

The **vigil** West Colliery 1993

Women Against Pit Closures

Vane Tempest Colliery 1993



The story of a campaign

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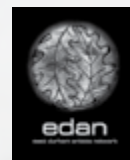
Adam Sutherland, Arts Officer of Easington District Council in 1994 gave initial support. Linda France helped enormously in 1994 with structuring and editing the raw material. Louise Harrington of Heritage Coast Partnership offered the opportunity to bring the project to fruition in 2016.

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Heritage Coast
Sunderland-Durham-Hartlepool



Foreword



The Vane Tempest Women's Vigil in Seaham was organised in response to the Tory Government announcement in October 1992 that it intended closing 31 pits, including Vane Tempest Colliery. The campaign lasted between January and June 1993 when Vane Tempest formally closed. It had become clear that the voices of those who wished to save the mining industry in the UK were not to be heard.

The women who had been involved in the Vigil had a final day on their caravan at Durham Gala in July 1993. They continued to meet as a group for a number of weeks afterwards to discuss the possibility of further action. Although there remained issues of concern around the question of mining, in particular the threat to local water supplies if pumping operations in the abandoned pits were to cease, the women decided that others were in a better position to deal with these issues than they were. So the Vigil group disbanded.

At the final meeting, it was agreed that a subgroup should be charged with recording the Vigil by publishing a booklet of words and images that would represent the activities and the feelings of those involved. That subgroup was supported by the Arts Officer of Easington District Council who employed the poet Linda France to help with the process of organising and editing the material. Despite bringing the text almost to publication stage, everyday life and cares, people's jobs, and the pressures of work took over and eventually the project was more or less abandoned.

The work lay dormant for twenty years. Then in 2015, East Durham Artists' Network organised an exhibition of words and images at the Art Block in Seaham to commemorate the 30 year anniversary of the ending of the Miners' Strike. The files of materials gathered by the women

during the Vane Tempest Vigil were brought out for public viewing as part of this exhibition. Amongst those files was the draft of the booklet which drew the attention of representatives of Heritage Coast Partnership who were about to embark on a local 'Memories' project. Thus the Vane Tempest venture was reawakened.

This version of the booklet has been produced as part of the 'Memories' project, thanks to Heritage Coast Partnership. The text is based substantially upon the work undertaken by the original sub-group but some editing has been undertaken to acknowledge the passage of time, and also to take advantage of the options made available by advances in e-publishing. Mainly this has affected the way the story is told and the choice of photographs used in illustration. The words which the women of the Vigil submitted have been left unedited, and as they appeared in the original document. The basic design also follows that agreed by the group with Linda France although there is now a possibility of including colour photographs as there was not in 1994.

Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since the Vane Tempest Vigil. The world that it represented is vanishing. Yet still the memories remain. Sometimes memories are distorted and romanticised. The words of the women in this publication are as they were spoken then. The photographs perhaps speak for themselves.



Miners and their families gather outside Vane Tempest to march in protest against pit closures, 9th January 1993.

Mining disaster 1992: 30,000 lost

On the 13th October 1992, Michael Hesletine, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in John Major's Conservative Government, announced the intention to close 31 pits in the UK. The effect would be the loss of an estimated 31,000 jobs in coal mining.

Coal mining had already suffered the loss of nearly 100 pits since March 1984 when the year-long pit strike had begun, and in East Durham, the only mines remaining open were Easington and Vane Tempest. Electricity privatisation had ultimately sealed the fate for deep-mined British coal and the fears of those concerned for the mining industry were confirmed when the electricity generators announced that they intended purchasing a much reduced tonnage of British coal.

The sheer scale of the closures announced was shocking even to those who were resigned to the run-down of the industry. For East Durham, it meant the immediate loss of 2,335 jobs, not counting those in support industries and those who would be affected by the inevitable loss of disposable income in the region. The closures, signalling the end of mining in County Durham, would have further social implications as people attempted to adjust to redundancy, job hunting, and to the inevitability of changing cultural and social relations.

