

What ever happened to the eco-warriors?

They were Middle Englands secret army — the New Agers defending the green belt. Now, they have fresh battles to fight, but they never really went away.

Mark Palmer

Feb 28, 2004

Ben Hartley is thinking of calling a “site meeting”. For weeks, it’s bugged him that no one with access to wheels has bothered to take the bags of empty cans and bottles to the recycling depot a few miles down the valley in Bakewell. Admittedly, recycling has dropped a notch or two on the list of priorities now that eviction is staring the camp’s inhabitants in the face, but, even so, the sight of bulging plastic bags lying at the side of the road isn’t helping the cause. Cleanliness is next to public-relations godliness when you’re on the eco-warrior front line.

“Everyone’s busy preparing the defences.” says Hartley, a 29-year-old university graduate from Manchester, who has lived in a tree in the Peak District National Park for nearly four years. “We don’t know when the bailiffs will appear, but we have no plans to leave. It’s going to take a long time to get us out and will cost a lot of money. We’re not scared, but it’s not something we are looking forward to.”

Depending on whom you believe, there are any thing between 30 to 100 protesters holed up near Stanton Moor on a 38-acre site high above the A6 in the hamlet of Stanton Lees, near Matlock.

Some, like Hartley and two women known simply as Clover and Toxic, have been there ever since the Stancliffe Stone company — a subsidiary of Marshalls plc - announced plans to reopen the dormant Endcliffe and Lees Cross quarries.

Of particular concern to the protesters is the impact any new quarrying will have on the ambience surrounding the nearby Nine Laches stone circle, which is thought to have been erected in 1500BC and today is visited by more than 40,000 people a year. A national park, a pagan monument and a small forest with its own spring of fresh water is a heady mix for the 21st-century eco-warrior. Throw in a threat of eviction and it spells trouble. Certainly, the population at what is known as Nine Ladies Camp will swell in the next few weeks as the battle of Stanton Moor reaches its climax.

Expect something similar near Stonehenge. Wiltshire, as positions harden over a proposed £192 million road scheme aimed at speeding up traffic near the Neolithic monument. Already, feelings are running high — as they always do whenever anyone suggests anything at all at Stonehenge. It may be the place where New Age devotees flock for the summer solstice, but it’s also the site of perennial old-world bickering of the kind in which the English seem to specialise.

The Highways Agency and English Heritage, the body responsible for the World Heritage Site, plans to build a 1.3 mile tunnel under the stones and reroute the busy A303. The National Trust, supported by among others, the Council for British Archaeology, the Campaign to Protect Rural England. Friends of the Earth and several disparate pagan groups, want the tunnel to be more than double the proposed length so that the immediate landscape can be better protected. A major anxiety is the siting of one of the entrances to the tunnel, which will pass within a few yards of an ancient barrow.

When the public inquiry into the scheme opened amid much fanfare two weeks ago in Salisbury’s Guildhall. Paul Hamblin, CPRE’s head of transport policy, said the tunnel would be like an “alien intrusion” into an area that rivals the Great Pyramid at Giza and the Great Wall of China. He may be right. But the proposals will trigger an

alien intrusion of a very different kind when the hardcore arrive in the form of Hartley. Clover. Toxic and an assortment of their fellow warriors.

“Middle England may look down their noses at these people, but very often they actually end up lending their support by sending money, equipment and food.” said Paul de Zylva. the head of Friends of the Earth in England. “Often, the eco-warriors serve as Middle England’s secret army and what we are seeing now is a new generation of people who are saying to themselves: ‘Look, we’ve tried to influence the debate in a sensible way. but now it’s time to take a more radical approach.’”

