*What is your name and where were you born?*

My name’s Fi Stephens, I wasn’t born in London, I was actually born on the Isle of White. I came to London in 1991.

*What was your connection to the protests?*

At the time I was living in Edmonton in North London and shortly after I came to London I got involved in various campaigning. I actually started in the London cycling campaign, doing some direct action with them, through the people that I met it led onto going down to Twyford Down in Hampshire near Winchester which was again a big anti-road protest against the extension of the M3 down there which was going through some amazing countryside. When that was winding down, the M 11 Campaign was just starting up, and that was much more local. So I got involved in the No M11 Campaign on the back of the Twyford Down Campaign. I lived a few miles away; I wasn’t that familiar with this area, so it was a bit of a journey of discovery of east London.

*Do you still visit Wanstead, or do you have any connections to the place anymore?*

Not so much, I actually moved to Hackney 12 years ago, so I am part of east London, a lot nearer the area in question, I only really pass through I suppose. Some years ago in 2011 I did a really short job as a census collector, collecting census returns and one of my areas was Leyton and Leytonstone, so one of my tasks was to visit some of the roads whi9ch were affected by the M11 and which were quite prominent in the campaign, and one of the roads was Claremont Road, but there were literally 4 houses left and I was quite shocked, what used to be a road, in front of the houses was now little more than a path, and there’s a really high wall - sort of 6 or 7 foot high in front of the houses and then it’s a sheer drop down to the motorway, so the row of houses looks completely out of place now.

*What was your main motivation for fighting to get the road…?*

There were lots of things, partly air pollution, the more roads that are built, the more traffic actually comes to fill them, it’s not a question of building more roads for the same amount of traffic, so air pollution increases a lot when you build new roads, and another thing was that nobody liked to live next to a busy road, and it really affected the local community there, I think there were something like a thousand people that were evicted from their homes that they’d lived in for years and years to make way for the road, so that was a big issue as well, the housing issue.

*Have you got any memories of how Claremont Road was then?*

I do, yes. As I say, I wasn’t familiar with the area before the protest began but I did get quite familiar with Claremont Road. There was one resident who became quite famous during the campaign, Dolly Watson, you’ve probably heard of her, who I believe was 90 something, and she stuck it out to the end. I don’t know if she was evicted, but certainly I think she went into a residential home in the end, but she was one of the quite prominent local residents involved in the campaign. I do have really good memories of Clartemont Road and the sense of community there. Not least because every Sunday afternoon and evening there was a street party there. People had barricaded both ends of the road so no vehicles could drive down it, it was a sort of loop, and all sorts of artistic and creative people had got involved constructing quite arty, quite wacky barricades, and they’d got an old car that had been smashed up and big beds and mattresses. These street parties were absolutely brilliant, really good memories of summer evenings there, watching bands play, I don’t know if you’ve heard of them, there was a band called the Tofu Love Frogs at the time, and they were based in Hackney and they were a kind of folk band and they had a girl who used to play the fiddle and guitars and so on and they always really got the crowd going, they were really good fun, so good memories of the street parties.

*What were the main influences in terms of art and stuff?*

All sorts of things, there was lots of graffiti and there were lots of paintings on the road surface itself, and there was a giant chess board painted on the road and people used to use various things as chess pieces, I can’t remember what, but each square would be a couple of foot square.

*Did you see any violence when you were protesting?*

Quite a lot, unfortunately. The various actions I went on, there were always lots of security guards and lots of police and I don’t know if they actually outnumbered us, or if it just seemed as though they outnumbered us, but they were certainly quite thick on the ground and they did certainly did indulge in lots of rough handling of people.

*What part did you play when you battled to get the road?*

Well I wasn’t one of the main people in the campaign. I was working full time so I couldn’t dedicate that much time to it, but I did come along at weekends when there was a major action happening. One of the things I was involved in was the eviction of one of the houses on Cambridge Heath - I think I’ve got the name wrong - Cambridge Heath Road, they were quite big houses, I took a couple of days off work because people barricaded themselves into the house when it was due for demolition and we spent the evening on the first or second floor and in the morning we barricaded - I think people somehow destroyed the stairs because we knew people were coming in, so we barricaded ourselves into the top floor and then went up onto the roof, and I remember it was quite frightening because it was a row of terraced houses and the bulldozers came in to demolish some of the others which didn’t have any protesters in, but it was shaking the house that we were in, the bucket on the bulldozer, hitting the house so I was quite scared, I have to confess.

*Was that the house that Patsy and Rebecca Lush were locked onto the washing machine downstairs.*

I think it was, it’s all a bit hazy now in terms of remembering who was there, I wasn’t in the same place as them, even if it was the same house, because I was on the roof and they were in the basement. But I do remember, I think it got to mid afternoon and I decided enough was enough because sometimes your stamina goes and I actually left the house. People were leaving in ones and twos as they’d had enough. Only a few people stayed that night as well on the roof, but I got arrested just for being there, it wasn’t very pleasant.