Two days after the announcement, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) called for a response. Locally, a meeting was held in the Sunderland Empire. Nationally, a lobby of Parliament was planned for 21st October. An NUM delegation met with MPs from all parties.

The Trades Union Congress meanwhile organised a rally for the following Sunday, 25th October. These were the first actions in the campaign to halt the closure programme. No-one knows the exact number of people who converged on the House of Commons on 21st October, and who marched to Hyde Park on the 25th, but estimates range from 100,000 to 240,00 men women and children united in their opposition to the deep mine closure programme.



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As in the 1984-85 strike, women united to fight and oppose the closures. The struggle took various forms and support came from many different areas. I felt very honoured to travel to London to the House of Commons with an NUM delegation from the North East to put their case against the closure to a group of Tory MPs.

Mary Smith

When the announcement was made in October 1992 that production was to cease at 31 collieries, my first reaction was utter disbelief. I knew something had to be done to try to stop this malicious government destroying thousands of jobs and communities with no thought to the catastrophic effect this would have not just on the mining communities but on the country as a whole.

So with the thought of the miners' great strike of 1984-85 still fresh in my memory, I thought what better way to put up some resistance to the colliery closure plan than for women once again to take the lead and stand firm with our men and fight the Coal Board and the Tory Government.

Chris Hardy

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MINERS MARCH ON PARLIAMENT

VANE TEMPEST • EASINGTON • BARNARD CASTLE • EASINGTON • WESTON

WED. OCT. 21.

11:00 am Assemble at Hyde Park
12 noon MARCH through London to Westminster
1:00 pm RALLY Central Hall, Westminster
2:30 pm LOBBY of Parliament

Transport Details

Trains will depart Newcastle at 7:30am, Durham at 7:50am and Darlington at 8:25am to arrive at Kings Cross 11:50am. Return Kings Cross 18:30pm arrive Newcastle 19:30pm. TRAIN TICKETS ARE AVAILABLE FREE OF CHARGE from Lodge Secretaries, The Coal Campaign at Red Hill, Durham and from Unemployed Centres in Newcastle, North Tyneside, Sunderland and Darlington. Phone the Ticket Hot Line for details.

TICKET HOT LINE: 091-384 2257

The Coal Campaign, PO Box 6, Red Hill, Durham DH1 4BB tel 091 384 3515

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On October 13th 1992, the labour movement was up in arms about the miners. By October 14th the country was up in arms about the miners. Shock and anger against the Tories' threat to shut thirty-one pits seemed to touch every one of us. Was this the beginning of the people's revolt against the Tories we had hoped for? All that weekend the phones never stopped ringing and by the Wednesday march in London, Tyneside had four full trains going to London. The Sunday march was even bigger. I was already thinking, 'What part can I play?' What can I do?

Maureen Forster

I had no connection to the colliery, but as an active working member of Sunderland North Labour Party, I felt that supporting the Women Against Pit Closures was imperative. The bitterness and the resentment at the closure of the Sunderland shipyards after 600 years of shipbuilding was still a bitter pill to swallow. The sheer waste of the skills and the talents and energy of our young people was a major blow. We could not afford to lose the pits as well!

Mary Smith

It was important. It was my livelihood. My husband's income contributed to the style in which we lived. Without that income it would drastically change our way of thinking and how we spent and what on - the type of house we lived in, the clothes we bought, how we socialised, the food we ate. The social aspects were crucial. The largest employer in the local area closing meant virtually no opportunity for local employment when my two sons left school. A pit community spirit which had been around for more than a century would die. This made me feel very sad. As the majority of men in the community worked at the pits the decline in money spent in the local area would be dramatic. The knock-on effect would be that local shops would do less trade and because of this close. The morale and the men's self-esteem was bound to diminish. Domestic life for women would change. Lots of women would become bread-winners.

Yvonne Robson

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North East women active in the region's labour and trades union movement were among those outraged by the Tory plans. They joined miners, their families, and local community supporters at the national lobby and the TUC march, and were keen to play their part in helping to organise an effective campaign in opposition to the closures.