In other words. Swampy, who tunneled his way to fame — but not fortune — during the Newbury by-pass and Manchester airport protests — is back. And back with a vengeance. Whether it be Stanton Moor in Derbyshire or Dibden Bay in Hampshire — where a private company. Associated British Ports, wants to build a 500-acre port on the New Forest side of Southampton Water — or the planned dual carriageway through the Blackdown Hills on the Somerset-Devon border, or the Thames Gateway Bridge in east London (before his election Mayor Ken Livingstone said he would have his dead body placed in the first block of concrete before a new bridge was built’, but now. in office, he has given his approval as long as any new crossing will aid economic regeneration), there is no shortage of protesters prepared to throw themselves in front of the bulldozers. Incidentally. Swampy himself — real name Daniel Hooper — shuns media contact these days, although he is said to have continued with his peripatetic eco-warrior life and has been seen at such events as GM crop protests.

De Zylva lays the blame firmly at the door of 10 Downing Street. “The Government is still obsessed with pouring concrete — new airports, out-of-town shopping centres, housing developments, you name it. And when the normal decision-making methods fail to deliver, it’s time to get off your backside and do something about it. We are very sympathetic to people who take practical action to show up the absurdity of some of our planning laws.”

So is the CPRE — particularly in the Stanton Moor case. “If it weren’t for the eco-warriors. the quarrying would have started already.” said Stephanie Woodhouse, a CPRE spokeswoman for the Peak District. “We applaud them for what they are doing. OK. they might not wash very much and they may look a bit strange, but we have had nothing but cordial relations with them.”

Which is not everyone’s experience. Locals living near the Xi ne Ladies Camp are divided. Jonathan Reid, who lives in Stanton in Peak and is a former chairman of the parish council, said that he and his wife. Sue. bought their house around the same time as the arrival of the protesters.

“At first, we were sympathetic and still today we would rather there was no quarrying, but these people have caused nothing but trouble and we want rid of them.” said Mr Reid. “We are frightened of going anywhere near the camp because of the intimidation we receive. If you accept their point of view, you are fine, but if you oppose them, you are in for a lot of trouble.”

Mr Reid alleges that he found human excrement in his drive one morning shortly after he had spoken out against the eco-warriors. He also claims that shops have suffered from “disgraceful” behaviour. “They have been known to go in and spit on food and then say it’s been soiled so they can get it free. I’ve experienced them sitting at the war memorial drinking Special Brew and abusing passers-by. and recently they invaded a school bus and demanded to be taken from Bakewell back to the village.” said Mr Reid. “I can’t forgive them for what they’ve done to my friends and neighbours.”

Another resident of Stanton in Peak, who asked not be identified, described the camp’s residents as “dirty spongers who expect to be looked after by the taxpayer”. She claims that a common tactic of the protesters was to stop passing cars by letting their dogs wander out into the road.

“Then they come up to you and curse and swear and threaten you.” she said. “I’ve seen some rough types over the years, but never anything like them. There may be one or two genuine environmentalists in there, but there are also a lot of riff-raff hangers-on. Most of them are collecting social security and I just don’t see why their lives should be subsidised. The only thing they’re giving others is their lice.”

Hartley, Clover and Toxic are appalled by the allegations made against their community. “We are intelligent, hardworking people.” said Hartley. “I don’t like to accuse people of lying, but some of the things said about us are so far from the truth. We have morals and codes of behaviour. I feel I’ve become a better person while living here. I’ve grown up a lot and realise what I want to do with my life. This is the heart of England and one of the oldest national parks in the world. I want to protect it and make sure it remains special.”

Technically, the eco-warriors at Stanton Moor are squatters. But to describe them as such does not do justice to the elaborate homes and communal areas they have created for themselves. Many of the tree-houses are more than 60ft from the ground — a deliberate ploy to make life difficult when the bailiffs come to call. There is also a “Healing Space” where you can go to read or meditate; a washing area, replete with a steel bath under which members of the camp light a fire to warm the water (a bath can take more than two hours to prepare) and several communal “spaces” where food is cooked, songs sung, beer drunk.

Almost all the tree-houses are linked by rope walkways and experienced tunnellers have opened up a series of underground hiding places, some deep within the stone cavities left from when quarrying was suspended more than 50 years ago. The camp even has its own postal address and receives regular deliveries. Getting rid of these modern-day earth people won’t be easy and a quick walk around the camp leaves you with the impression of a well-oiled organisation.

