly go via Oxley’s wood.

*Let’s go via Oxley’s wood.*

Because Oxley’s wood was quite important for why I got stuck in, because it was near where I was living at that time. So there were these 3 – these 3 road campaigns, I’m just going to rewind to 1989, which was an important year for all sorts of reasons. It was the year when, on the one hand Maggie – well firstly, it was the year when the Green Party won, got 15% of the vote in a European election. It was also the year when Maggie stood up at the United Nations and said ‘Yes, Climate Change is a serious issue, as a scientist I am convinced about the need to do something about climate change.’ In 1989. And in the same year, her government also launched, what they themselves described as the largest road building project since the Romans. As if Climate Change was irrelevant to building roads! So, it took a little while for the kind of environmental movement in Britain, to kind of react to this large road building programme but these three schemes, Twyford, Oxley and the M11 knd of really stepped into the limelight. And in all 3 cases, the local campaign groups in all 3 cases took complaints to the European Union for breaches of – for alleged breaches of - a new European Directive requiring environmental impact assessments for major infrastructure projects like new roads. Now there was a whole load of legal argument about at what stage did the road have to have – how far through the planning process did the road have to have gone in order to be caught by the requirement to do an impact assessment. The government was saying, we’ve gone so far through the planning process that basically, we’d given permission to the road before the new European Directive came in and there was na argument about, a legal argument about this. It all ended up with the Europeanb Union saying, Nah nahnah we think these local campaign groups have a case to answer, Maggie’s government said piss of EU. Um, they ended up doing a deal – Maggie made some concessions over Mastricht (?) while the EU said, well, we’ll let Twyford go ahead and the then European Environment Commisioner got pushed aside to allow this deal to go through. He came back into the story later because what then happened was that, as I was saying earlier, we had regular protest pretty much most weekends at Twyford and the numbers grew and grew and grew, to the point where the transport secretary took out an injunction to stop, y’know people who had been regular protestors, they’d got video evidence and they’d got private detectives recording all of this, y’know who was coming and going and finding out names and giving people code names where they couldn’t find real names, and giving everyone action file numbers… So, the two days after they got this injunction from the court we’d already planned for another big day of action, so it just became obvious that this day of action would become the blatant breaking of injunction, so people went out with their action file numbers emblazoned on their t-shirts or whatever. Which was basically saying, you’re going to have to imprison me to stop me.So um, 6 people went to Prison. But before they even went to prison, before they even got taken to court, the government made the decision, three days, maybe four days after that, to not build the road at Oxley’s Wood. The one in my own backyard. The one which had been my main reason, why I, as a member of the local cycle campaign group, of the London Cycling campaign in Greenwich, thinking – My goodness, we might need to jump up the trees to defend them, I want to find out about road protest- that’s when I really took an interest in Reclaim The Streets and started acting as their London Support Base. So I got stuck in, my own motivation was, I want to know what to do when, on the expectation at that time that we were going to have to defend Oxley’s Wood, an 8000 year old ancient woodland in South East London, a mile and a half from where I was then living. Um so, just to sort of wrap that little story up, so government drops Oxley’s Wood, people go to prison for having effectively saved it by what they did at Twyford Down, the now sacked European Environment Commissioner comes over for what had been planned as a big mobilisation rally at Oxley’s Wood, but it turned into a victory celebration. While these 6 mates were still in prison, he visited them in prison, Daily Mail goes ballistic – SACKED EX-EUROCRAT GLORIFYING OUR PRISONERS! – y’know, everything wrong in Daily Mail world, but he came and spoke at this Oxley’s Wood victory rally and of course just gave a huge shout out for the people who were in prison who couldn’t be there for the victory rally that they had basically earned. And he just ended up saying for all the Oxley’s Wood had been such an important part of his professional working life, he’d never seen it before! It’s fabulous to see this wonderful place that you have saved by your collective campaigning efforts! to the crowd assembled there, and he ended up saying in his thick Italian accent, Oxley’s Wood will be forever etched on my heart. We all went Ooooh! (Mock Crying).

Anyway, it basically, with the government retreating on Oxleys so whats next? M11 link.

*And that must have been a huge boost of morale!*

Oh god yeah! They’re retreating! Go chase them! That’s exactly how that felt! That was like, Ok! We’ve won one, keep pushing! Yeah – where can we chase them, now they’re retreating?

*And you chased them to the M11.*

Exactly, exactly. Up ‘til then, the M11 had been the Cinderella of the 3. So, Twyford Down, area of outstanding natural beauty, two scheduled ancient monuments, two sites of special scientific interest, anything that protected ought to have been saved but it wasn’t sacred. Oxley’s wood, 8000 year old ancient woodland in South East London. M11 Link Road, 350 houses that had basically been condemned from the moment that road was planned back in the 1960s, some of them were squats, others were bought out by the Department of Transport and let out on short term rents, because they expected to build the road in 6 months time. And that 6 months had been going on for 30 years. So basically they had been letting these houses get pretty run down for a good 30 years and you look at it and you think y’know, you might as well knock it down for a road. Except that, us lot thought otherwise. So did the people who were still living in those houses.