The first meeting to begin the process of organising a women's fightback locally was organised for 12th November at the NUM headquarters at Redhills, Durham, linking with women who had remained active since the 1984-85 strike through Durham Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC). Meanwhile, the National Committee of WAPC was discussing the possibility of setting up 'pit camps' outside threatened pits.

The women who attended the steering group meeting at Redhills were very enthusiastic and determined to fight for jobs. They represented many areas in the region—including Durham, Sunderland, Newcastle, Gateshead, Boldon, Tow Law and Blaydon. They began by recognising that they all had different strengths and campaign experience and that these could all be deployed. It was agreed that the local group would try to support the national WAPC. Two women were therefore delegated to go to Sheffield to discover more about the proposed pit camps or 'vigils' and to begin the process of coordinating the response. By the end of the meeting, it had also been agreed to fundraise for the campaign by holding a cake and coffee morning, to set up a women's education session on energy policy and its relationship to pit closures, and that the next meeting should be a training session on public speaking for meetings and rallies.

In early January 1993, the steering group convened a meeting at the Island Club in Seaham with a clear agenda. The aim was to support WAPC by mounting a Women's Vigil at Vane Tempest Pit. In order to do this, the women needed the support of the miners there, and local people. The meeting was open, but in particular, people were invited who had been active in 1984-85 strike as well as those who would be immediately affected by the local pit closures.

Those of us who attended knew what we wanted to do, but needed help in setting up any sort of pit camp. It was the middle of winter, and if a Vigil was to be established, shelter from wind, rain and snow was essential. Help was to come from Easington District Council which was already staging its own campaign against the closure programme. The council provided us with a caravan, heaters, and crucially a portable toilet! The Vane Tempest Vigil could begin.





Women Against Pit Closures

*Women together
Organising ourselves
Making tea and banners
Every day
No to the pit closures.*

*Angry
Getting support
Another march
Increasing strength
Never too late
Speaking at rallies - it's
Too hard on our own.*

*Please come and help us
If you do we could win
The Tories are worried but are*

*Confident again
Look at the future
Open your eyes - understand
See how it works
Understand methods
Reclaim all for the rich
Emotions are rising - we
Snarl at their sneers.*

Gaynor Clarke



HOME NEWS 3 MPs say 10 closed pits must reopen

On 9th January 1993, some of the women participated in an NUM organised march through Seaham. That day, it was agreed in Sheffield that the first Women's Pit Camp would be established outside Markham Main (Armthorpe) on 11th January, to be followed by Grimethorpe and Houghton Main (both Barnsley) on 13th January. Other camps were to be set up at Trentham (Stoke on Trent), Parkside (Merseyside) and Rufford (Nottinghamshire). The Vane Tempest Vigil began 21st January.

The women who agreed to commit themselves to the Vigil were determined, despite the surrounding gloom, and whatever the odds against them, to put up a fight and to do their best to at least impede the pit closure programme. We wanted to demonstrate that the people of this area still had the spirit to stand up to the Tory Government's relentless persecution of miners and mining areas. It seemed that the decision to close so many pits at such short notice was motivated by political spite and greed and that the motivation behind the closures was not only economic but also a desire to break the remaining power of the NUM in order that what remained of the mining industry after the closures could be easily privatised.

There were undoubtedly mixed feelings about mining as an occupation and the harshness of underground labour. Women were only too aware that they had not had to work below ground but that they and their mothers and grandmothers had still spent lifetimes waging war on soot and muck. Nevertheless, for most, mining had been a primary source of income, and women's lives had been affected by mining as well as men's. Those who came from mining families had strong feelings associated with their way of life and the social relationships created by mining. It was clear that the government was not only hitting jobs, but was aiming a direct blow at political values and cultural identities. All the women involved in the Vane Tempest Vigil believed that the pit closure programme was an unnecessary and destructive attack designed to 'finish off' a process that had begun before the 1984-85 strike. Conservative individualism, competition and greed were set against traditional mining values of community, cooperation and sharing.



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We started the Vane Tempest Vigil, 21st January 1993, with high hopes that we might make a difference. Our desire to demonstrate our feelings touched a lot of people and we generated a wave of support locally, nationally and even internationally. Our campaign motto - **Jobs, Community, Environment**, continues to be relevant to political issues today.