“We are not affiliated to any group or organisation and there is no hierarchy.” said Hartley, adjusting his yellow cap and rolling a cigarette. “If there is an issue to be settled, then anyone can call a site meeting and at that moment he or she is listened to by everyone else. There is no obligation for people to work, but it’s amazing the way everyone starts to contribute something. Even if someone has no special expertise,

they won't be asked to leave, especially if they're pleasant and make an effort to keep people's spirits up."

Spirits have not always been good. Three people associated with the camp have died — one as a result of a fire, one who drowned while crossing a nearby river and one who fell from a quarried cliff-face during the night.

Toxic, 30, once worked for the Wildlife Trust, in Sheffield. She said living the life of an eco-warrior gives her the chance to practise what she preaches. "People throw things out and we use them to build our homes. I could go and get a normal job. but I'd rather give my time freely than get paid for it. I was always going on at my parents about the environment and always wanted to live close to the natural world."

Clover, 29, has planted daffodils, crocuses and hyacinths in boxes outside her two-storey dwelling. Pieces of carpet found on skips are laid on the floor and the roof is sturdy — and almost waterproof. "My brother came to visit and he loved it," said Clover, whose matted blonde hair sticks out at sharp angles from her head. "Then my mother turned up and was gobsmacked by what we have achieved. I think she's really proud of what I'm doing."

Like many of her fellow eco-warriors. Clover's face is pierced and she wears a ring through her nose. From time to time, she is offered a bath in the homes of locals opposed to reopening the quarries. In summer, she works as a fruit-picker and last year earned money as a litter-picker at the Glastonbury Festival. But inquiries about other forms of income support are brushed aside -and Clover is not her real name.

A man called Graham — who doesn't want his surname to be made public -has assembled the most sophisticated house in the camp, complete with sealed windows, a corrugated iron roof and wood-burner. On a home-made shelf down one side of the shack are books by John Steinbeck and Irvine Welsh. Paul Vallely's Promised Lands is there, too. beside a thick tome called Wales Through The Ages.

"This is a way of life that I have chosen — and I prefer it." said Graham. "I've lived on the road for a number of years and now I'm here to save this beautiful spot. You might think it can get cold in winter, but I am used to living in a small space that can heat up quickly. What we are doing is not heroic. We are a community of people with a common cause."

Trouble is that the land doesn't belong to them. It is owned by Lord Edward Manners, from Haddon Hall in Bakewell, and leased to Stancliffe Stone. Permission for quarrying was granted in the 1950s and although the Peak District National Park Authority is lukewarm about Stancliffe Stone's plans — and is assessing the environmental impact of opening the Endcliffe and Lees Cross Quarries -there is little it can do to prevent it without the intervention of a higher authority.