*What was being arrested like?*

Not great! I remember there was a police woman escorting me along the road, off the premises, away from the house, but I was quite incensed by this, because she got me by the arm and was marching me along, when I’d actually elected myself to leave the house, so I objected to that and I do remember being a bit mouthy, so that’s probably why she nicked me.

*Do you have any regrets?*

Only that I wasn’t able to get more involved actually, because I wholeheartedly believe in the cause. But it was a question of balance, and unfortunately I had to go to work rather than spend a lot more time there.

*Did you make any friends during the protest?*

Yes, I did actually. More people I’ve lost contact with, but certainly there were a lot of really nice, likeminded people that were quite sound and there was a little contingent of us from Edmonton that used to go along, particularly to the street parties, as well as the protests, so that strengthened existing friendships as well.

*What really brought your attention to it, and made you think you had to fight for it?*

Good question. Like I say, it just naturally led on from the protests that I’d already been involved in, in terms of general environmental campaigning, for cyclists and against the destruction of Twyford Down which was really big and in the news at the time. My feeling was we wouldn’t actually win the battle against the M11 because there was so much money, so many resources being spent on it, and I think we knew the road would be built, no matter what we did, but we did want to get under the skin of the politicians; we did want to cost them money, I do believe that through the efforts of people involved in those two campaigns and many others, that we actually stopped further roads being built and we caused a change in government policy, which has lasted about 20 years. Unfortunately they’re talking about resurrecting the road building programme now. But I think we staved it off for 20 or 30 years.

*Do you go back there now?*

I don’t really have reason to actually. Occasionally I pass through Leyton or Leytonstone, but not really, though having said that, when I first moved to Hackney we used to have a van so we used to drive down that part of the M11 and I didn’t recognise it when I moved here. It’s a huge busy road now while it used to be houses. It’s quite shocking when I think about it, but I was most shocked when I did the census collecting job and I was walking round some of the streets there, especially Claremont Road itself, where there’s hardly anything left.

*Did you come across any people that you remembered?*

No. I did a certain amount of door-knocking to get the census returned, but they were mainly young people, not people that I recognised.

*And are you involved in any environmental stuff now?*

I’m involved in local campaigns now in Hackney, to do with Hackney Marshes and at the moment the council are planning on building a cricket pavilion on existing open green space, there’s a pavilion there at the moment and its very dilapidated and does need replacing and I don’t think anybody’s arguing against that, but it’s the sheer size of the one they’re planning. We went to a public enquiry in June 2015 to do with the pavilion and two associated car parks. We lost the appeal against the pavilion, but we did win against one of the car parks, so it was time well spent.

*Overall, are you proud of your experience and do you look back on it…*

Definitely. Despite the violence and various incidents, I don’t regret my part in it. I made some good friends at the time and I think it was very worthwhile.

*Can you just say something about the other people that were involved in the campaign?*

There were all sorts of people, there were people who were quite creative, that made the campaign quite visible, by doing graffiti, by doing artwork, posters to publicise the various actions that went on, and there were a lot of very committed environmental campaigners that really knew their stuff, very well educated people and lots of people that were really new to campaigning, that just had a huge learning experience ahead of them, like learning to deal with the media and answer questions coherently, we all had do learn best tactics. Non-violent direct action was the order of the day, because nobody wanted to see violence escalating, and as somebody quite eloquently put it, they do violence better than we do, so we knew we’d come off worse and it doesn’t do a campaign any favours if you come across all violent, you need to win over the hearts and minds of people in the local area, and decision makers as well. You’ll have heard about the chestnut tree, I wasn’t involved in vigils there, but it became really famous, the tree on George Green, it became a postal address for protesters camping in and around the tree. There were messages coming from all around the country to the tree itself, so that was quite a good focal point.

*Is there anything that we haven’t asked you that it’s important to mention?*

Not that I can think of.

*You’ve talked about being involved in Claremont Road and the houses on Cambridge Park Road -*

That’s it, Cambridge Park Road -

*Were they the main areas you were involved in?*

Yeah, they were big actions. A lot of the time there wasn’t much going on, so we would visit at weekends and I remember being taken to what was called The Last House, which was on Fillibrooke Road, and it was quite a sight actually, it was quite a big house left completely on its own. I think it was four stories, someone had put up a tower, it was a flat roof and someone had put up a tower with lots of records on it as a sort of instillation and the tower also had the function of being something people could climb up when it came to it at the last minute so the bailiffs couldn’t get them. I remember going up there and looking down. I’m not the best person with heights. I remember going up and looking down and thinking I’m 4 floors up and there’s the edge. It was nice to visit when there was nothing going on as well. In situations where you’re campaigning against something quite unpleasant, it’s important to savour the positive experiences as well, like the street parties and the music that went on. It was good.

*Brilliant. Thank you so much.*