It is too easy to think of campaigning as something which is difficult, always serious and always hard work. Maybe this is something to do with the military connotations of the word 'campaign'. We wanted to think about our campaign differently. We wanted people to join in if they agreed with us. No expertise was required. So we tried to make our activities high profile and to organise activities and events that would be appropriate to all sorts of people, including children, the elderly and people not directly associated with mining. We wanted to explore non-violent ways to fight, and to steer clear of physical confrontation.

On the very first Saturday of our Vigil, most of us participated in a march in Sunderland organised by the Coal Campaign and the Northern Regional Labour Party. Others of us stayed on the caravan with the children, ready to welcome guests who might want to visit after the march.

We did indeed receive guests! The caravan in the Vane Tempest Pit Car Park was full to overflowing with people from the Labour Movement nationally as well as locally - including MPs and MEPs and Trades Union leaders. The mood was enthusiastic and positive. There were lots of frank and interesting discussions and everyone was provided with refreshments. All the food and drink had been donated by local people, by Labour Party members and by trade unionists who consistently kept us stocked up throughout the six months of the Vigil.

That Saturday was a good start. It boosted our confidence that what we were doing was meaningful and it demonstrated the importance of having a focal point for the campaign. The caravan was to remain a welcoming and sociable place for interested people to get together, for those who were simply curious to find out more, for NUM officials to meet members to give advice, and for activists to debate politics and discuss tactics.

Jean Spence

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On that bright, cold, frosty day in January when we got together in the Vane Tempest pit yard to have our photo taken by John Garrett for a Guardian feature on the campaign against pit closures, I don't think any of us thought we couldn't win. It was good that the article was in the newspaper the following weekend because it gave a great boost to our optimism about the campaign ahead. Looking back, it was poignant because John Pilger had been there before - in the 1984-5 strike - and there he was, once more reporting on the struggle for jobs.

The miners, their families and local residents were very supportive of our attempt to publicise the Vigil. Nearly all the cars, buses, vans and lorries that passed the pit gates would toot to show their support. I remember one Sunday morning when a group of us were standing at the pit gates; we were absolutely frozen because it was very cold and wet. It was that tiny gesture of toots which lifted our spirits. Even at night, when it was pitch black, the motorists would sound their horns as they passed. This showed us that we were not forgotten.



The Vigil attracted support in terms of donations too. This money helped us to fund our marches, to maintain the everyday costs of the caravan, and, though we didn't know it at the time, eventually to fund the story of our campaign.

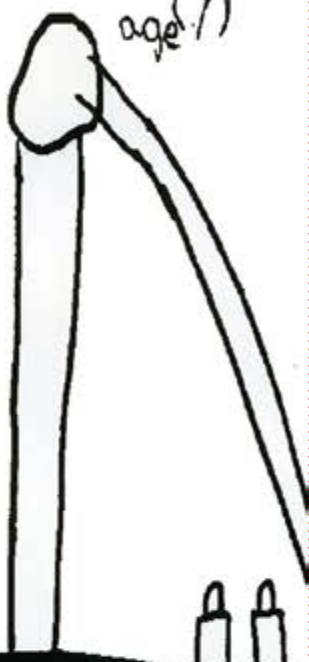
Very early on, financial support for the Vigil came flooding in. Even local children had a whip-round for us. Three youngsters called at the caravan to hand in a £2.50 donation. It must have been their pocket money. Local residents brought along tea, coffee and bread for the women.

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Cynthia Robson

Sack mae Jer not
mineers

by
Andrew
Jeffrey
age (7)



“What’s it got to do with you?”

It wasn’t easy to know what could be done when the pit closures were announced and when someone told me about the caravan I didn’t think for one minute that it would be possible for me to get involved. I have no family connections with the pits and do not live in Seaham or Easington. I was very sensitive about the view that it was not my fight and that to get involved would bring criticism that it wasn’t local women who were doing it. This was even said by friends and colleagues who were basically supportive of the Campaign Against Pit Closures. After talking to lots of people, I was clear that the fight to keep the pits open wasn’t just about the pits, but about challenging the Government. I also realised that some people who claimed to be socialists would think of any excuse not to get actively involved and that their refusal to act shouldn’t stop me.