*And did you expect the M11 to have the momentum that it did have in the end?*

No. Absolutely not at all. Um, we really thought we were up against it. For all the sort of new age hippies who’d got excited about defending sacred hillsides at Twyford and trees, 8000 year old ancient woodland at Oxley’s wood, they’re not gonna get excited about houses but they did. And it was mostly because they first got excited about defending a 250 year old sweet chestnut tree! One tree! But we made such a big story about it that it totally moved the environmental direct action movement from being about more conventionally green things, to being about the interaction between green and social politics, which is why the M11 campaign was so important from that respect, for the political development of y’know the development of the Earth First Movement, the environmental direct actions movements political thinking, including my own.

*Yeah, so exactly. That’s what I was going to ask next. It’ s really clear from what you are saying that the trajectory that the new age hippies and the Donga tribe and that lot were going on, but can you talk a little bit about the shift in your own political thinking? Yeah, I mean how the M11 contributed to that.*

Yeah well, its um…

*I mean, you have done already but if you could say a little bit more!*

It was a really interesting transition because yes I’d, as I was saying earlier, I’d kinda beena leftie, then I’d kinda got disillusioned then I’d sort of started discovering environmental politics, um and I had a real jolt just from discovering just how serious climate change is as an issue, um I’d already got involved in cycling politics just from my own experience of cycling, and at that time the big issue was air pollution and asthma. Funnily enough asthma has sort of dipped out of media awareness but … and air pollution has been out of political awareness for quite a long time, except that its just come back really within the last 6 months or so, thanks to a brilliant environmental law firm, Client Earth, taking the government to court and winning on air pollution. It was a big issue then, it dropped out, its just come back but I kinda realised climate change is really really important and that gave me renewed motivation and massively increased my motivation to do stuff around roads as well as cycling. And then, as I say, moving on to the M11 campaign where we had to make the case to why houses and communities were important too. Um, and then just discovering, when I got stuck in what that community really was. The sort of people who were there, the people who were in these kind of quite run down kind of houses, because they were socially marginal but actually had this incredible community spirit. And incredible social solidarity networks, that I really didn’t know much about til then. And how important it was to protect and defend that side of things too. And so yeah – I learnt loads of stuff that just added to the environmental politics that I had learnt from getting on a bike and then discovering that I wanted to campaign on cycling and it sort of re-ignited that sort of political awareness that I had had as a teenager but it gave it a much more practical and tangible outlet. So yeah, for me that was very very exciting.

*Mmm, absolutely. And so where were you, were you involved in the M11 right from the very* –

Oh yeah.

* *Beginning?*

Yeah yeahyeah. There was myself and a guy called Paul Morozzo who had also got involved in the Twyford Down campaign, absolutely incredible catalyst of um, err of campaigning activity. You – Paul just said to me, after the M11 had gone, sorry after the government had re-treated at Oxley’s wood, um Paul said, shall we go and investigate the M1? And we went up to one of the local campaign groups meetings and quite frankly they were all over the place and we just thought, let’s give it a crack anyway. Um y’know, we really didn’t think that the M11 had much chance of going anywhere, um and one of the things we thought was goingto count against us –we were completely wrong- was that the construction was due to start at the Wansted end, not the Leyton end. We thought that this was going to count against us. That because the construction that had to be done by the Wansted Tube station was technologically the most difficult bit – they had to build a tunnel, they had to take it very close to the tube lines under Wansted – it was exactly because the tube line was only just below the surface, at the point at which they had to start tunnelling from underneath the existing road, take the new tunnel slightly off from being directly below the existing road, so they could actually do some tunnelling but then you had to sit on top of the central line. And that’s exactly why the road – the tunnel – had to be shallow, taking it straight through the tree roots of the 250 year old sweet chestnut tree. Which is why all the residents in Wansted thought that their George Green was going to be protected by a tunnel and no-one had told them that the sweet chestnut tree was going to go. So far from being the leafy, more conservative people who weren’t going to get involved, they got incredibly heavily involved because they felt they had been lied to over their 250 year old sweet chestnut tree. And then, having got involved, they then followed the whole of the M11 campaign on that same political journey. From a sweet chestnut tree, to homes and communities and climate change and everything else that the M11 campaign was saying. It’s fantastic to see how they too went on this political journey that I too was going on.

*Wow, that’s a really nice encapsulation*. So the point at which you became involved, it was already agreed that the Wanst – that George Green would be tunnelled under?

Oh yeah.

*Do you know when that –*

The planning for this road had been going on for ages, as I say. There had been arguments about whether it should be tunnelled or there should be a surface road for … had been going on for a good ten years before.

