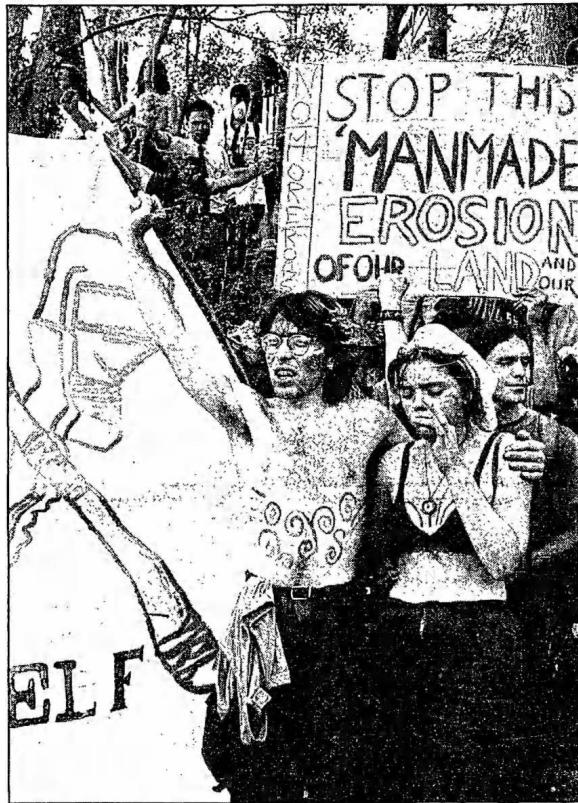


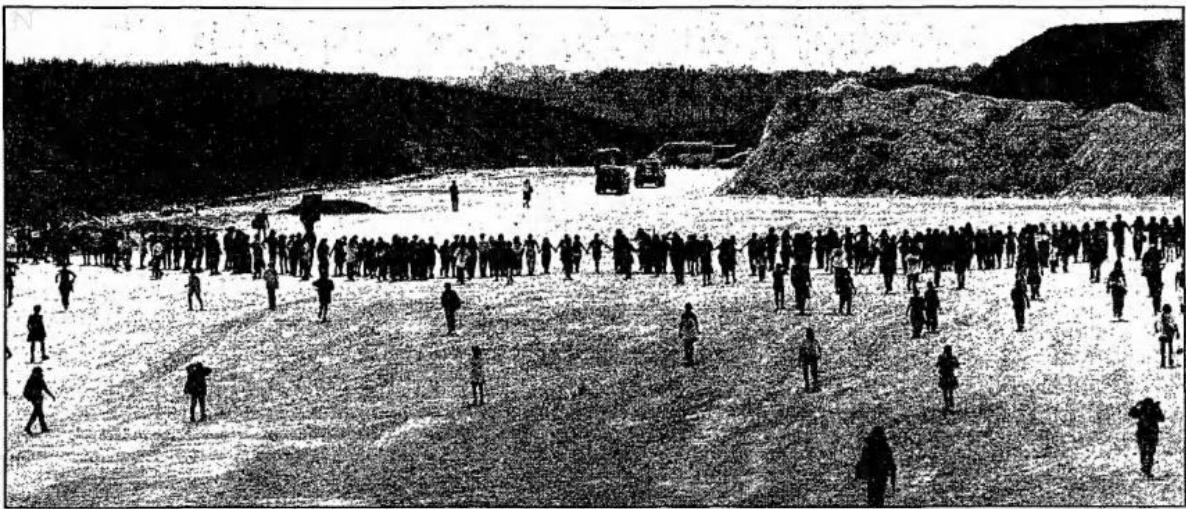
# Explode a condom, save the world.

A rising chorus of dissent contributed to the Government's U-turn on Oxleas Wood this week. JOHN VIDAL meets the Elfs, its self-appointed shock troops. Photographs: ALAN REEVELL

John Vidal



Jul 10, 1993



The battleground of Twyford Down ... the failed anti-road campaign was nonetheless a fertile training ground for eco-militancy. Below, protesters next to a banner of the radical ELF

WHY did a Norwich shop selling mahogany products burn down? Why did a stretch of tarmac go up in flames, destroying a £250,000 earth digger on a deserted motorway site? Why have road constructors found their plant hydraulics sabotaged, cables cut, petrol tanks filled with sugar, and nuts and bolts removed in the night? And why have some of Tarmac's directors had to employ security guards at their homes?