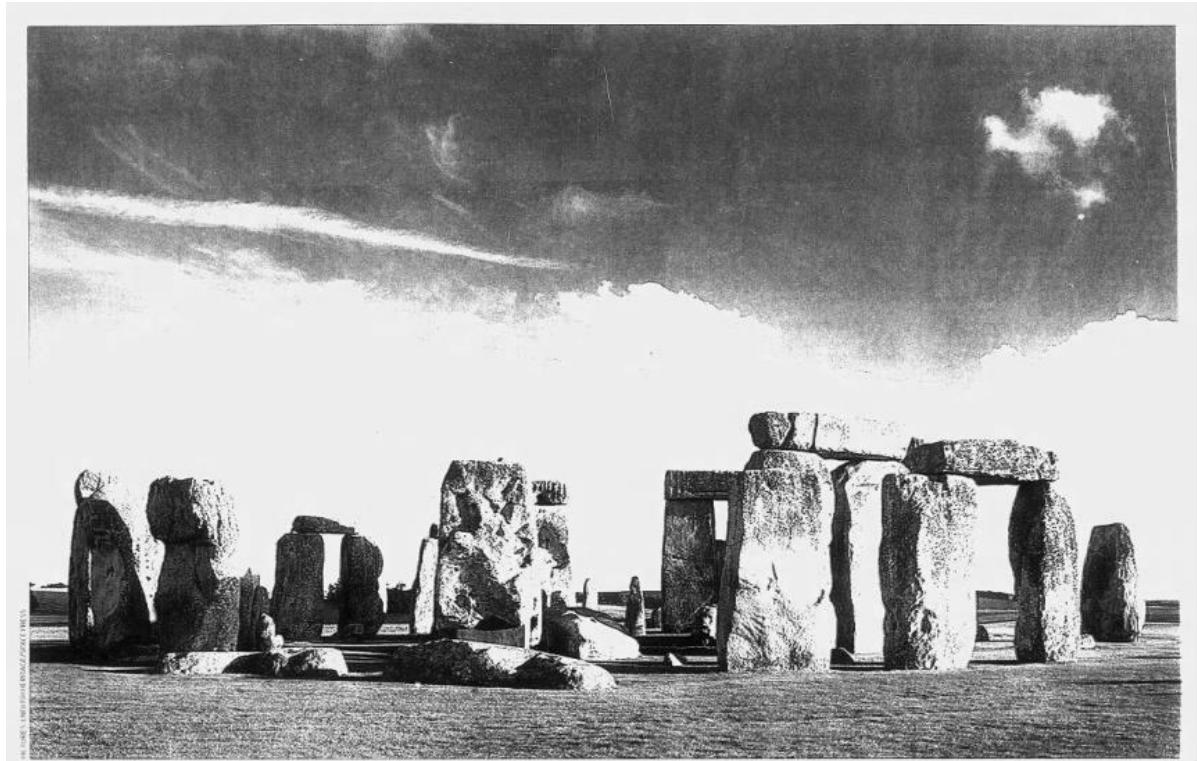
CPRE's favoured option is for the Government to step in and compensate Stancliffe Stone and Lord Edward Manners for the money they would make from quarrying — but no one is holding his breath. Stancliffe's lease on the land runs until 2029, during which time the company expects to extract more than three million tons of stone. The licence to quarry runs until 2042.

“The fact is that the squatters are there illegally.” said Stancliffe’s managing director, Brian Wallace. “Their structures are in breach of planning regulations and their presence is not conducive to helping the wildlife. It’s sad that they have not chosen to make their voices heard in a normal way. In our report, we have taken into account the issue of noise, dust, traffic and general impact on the environment and found that it is absolutely minimal.”

Try telling that to Geoff and Julie Henson, who live within 100 yards of the dormant quarries and head a local group fighting Stancliffe’s plans. “They have even had the nerve to suggest that the vista will be improved by the quarrying.” said Mrs Henson, a retired teacher. “I admire the eco-warriors for their dedication. They have never given us any hassle. Yes, the camp has become a bit of a mess, but it’s nothing compared to the mess that will be made once the quarry opens.”

Direct action to save the green belt is now a firm part of our culture. It may not always bring the result the protesters want, but it is becoming an increasingly acceptable form of rebellion. Dr Mark McDermott, a lecturer at the University of East London, who specialises in the study of non-conformity, attributes this development to a general perception of the world in the grip of big business and cultures where regimented behaviour is expected.

“We have also had four decades of mass consumerism and a backlash is inevitable.” said Dr McDermott. “You only have to walk into any large superstore and see row upon row of plastic rubbish to understand why people are keen to find an alternative way of living. In this country, we have always valued individuality and it might be that individuality is seen to be under threat. What’s interesting about people such as the eco-warriors is that they are choosing to find their place in society as individuals by forming interdependent communities. They have made a conscious decision to forge closer ties with other people, rather than being lairds of their own estates. It’s a significant development and will be interesting to see how long it lasts.”



Disputed territory: Stonehenge.



Swampy



Comrades in arms: protesters (from left) Toxic, Clover and Ben at their camp at Stanton Moor in the Peak District.



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"Everyone's busy preparing the defenses," says Billie, a 29-year-old university graduate from Mandeville, who has been a park ranger for the National Park Service for nearly four years. "We don't know when the battalions will appear, but we have no plans to leave. It's going to take a long time to get us out and will cost a lot of money. We're not scared, but it's not something we are looking forward to."

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Left: Swampy

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