*Was there a strong campaign in Wansted to get it –*

Mmm, yes there had been. And the local campaigners in Wansted thought that they had won because there local Green would be protected because the road was going to be a tunnel. And that’s why we thought we weren’t going to get local support in Wansted.

*So who were the local campaigners that you first came into contact with – do you remember?*

Um yes. When I first went up to a meeting, um, I met Henry. The wizard like guy, you have seen in the photo journal. We met a guy called Stuart Barnes who – um- and there was a guy called Colin Becks. And um, Colin Becks was editing a newsletter called Road Breaker. And it was this fantastically full on rant and we thought Wow! There’s some really incredible radicalism going on! But actually, he was a lone voice,it’s not as if people in the actual community were resonating with what Colin was saying. He was on his own little planet. Y’know, in some ways, politically amazing but just not building a network around him at all.Just going off on a soap box.

*Oh, I didn’t realise that the Road Breaker had its origins in the local community – in the residents – rather than incoming activists.*

No! No no, Road Breaker was being edited by Colin Becks and it was pretty much his own soap box. He was himself a squatter with some really interesting anarcho-syndicalist politics but also some very odd – there were all sorts of very odd things about Colin. Um, I hope – hmmm. But he had, he had in some ways a really interesting political critique but he wasn’t, he wasn’t getting it out into the community. He was just writing this little Road Breaker thing which was his own little soap box. So there’s this little band of old men ranting about how dreadful everything was that the department of transport was doing but really not having the local roots to be able to generate visible support for – well – visible support for the road.

*And that was all around Wansted was it?*

No, they were at the Leyton and Leytonstone – they were much more at the Leyton and Leytonstone end.

*And so, Richard Leyton as well.*

Yes, yes, I should have brought him in as well – yes.

*I’m just trying to join all my dots.*

Yes. He was the most sensible of that group.

*Yes, he’s wonderful, Richard.*

Yes, absolutely.

*And how about John Stewart, can you –*

Yes, yes John Stewart is such an important player; he absolutely needs to come in, into the story. John had been a really important catalyst. He’d created a network called Alarm, which originally stood for All London Against Road Menace. Particularly to oppose a revival by the Department of Transport of plans for a whole load of roads in London.Basically they wanted to revive the 60s plans for a motorway box and various ring-way schemes. And they had a go at this in the 1980s after Ken Livingstones Greater London Council had been abolished and John Stewart did what he had done in various guises since. Basicaly created a network of all the groups opposing road schemes against London. And the John Stewart tool kit is don’t plan of the road onto somebody elses backyard, and don’t dismiss the idea of direct action. Don’t make yourselves out to be terribly, terribly, terribly responsible campaigners – actually its quite useful to threaten direct action, and don’t place your faith in the public enquiry. Those are John’s three key messages and he spread them to the London anti-road groups and when he – he and that network defeated the London road schemes in 1990, he started spreading the idea of Alarm to be Alarm UK, which was effectively a contradiction in terms because the L stood for London, Alarm UK became a UK network of people opposing roads and he became this bridge between the direct action movement and all the community groups who were still fighting road schemes through public enquiries. We were saying look – don’t distance yourself from the direct action movement, if middle England had threatened direct action, you’d probably win. So what started to happen was that we got noisy defeats at Wansted and then at the M11 link road, and at Newbury and at M65 in Lancashire and Pollock in Scotland and as I say Newbury was the noisiest but by the time we actually got to Newbury we had killed off the biggest road building project since the Romans. It had started as 23 billion, it had crept up to 24 billion by 1994 when the M11 campaign was underway and by the time we got to 1996 and Newbury, it had already been whittled down to 1.5 billion pounds of road schemes. So that’s 22.5 billion pounds of roads that did not get built at that time. Some of them came back since but even the delay is a saving in CO2 emissions, and many of them never came back. Oxley’s wood never came back. It still gets threatened.

*Does it, still?*

It’s still be threatened. Not the whole thing but the bridge – that has come back as the Thames gateway bridge. Now they’re calling it the galliants reach bridge way or tunnel, they can’t seem to make up their mind but the GLA is still talking about whether to build a road across the Thames at the location of the original East London river crossing. They’re no longer talking about continuing Southwards from that bridge or tunnel through Oxley’s wood. And at the time the government were saying the scheme would make no sense without going through Oxley’s wood, now it’s perfectly sensible not to go through Oxley’s wood, we just need a bridge over the Thames. They’re still threatening it. But it’s never been built. And there are plenty of road schemes that got defeated at that time. Some of which did get built later, some of which got partly built – Hastings Bypass. They’ve only built half the bypass around Hastings. There was an awful lot of road building that never happened.