So I went and was welcomed. I knew some of the women, but most I didn’t. I felt a bit intimidated, especially when any of the men from the pit were there. I felt that at any moment, someone would say, ‘What’s it got to do with you?’ But they never did.

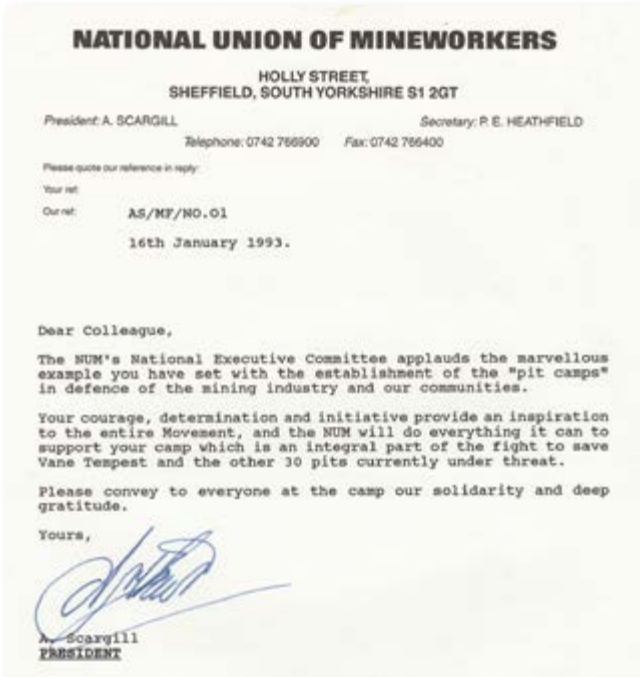
The romanticising of the life and work connected to the pits makes me angry. I know there is no reason why people should be subjected to such dreadful working conditions. I have many friends who have lost fathers and brothers either directly or indirectly due to working in the pits. But for me the issue was about riding roughshod over people for political and financial gain, without a thought for how those families and communities would survive.

Too many people would ask me what was happening and pledge their support in the pub or at work. They didn’t write one letter, visit the caravan, make a donation or go on a march but they applauded what others were doing. That made me angry. We could have had a real impact on the government’s future if more people had done something. But it seemed as if we were doing it on behalf of everyone. And that wasn’t enough. When the pits closed and they said ‘We knew nothing could be done’, they hadn’t even tried.

I was glad to be able to answer all the letters we got. It was great to get so much support from other parts of the country and to know that people in areas with no pits or where the pits were long gone were taking so much trouble to support us. I am really glad that there are so many photographs and that we made the exhibition because now there will always be a record of what we did. I am glad that I can say I tried to do what I could to challenge the government. I am more determined, not less, to fight on other issues. I don’t feel despondent. I feel stronger because of my involvement in the caravan.

Lastly, it gave me a real insight into politics and the Government’s lack of regard for ordinary people. I am grateful to my nine-year-old daughter who often kept me going and raised my spirits when I felt we were getting nowhere.

Gaynor Clarke



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What gave them the right?

It's not difficult to understand why I became involved. Living in Seaham, having a family history of several generations working the mining industry and a husband employed at the last remaining colliery, Vane Tempest, meant I had a vested interest in the fight to save the pits.

However, my involvement was not just one of self interest, although I was very aware the closure would have profound effects on my family and our usual way of life. Gone would be the security of a weekly income; gone would be the routine, sense of purpose and fulfilment that employment gives; but the industrial economic base of our community would also be gone. I felt I wanted to be active, to become involved, to show support for the miners who were fighting so hard to save the pits with real commitment, enthusiasm and passion. We were fighting for what we believed to be right.