Elves live in woods. Elfs, eco-saboteurs of the Earth Liberation Front, are now running unchecked through Britain. Police are only beginning to grasp the problem they pose. Estimates £2 million damages have been put on their activities and their growing numbers are concerning anyone running a company damaging the environment notably road builders and tropical forest wood importers.

Elfs are the new, young face of British environmental extremism. Protesters until recently have tended to engage in middle debate first, write reports and policy documents second and only take strictly peaceful action when all else fails. Elfs are the environmental equivalent of the Animal Liberation Front with whom they have growing links.

The strange names of the Elfs, often taken from trees, may provoke mirth, but they are being taken seriously following costly, prolonged demonstrations and mass trespasses at Twyford Down. The government's U-turn Oxleas Wood is partly attributable to the rising chorus of dissent from 200 anti-roads groups for whom the Elfs are the self-appointed shock troops.

One such, Alder, telephoned the *Guardian* this week: "There are 20 or more cells now in Britain. They vary in effectiveness. We've been targeting Group 4 Security vans, Shell stations, monkey-wrenching [sabotage].

“There’s a lot of ‘levelling’ going on now but I don’t know about everything. No one advertises what they’ve done or claims responsibility. We are deep green but we support the miners, the railwaymen, communities. We are not eco-fascists or middle-class commuters.

“Violence to property,” says Alder, is “a form of liberation.” He’s echoed throughout Do or Die, a magazine produced haphazardly by several Earth First! groups. Earth First! is a legal direct action environment “group” that has spilled over, in name at least, from the US. It has no membership, leadership, structure or constitution be “neither condoning nor condemning” violence. In the last year more than 30 groups have set up, the majority in cities.

Do or Die is a mix of letters, diatribes on multinationals and reports of “carth rapes” in Britain, Canada and the Third World. There are questions and advice on how to construct exploding condoms and seed bombs, animal lib rants and messages from the US. It is not without humour: there are profuse apologies for the first edition being late “owing to the layout staff being chained to bulldozers at Twyford Down”.

The Hill Elfin writes: “A good way of fucking up diesel engines is to put zinc filings into it [sic]. If you can’t find those use water or sugar. Dismantling the sump is a good tactic; it really tears up the engine.”

To understand Elfs it is necessary to understand the British version of Earth First!, out of which they grew. The first group, set up in London two years ago, demonstrated vociferously at the London G7 conference, and has in the past 18 months mushroomed, picking up students, travellers, disaffected environmentalists and many who despise the rhetoric but no action of the blue chip groups they see moving too close to a government which outmanoeuvres them at will.

Earth First! was not welcomed by the hierarchical, middle-class environment “movement”. Respectable groups panicked and rushed to distance themselves from press reports of US-style “eco-terrorists”. In fact the British Earth First! was only involved in peaceful direct actions. Nevertheless, Friends of the Earth advised its members not to have anything to do with it, believing it would bring them into disrepute. Greenpeace was wary.

But Earth First! has easily exploited desires in British youth for more environmental direct action. By January they were disrupting and peacefully invading banks, timber yards, paper makers and companies’ annual meetings and, along the way, attracting the attention of an over-reacting constabulary who would often send 200 people to police fewer than 75 protesters doing little more than waving banners.

MANY Earth Firsters say their telephone lines are now tapped, believe they are followed, know they are photographed on actions. Just as the group neither condemns nor condones violence, the police neither confirm nor deny this.

George Marshall, who helped set up the first Earth First! group in London and has coordinated some of their actions, says (speaking personally because Rule 1 in EF is that no one can speak for others): “It was recognised that some people wanted to make their own protests. At the first Brighton gathering in February last year, no

consensus came out of the debate on the benefits of monkey-wrenching. Some people were concerned, others believed it was the essence of radical direct action.