*So what you, and John Stewart and others did really, was to start to build a network. Is that right?*

Absolutely, it was kind of two parallel but inter-related networks. There was Road Alert which was set up by people who had been involved in Twyford to really act as a support network between direct action networks, and Alarm UK, which was a parallel but over-lapping network which was helping all the campaign groups who were still facing the direct action, sorry, the public enquiry, still going through the conventional channels to oppose road schemes, but John was saying, ‘look, these two need to be absolutely mutually supportive’, and that was such a powerful thing to have that diversity of tactics in one movement saying ‘you can move along the spectrum depending on what’s needed for the circumstances’, there are no right tactics and wrong tactics, it’s actually very useful to have a spectrum.

*Absolutely. And was there diversity within the different groups, or did it tend to be that the residents were fairly official and the incoming activists were much more radical, or was there more diversity than that?*

There was much more diversity that that. The residents, some of them, would be perfectly happy to get involved with sitting on ‘dozers and occupying houses when evictions were happening and all those kind of things, some of them… I think what you realise is that how far people will go is partly around their life circumstances – have they got a job that they can’t afford to lose, and therefore does that constrain them? One of the factors that I think is quite important, one of the things that I think helped the direct action movement in the 90s to grow in the way that it did, was that unemployment was relatively high and compared with today, getting doll was relatively easy. We thought it was really hard at the time, but my god it’s got a lot harder since. So it was possible to be a PANSE [pronounced ‘Pansy’], it’s a wonderful acronym – Political Activist Not Seeking Employment. PANSE

*[laughing] That’s the first time I’ve heard that.*

It’s a nice one. Sweet. So there were a fair few PANSEs around the direct action movement at the time.

*And were you a PANSE?*

I became a PANSE about 3 months into the M11 Campaign, I just decided right, I’ve had enough of this little – I was working for a classical music record producer, but for a company that was going nowhere, I was going nowhere with it. I couldn’t get on with the boss, I couldn’t get out to anywhere else in the record industry, I just decided this was more important.

*So you were able to dedicate yourself to this full time.*

Yeah. Just threw myself into this.

*Were you living off site, or did you move.,..?*

I was already living here, I’ve been here for all that time, but I was basically, once we got into the phase of the M11 Campaign where we were occupying Claremont Road, so we had a whole row of houses that we needed to defend and we were building up the fortifications, I was spending more time living on Claremont Road and coming back here to get a bath and a change of clothes and whatever from time to time.

*So did you have a house on Claremont Road? Were you in one house, or were you just kind of moving around?*

Yeah. I was in one of the scruffier squats because I did have somewhere else for my belongings so I didn’t mind being in a fairly scruffy place.

*And what number were you?*

I was… was I number 15 or number 17? I was next to old Mick. I can’t remember if Mick mas 15 or 17. I was what had been…erm…what’s the red haired guy’s name? Massive hoarder of all sorts of stuff… I lived in his upstairs. I’ve forgotten his name now. Doesn’t matter.

*But you were living in a squat, rather than staying with a resident?*

Yeah.

*And was Mick a resident or a squatter?*

He was both. He was a squatter who had lived in that house for a very long time. He had been squatting in I think 17 Claremont Road for a good 10 years before the protest came to his patch, and it was absolutely transformatory for him because as you may or may not have picked up, he’d been an outsider of the system all his life, and he’d done time inside for GBH, he’d got one hell of a criminal history, I don’t know the details of it, but people just knew that he’d got a history of violence. And then he discovered non-violent direct action, and he just became it’s sort of… it’s funny to sort of say High Priest, because actually he was this rough, old east ender, his manner of speech was almost east ender old gangster, but the wisdom he came out with was kind of Buddhist monk. This wonderful mix of wisdom and burley east ender, just made him a kind of guru figure for people, particularly the youngsters. People who had come to Claremont Road as a squatted community to take part in it, and when Claremont went they really had nowhere else to go. I did, but there were people who didn’t. Mick was one of them, and he held that community together and they found other places to be. Some of that community started having kids, and he was just their Grandfather, and he became an absolute talisman. His funeral was an amazing occasion. Has anyone told you about his funeral?

*They have. I would love you to tell me about it though.*

It was just fabulous. Mick was such an outsider to the system that there was no way he was going to have a conventional funeral. Goodness knows how his body got out of hospital. In fact, probably him being in hospital was the one time he ever did anything inside the system, but his body got out somehow.

*You honestly don’t know how?*

I do not. I genuinely don’t know how. He’d been involved in another protest came down at LymingeForest in Kent, quite a number of ex-M11 squatters had also been down there with him, so it became obvious that that was where we had to have his funeral, it just became a complete regrouping of the tribes for Mick’s funeral. So we had a rave, an illegal funeral, a trespassory assembly, an aggravated trespass, Mick was probably breaching Michael Howard’s Criminal Justice Act in four different ways in Michael Howard’s constituency, and he was dead. Only Old Mick could do that. So we built this huge funeral pyre and had this wooden coffin, I don’t know who had made it, but it was a DIY coffin, that someone had made, you know, and then someone said something about what an amazing character Mick was, and then one of the kids joined in, one of the little 5 year old kids who’d probably not even been born at the time of the M11 Campaign said something really nice about…[in child’s voice] ‘he was always doing good things for other people’ and we all went arrrr, and then someone else went ‘yeah, and he was a grumpy old git too, especially at the start of the morning’ – which he was – and we just chucked him on the fire. Bloody good party. Absolutely the way to go for Mick, and everybody just remembers it as the best possible send off for an incredible guy.

*Fantastic. And there were no recrimination for the –*

A couple of police officers showed up, looked around, thought ‘what are we going to do about this?’ They’re not causing any harm, went away again.

*But did they know you had a body that you were burning?*

I think so. I’m not sure actually. I’m not sure if they worked that bit out. But it was blatantly a trespassing assembly, it was blatantly a rave, it was blatantly not legal. They just thought ‘bunch of people, they’re not disturbing, what are we going to do with it? There’s two of us, there’s several hundred of them…we could call every copper in Kent and probably have to draw on the resources of the Met to brake this lot up, or we could just let them to it, because what’s the point?’

*And that’s what they did. Very wise.*

Absolutely. I’m just going to have to stop and take a leek for a moment.

[Tape pauses]

*Ok, where had we got to? We’d just finished with Old Mick’s funeral, hadn’t we?*

Yes, indeed, and that came out of talking about squatters and Claremont Road.

*Ok. Erm, what do you think is the best line of enquiry from here? Is it best to…shall we stay on Claremont Road, should we… were you on Claremont Road from the beginning, while work was happening…*

Not really. Yeah, if we want to do… I mean there was basically 3 or arguably a forth post-loot phases, but 3 main phases to the campaign, yeah. Well, quick potted history: First phase was Wanstead defending the 250 year old Sweet Chestnut tree. I guess other people have told you the story about the crazy lawyer who came up with the idea of declaring the tree a dwelling and how it actually worked. What was his name?

*Did you know him?*

The lawyer? Yeah. Oh god. What. Was. His. Name? Crazy guy. He just came off with this one moment of genius. He brash massively… quite posh guy, larger than life character, but actually a bit of a drunk and very, very unreliable as ait later turned out, but he had this moment of genius where he said ‘well if um…’ what happened was someone wrote a letter to the… I’m going to re-wind a bit. When it first became clear that the construction company were putting up fences around the tree, Jean the Lollipop lady started telling the teenage kids ‘they’re going to cut the tree down, go and join the protesters and get in the way’. It took then 4 days to put a fence up around a tree, just because everyone gave them such a hard time. On the Saturday they, we planned a tree-dressing, a very family friendly thing, and the construction company at first said ‘yeah, ok, we’ll let you through the fencing to do your little tree dressing’, and then they changed their mind, so people got really angry and those fences came down mysteriously…it must have been windy up on George Green that day or something like that. Actually I’ll just do a little story about…. Where’s that photo with Jean and Ron… there’s a woman in the background…if you haven’t seen her interview, there’s a fabulous interview…have I missed it? Oh no, there it is. [interviewer and interviewee are leafing through the one off newspaper publication ‘Claremont Road E11 A Festival of Resistance’]There’s some fabulous footage on one of the films of her talking about how she’d been down to the green that day with her son, who was then…a teen… you’ve heard this.

*I have, but say it again.*

She’d taken her son down for the tree dressing, and then when the fences started coming down she thought, ‘oh, this is getting a bit trouble, I think I’d better take my son home before it gets too troublesome’, and half an hour later she realised her son wasn’t there, and she thought ‘I bet he’s gone down to the green’, so she went down and there was her son getting involved in pushing the fences over, and she thought to herself – and she describes this on camera, beautifully – she says she thought to herself ‘I can either take him home and tell him he’s been a very naughty boy, or I could follow what my heart was telling me to do and join in, and I just joined in’. It’s just like Woah! Someone absolutely capturing that moment when life changed and her perception of the world changed.