“Now [the Elfs] are working in isolation, inventing their own protests and actions. We hear some of what has been done but don’t ask questions. There’s an awful lot of hatswapping but making links between Earth First! in Britain and Elfs is worrying. We say there’s a place for monkeywrenching in a campaign but we neither condemn nor condone it.”

Some Earth Firsters, says Marshall, Elfs, not all Elfs are Earth Firsters and no one knows who is doing what, when or to whom. To further complicate matters, Animal Lib extremists are now doing their own eco-sabotage. As one says: “What’s the point of releasing animals into a world of concrete? The intellectual link between the two creeds is now being made.”

But unlike Animal Lib, which courts publicity, Elf “cells”, for security reasons, work without informing the press and do not claim responsibility for actions. “We have learnt from the ALF experience,” says one. “They are careless, have made mistakes. The surest way to be done for conspiracy or to attract surveillance or infiltrators is to seek attention.”

“To an Elf a CAT [earth mover] is just a large chunk of metal, probably from somewhere like Papua New Guinea,” says Elm. “If you monkey wrench it, you’re returning it. Those machines have no right to exist, they’ve been turned into monsters. There’s a philosophical jump between seeing violence as the last step to what we see should be the first. It is the only option, the first option.”

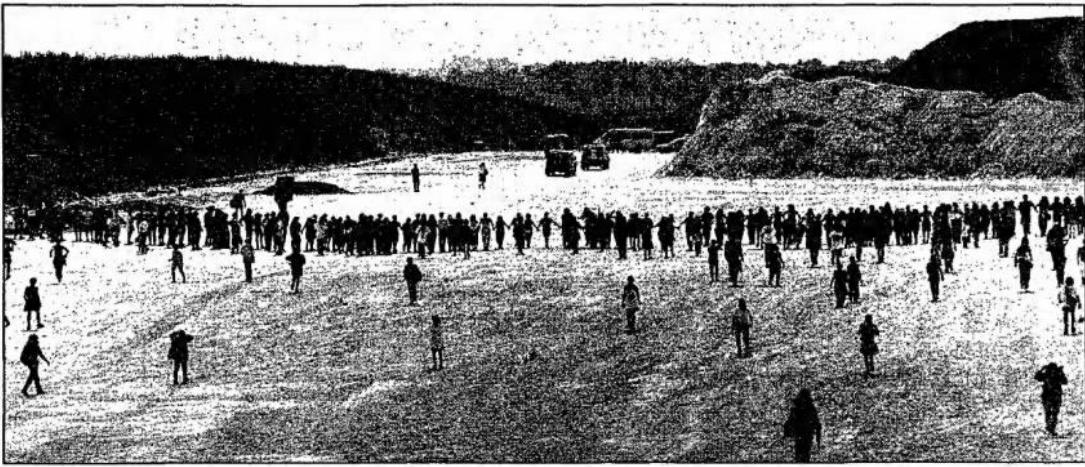
ELM is young, wildly idealistic and sharp. He slept rough for years and is now wholly opposed to the industrial society. He’s been arrested several times but no charges have been pressed. He has never been to school, yet liberally quotes modern European and American philosophers, and identifies with human rights groups, communities, grassroot campaigns and the English traditions of rural dissent. “You can link the Peasants Revolt, the Levellers, the Diggers, the Luddites and now the present day Travellers [to whom he was born].

“We look back to pre-Industrial Revolution, to rebellious agricultural movements. Elfs see themselves as a spoke in the wheel of an international civil dissent movement that draws in the Chipko women in India, the Narmada dam protesters, European groups and environmental and human rights activists.”

In the romantic, often symbolic Elf-world, many actions are done on “Earth Nights” sometimes semi-coordinated across continents and coinciding with solstices and planetary conjunctions. The next is on August 1. Twyford Down, say many, was a training ground for eco-militancy. The Donga tribe of “indigenous” Englanders here occupied Department of Transport land, were attacked by Group 4 security guards and, they claim, the police. They fought back. Others joined them and were radicalised.