*Really? Was it a real turning moment for her?*

It comes over so clearly in the way she herself describes it as an absolute lightbulb moment. It’s a fabulous bit of footage. So that’s the first phase of the campaign, anyway, so John Vigal the then environment correspondent at the Guardian tells about how… OK, so after that, tree house gets put up in the tree. John Vigal talks about the tree house, one of his readers writes a letter to the tree house. Angus! That was the lawyer, Angus latches onto the letter, takes it to court, and argues successfully that this tree is a dwelling and therefor the Department of Transport has got to go through a full blown eviction process to get the tree dwellers out. This buys us time, and of course it gives John Vigal another story to run in his column about how one of his readers has managed to make legal history by writing to the tree dwellers. Of course this produces a deluge of letters to the trees and we produce a book of all these fabulous letters that got written to Dear Tree, it also meant that a whole load of people came out and we then were able to create a phone tree to defend the sweet chestnut tree. A metaphorical tree where basically the idea is we the hub, the trunk of the tree, make 6 phone calls to people who then make 6 more phone calls, make 6 more phone calls…how many people can you get in an emergency when we get a tip off, which we did, that the sweet chestnut tree was going to be evicted, so we ended up with about 500 at about 5 o’clock on a very, very, very wet, muddy morning to defend the sweet chestnut tree. It was one of those things that, well, that photo was taken that morning. That is from the morning of the tree…they are watching the sweet chestnut tree, and it tells you what they felt at the time. And it was one of those moments where it was both very painful, but we also knew it was a fabulous victory – the fact that they had had to spend a whole day and send out huge numbers of police to take 500 people away from one tree and we were going to fight every bloody way, we were going to give them that much hassle. So the next stop up was the houses here. There was a row of 4 houses, that being the end one, that’s number 2 Wanstead Road, it was lived in by Patsy Brager and her brother Mick and I think Mike Edwards and his cousin Stewart, they were 2 doors up. Basically that was the next line of defence, this fabulous row of lovely houses, they were beautiful old houses, and they had to give over the keys to their houses which they owned and lived in and loved, and then well, they didn’t give the keys to… they gave the keys to us and then Patsy moved back in as a squatter in her own home…

*And was it Patsy that locked on to her washing machine with Rebecca Lush?*

That’s right, with Rebecca Lush, that’s it! That’s absolutely right, so as I say a classic case of a very well-spoken resident of Wanstead just going all the way on direct action and taking people with her. So that was the next phase.

*And what was your involvement in that? Sorry, you were going to say something else…*

I was going to move o… what was my involvement? I was mostly doing… I was still in my full time job at this stage, I was mostly doing networking, putting out posters and leaflets, spreading the word and helping to set up phone trees and basically run media and communication stuff, but as I say I was a part timer so I wasn’t always there when there was crane that needed jumping on, but mostly it was about preparing for the sweet chestnut tree stuff.

*Ok. Do you want to…*

Next phase. So it was after we lost these houses that we moved into doing Operation Road Block. So the tree was December 1993, those got evicted February ’94, on my mum’s birthday so I can remember the date of it, February 16th those went and basically Operation Roadblock… we’d been doing the preparations whilst the defence of those houses…so when those houses went we thought well let’s start doing this non-stop direct action to hassle them wherever they’re building each morning, we’ll go out and find them, we’ll train some people up at the start of the morning and then take them out to jump on the bulldozers and we started that in March.

*And how did you reach the people that ultimately came? That weren’t already there.*

It was basically by creating the phone tree to defend the sweet chestnut tree, and then a bigger phone tree to defend this. Each time we were getting more and more oxygen and publicity, more and more people wanting to be there for the next eviction because they’d missed out on the last one and had heard about it through word of mouth, so our capacity to build phone trees was growing. Each time we got these two big media hits – we were getting other bits, but these two were big media hits – and each time they were just giving us more networks, more people saying ‘I want to know what’s next!’ So we were able to put people on phone trees, and then as I say we created a structure from all the people on the phone trees to do operation roadblock.

*And what was the secret of the success of that media campaign? How did these incredibly successful media stories come about? Is it possible to pin point what it was that sparked the wider public interest and the media interest, do you think?*

I think it’s this mixture of creativity and audacity. The sheer creativity of managing to argue that a treehouse was a dwelling was just like… John Vidal just loved it. And then the fact that people were willing to jump on the arm of the bulldozer. I mean one of the photos that isn’t in here was Paul Morozzo, a guy that I mentioned earlier, and the thing about Paul, was not only that he was a fabulous catalyst, but he was also a brilliant climber. That’s what he wanted to do until he got tendonitis, found he couldn’t be a climber, re-directed his energies into road protest, we gained massively

from him not being able to be a climber. But actually his climbing skills were perfectly good for getting him onto diggers so he managed to get into the tree and then leap from the tree onto the cherry picker that was trying to get him out of the tree. He managed to leap onto it and climb onto the arm of it which held them up for another several hours. But it was that sort of audacity. And as I say, people doing crazy things like barricading…turning chimney pots onto lock-ons, and then as I say, continuing on when we go onto Claremont Road, the sheer creativity of how everything that was done on that street was both artistic and defences. We were making things in the street that you could lock on to. All of the ground floor of those houses… at first we decided we had to force them to come up with cherry pickers so we had to block the ground floor entrances and at first we were doing this with wheel barrow load after wheel barrow load of rubble and then someone had the brilliant idea of car tyres. For us, car tyres were fairly easy to move compared with rubble and they were really bulky, by contrast, when the department of transport came to knock these houses down ]with all their bulldozers, car tyres were quite difficult for them to move with their digger buckets because they’d just bounce out. And then they had to dispose… symbolically it was lovely because they had to dispose of all these car tyres. We’d got the car tyres cos we just phoned up a whole load of car breakers yards to say ‘do you want to get rid of some car tyres?’ getting rid of car tyres is a big cost for these people demolishing cars. So to be able to offload car tyres on us for free was great for them, gave us barricading materials and symbolically it was beautiful too because when the government finally came to knock down these houses they had to basically get rid of the waste product of their own bloody car culture. It was beautiful.

*Did Operation Road Block continue through Claremonet?*

Not really, no. We basically had to bring it to an end. We were stretched on too many fronts. We did Operation Road Black…

*And was that focussed on a particular bit of the road?*

It was wherever they were building in the morning, we would go out and find them, mostly at the Wanstead end, and some drainage work at the Leyton and Leytonstone end, and then one morning when we were out stopping them doing work at the Wanstead end, they basically came behind our backs and took the roofs off two of the houses on Claremont Road, and we already knew that Claremont Road was the last fully intact street and because of its shape – it was basically 3 sides of a rectangle coming off Grove Green Road – that row of houses was intact until they came and took 2 of the roofs off that morning. W thought ‘right, we’re not letting that go any further’. That day actually sparked an idea for one of our next media hits cos we had this discussion – ‘if John MacGregor’ who was the transport secretary at the time, ‘if he’s sending his bloody construction company to smash the roofs of our houses, we should go and smash up the roof of his house’ Then we kind of all of looked at each other – ‘who’s up for that then?’. No one was, funnily enough, so I thought well there’s one thing we could do which is get a bloody huge banner, symbolically showing a road going through his house, and we did exactly that one morning. We climbed on the roof of his house with a banner saying ‘M11 Link Road – Return to sender’ on John Macgregor and by the time he’d finished his breakfast and his ministerial limo showed up to take him off to work, both the London TV stations – BBC Breakfast and ITV Breakfast had both showed up and got helicopters to show him leaving his house trying to pretend that nothing was happening. I was doing media support from the ground. I was about to leave to go on holiday so I was doing media support and not getting arrested, but it was a complete media hit. We took a ladder to get on the roof. Another lovely bit of footage – about 6/6.30 in the morning a little posse with the ladder going through Highgate Woods to get to the house and Paul turns to the camera and slyly says to everybody else carrying the ladder, ‘if anybody asks what we’re doing, we’re making a film called The Ladder’ [both laugh].

*Was there any communication?*

John MacGregor did ‘No Comment’, which was of course the phrase that was being outlawed by his ministerial colleague Michael Howard’s Criminal Justice Bill, as it then was, so he gave a no comment interview which we all laughed at.

From then on we realised we’d got to go back into defensive in order to kind of make Claremont Road a big showdown and assert that you’re not taking Claremont without a really big fight. We went into defensive for a while , we did some stuff about the Criminal Justice Bill which got passed while we were out there, and shortly afterwards we went and paid Michael Howard a visit, had a tresspassory assembly party in his garden, took people off on a mystery tour, didn’t let people know where we were going, 150 people trusted us to have planned something good and we went down to Michael Howard’s garden and he too gave no comment, which was again beautiful. From then really through the summer kids and local teachers were coming down to paint some stuff at the M11 and find out about some politics and local history. We were getting quite brain fried quite frankly. We were an open space so we were getting all the people with drug problems coming up; Mick was brilliant at dealing with that. He knew that people were going to show up with those sorts of problems and they needed a bit of time to wither settle in or get out. If they showed signs that they were beginning to sort themselves out and contribute, they got to stay. If they remained destructive, Mick was the person who wasn’t going to allow the destructive mental health issues of people on the street to drag us down. And there was a very fine line between welcoming and giving people a space to sort themselves out, but not at the expense of dragging us down. Mick drew that line very successfully. There were people that got badly frazzled by some of the conflicts with people with mental health issues. It was disruptive and hard work, and people were constantly arguing ‘have we got the balance right?’ what are we about if we are defending the loss of housing and yet we’re not prepared to accommodate the victims of lack of housing. That argument was made and was very powerful, but there was also ‘we’ve only got so much capacity to absorb society’s shit, and there comes a point…’ and Mick was very good at drawing that line when most of us were too lily livered and liberal to know how to deal with it.

*And were there people who took on the role of supporting?*

At a personal level?Probably not as much as it should have done.Climate Clamp has now produced an activist trauma support group, we didn’t really have that. No, not really. I don’t think we did terribly well at that sort of thing. We were very good at making sure people got fed, but beyond that…I think people who got traumatised I don’t think we really looked after them very well. If you were going through trauma and you needed support, it was totally down to whether you’d got mates who had the time and headspace and skills to offer that support or whether you didn’t. And some people who needed it most didn’t have that. [1.25 – some dialogue missing, due to time constraints]

*Were the parties troublesome for Dolly?*

She never complained about it, her hearing was pretty bad which probably helped. She gave a fabulous interview where someone asked her what it was like living around all those squatters – ‘don’t talk to me about dirty squatters, they’re the grandchildren I never had’. It’s like what a fabulous answer! She was gold dust, of course we looked after her.