“The Establishment is so used to an empire, but the only empire it has left is the public and it’s riding roughshod over it,” a west country Elf. “There is a terrible, growing dissent in the land and people are being driven to the edge of society. When

they get there they find it rather attractive. As the authorities have sown, so are we reaping.”



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**W**HAT did a Norwich Alder, "a born of litigation," think selling man-hogany products burn down? Why did a stretch of tarmac go up in flames, destroying a £200,000 oil rigger on a decommissioned railway site? Why have road constructors found their plant hydraulics sabotaged, cables cut, petrol tanks filled with sugar, and nuts and bolts removed at night? And why have some of Tarmac's directors had to employ security guards at their homes?

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The strange names of the Elves, often taken from trees, may provoke mirth, but they are being used to sustain a following costs: prolonged demonstrations and mass trespasses at Twyford Down. The government's U-turn on Oxleas Wood is partly attributable to the intense direct action from 200 anti-roads groups — for whom the Elves are the self-appointed shock troops.

One such, Alder, telephoned the *Guardian* this week: "There are 20 or 30 of us in Britain. They vary in effectiveness. We've been targeting Group 4 Security vans, Shell stations, monkey-wrenching [sabotaging].

"There's a lot of 'levelling' going on now but I don't know about everything. No one advertises what they've done or claims responsibility. We are deep green, we are environmentalists, the railwaymen, communities. We are not eco-fascists or middle-class consumers."

"Violence to property," says

Alder, "is a born of litigation." His e-chuch throughout Do or Die, a magazine produced haphazardly by several Earth First! groups. Earth First! is a legal direct action environmental group that has split off from its namesake, at least, from the US. It has no membership, leadership, structure or constitution beyond "neither condoning nor condemning" violence. In the last year more than 30 groups have set up, the majority in cities.

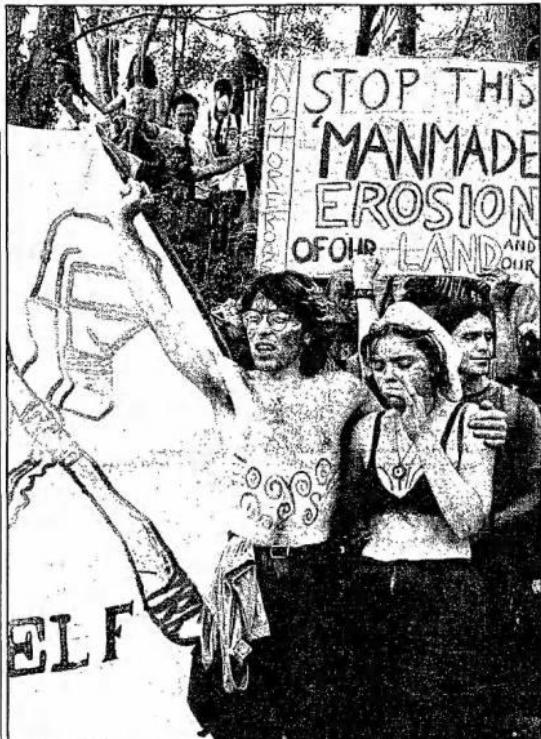
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annual meetings and, along the way, attracting the attention of an over-reacting constabulary who were often sent 100 police to patrol less than 75 protesters doing little more than waving banners.

**M**ANY Earth First!ers say their telephone lines are now tapped, believe they are followed, know they are photographed and accused of being a group neither condoning nor condoning violence, the police neither confirm nor deny this. George Marshall, who helped set up the first Earth First! group in London and has co-

ordinated some of their actions, says (speaking personally because Rule 1 is ELF) that "no one can speak for me". He emphasised that some people wanted to make their own protests. At the first Brighton gathering in February last year, no one came out of the doors on the benefit of monkey-wrenching. Some people were concerned, others believed it was the essence of radical direct action.

Others were working in isolation, inventing their own protests and actions. We hear some of what has been done but don't ask questions. There's an awful lot of hat-swapping but making links be-

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The Guardian, Jul 10, 1993, page 27. <[www.newspapers.com/image/259899904](http://www.newspapers.com/image/259899904)>

**www.thetedkarchive.com**