*Do you want to tell me about the eviction of Claremont Road?*

Yeah. I went off site to do media support. We knew that we were really going to struggle media wise because we’d had several false alerts and triggered the phone tree 8 or 9 times for false alerts, but when the one came that was the real one we absolutely knew it was the real one, so we’d got used to saying ‘this is an amber alert so if you’re free come down, but don’t bust a gut’, but when the real one came it was ‘this is red alert, drop everything’, and we were able… it wasn’t just one tip off, we heard it from left, right and centre. So we triggered a red alert and people did come down in numbers. We also worked out why they’d chosen that date. They’d chosen to start the eviction of the day of the budget so the media attention was elsewhere, so I went off site to really work at the media. Have you interviewed Ali Butler?

*No.*

If you’re looking for women she’s be really good. She came to us as a squatter, and she’s still in London working as a cycle trainer. She’s moved into a place slightly off route. We moved into that and made that a kind of comms and media place, we acted as the off-site temporary hub and I went and held that together. It was a lively 4 days, we were struggling for coverage, and then the media started coming when we were still there 3 days later. Of course they could get their photographers in, which weakened our coverage, but they got interviews with people coming off site, and then filming from the edge of it when Phil was the last person down off the tower. [some missing].

How did Paul get the idea to build first wooden towers and then the big scaffold tower? Once we’d started on the defence of Claremont Road, he went over to visit his grandparents one day and they unearthed this book that he had read as a 6 or 7 year old and he’d completely forgotten about it. It was called The House that Bibo Built, and it was about this character Bibo who decided to build a tree house in his garden and then the local council came round and told him that he had to move out of his house because they were going to build a road through it, no it was a supermarket, not a road, I think I’ve got that wrong. So he built a tower on the top of his house, and he just build this tower taller and taller and taller, so the first part of the book was effectively a retelling of what we had done at the sweet chestnut tree, and then to defend houses, and the thing that he had to do next was to start building towers on the roofs of houses. So we started with these little wooden towers, and they worked brilliantly, even though we had moistly moved out of Claremont Road [to defend houses on Filibrook Road for the day], those wooded towers acted as fabulous defences, that just gave us the idea, ok, if a little wooden tower can cause them that much hassle, what would happen if we build a really big tower? So there was all this lovely stuff…there was a construction site on the other of the road, for some reason, we have never found out why, whoever was the site manager never put in place a mechanism for stopping us nicking scaffold, and we just got more and more scaffold for months, regularly had little people ‘being Bob’ – Bob was the anonymous person who was nicking the scaffold, so ‘being Bob’ was code for … ‘are you going to go and be Bob tonight?’ that was ‘are you going to go on a scaffolding mission?’ So Bob got away with an awful lot, and the tower would grow and grow whenever we got a false alert. It wouldn’t surprise me if on some of those false alerts, they actually had planned to come in and then the tower went and grew beyond the reach of the cherry picker, so they had to postpose and book a bigger cherry picker. [some missing 1.34]

*How did it feel in those last day?*

We’d sort of learned that the moments of tragedy were moments of triumph as well, this was something we’d been waiting for a long time. We’d expected them to come and evict us much sooner in the summer, in a way the fact that we were left there till late November into early December had been frying our brains, we were like ‘we’ve done the defences! Come and evict us! We want our moment in the media, we want to move on’. So this thing that we’ve set up, where we’ve forced the Department of Transport to come and play our game to evict us, we’ve created the stage, this is our drama, they’ve got to come on as the villain. ‘When are you showing up villain? Ah, right! Finally you’re here. Now we can mock you villain’, and the fact that Phil held the villain up for yet one last night was just brilliant, and then they had to knock these houses down with all these car tyres. By that time we were ready, we’d been kind of waiting to move on and do something new for quite a while, and the thing we already knew we were going to move on to was from doing stuff around roads to doing stuff around cars and reviving Reclaim the Street, which had been a little group of half a dozen people…what we’d been doing on Claremont Road all summer was having street parties, and the idea that you could reproduce street parties not on roads that had been closed to cars by dint of being whole streets squatted, we could reproduce this idea of street parties a busy shopping street and transform it into a place where we could have a street party.

1.39.12.7

**Name of interviewee: Roger Geffen**

**Date of interview: 20/01/2016**

**Language: English**

**Venue: Interviewee’s home**

**Name of interviewer: Polly Rodgers**

**Length of interview:**

**Transcribed by:**

**Archive Ref: 2015\_esch\_VoLe\_15**