How could this government make such a decision without due care or concern for the devastating effect and consequences their actions would have on people's lives, my life, my husband's life, my children's lives and the lives of many of our friends and family? What gave them the right to such an unjust and immoral decision that made no sense to the majority of people? A decision not based on sound economic arguments. A decision based on revenge, power and greed. I can still feel the outrage, the intense feelings of anger and frustration, along with strong feelings of pride for the actions we took.

There were many occasions during the months of the Vigil that I wondered, 'What am I doing this for? Why am I sitting in this caravan? Does anyone care that we are here? And then a visitor would arrive, we would discuss the issues involved and I would be reminded of the importance of our actions and presence.

We were a focal point for people to show their support, we helped to maintain the spirit of the miners who signed on at the pit each day and we were a reminder that the battle was not yet won.

The caravan itself was just one aspect of our campaign. We attended numerous rallies, gave speeches at many events, fundraised at venues up and down the country and corresponded with hundreds of people.

We did make a stand and we did make a difference.

Gail Price

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I'll tell you about preparing for the WAPC march in February 1993, a march aimed at keeping the campaign high profile as a national issue, as well as keeping up the morale of the campaigners. On the Wednesday beforehand, one woman from each of the pit camps met at Kings Cross station late in the afternoon and were all taken to the TUC Education Centre where we were to stay.

After a quick meal, three of us were despatched to speak at the local Labour Party constituency meeting, while the others wrestled with such problems as how many blocks of portaloo to order for Saturday, bearing in mind the several thousands of pounds it would cost.

At half past eleven that evening and each evening afterwards, we were busy planning the next day's programme and allocating tasks. The time passed in a whirl of activity: the national WAPC petition to be delivered to Downing Street; interviews with our own local radio and television stations; a visit to Parliament to lobby Tory MP Elizabeth Peacock on behalf of the campaign, and talks to student and union groups who had requested speakers.

This was how I met George and Anne Wilson. George was born in our area and was Chairman of the Bromley Trades Council, who adopted Vane Tempest during the 1984/85 strike, and who again immediately sprang into action when support was needed. They invited me to talk to the AGM and were pleased to see photographs of the caravan and our activities. Generous donations were given for WAPC.

There were also more practical tasks to be undertaken. A recurring theme was construction of placards. Whenever there was no other planned activity we found ourselves at CHD Headquarters, where we set up a primitive production line with the aim of producing at least 800 placards. Late on Friday afternoon we achieved our target and could rest sore and aching hands. The most popular placard was undoubtedly: NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THE WOMAN!

Saturday—great relief – it wasn't raining. A briefing meeting for hundreds of stewards and then off to the Embankment to meet up with our own groups. It was good to see a big turn-out from the North East among the 30,000 who took part in the demonstration, listened to the speakers and returned home tired, but with renewed enthusiasm to continue the struggle.

Joyce Copland



COAL CHAMPION'S MESSAGE OF HOPE

In the early days, we were learning about each other, our lives, our hopes and our allegiances. The caravan was a great place to sit and discuss issues. We welcomed numerous visitors, many of whom brought letters of support, greetings from other groups and organisations, and donations and gifts to help keep us going. Some people travelled long distances to visit. We had a particularly enjoyable visit from two women fire-fighters from London and a memorable night out on the town with them. Many individuals came simply to pledge their support. The Vane Tempest miners who refused to accept voluntary redundancy and the bribe that went with it came to the pit to 'sign on' every morning and many dropped in afterwards for a coffee and a chat. Sometimes NUM business was conducted in the caravan. It was like a mini community centre at times.

Women who spent nights sleeping at the caravan enjoyed talking into the early hours and planning future strategies and activities. Because of donations, there was plenty of food and drink always available to anyone who stayed. We spent one night furtively decorating the pit with balloons and posters. We maintained a rota so that the caravan would never be empty - especially during the day and we took turns at the pit gates urging passing motorists to toot their support and talking to people who passed. We tried to enjoy ourselves while we occupied the pit yard, but our activities were not frivolous. Their purpose was intended to boost the morale of miners and all those who were concerned about the situation.

One of our group went to London to help with the preparations for a march and rally there and to talk about the pit camps to London-based supporters. The remainder of us followed on the specially chartered train with our children, our sandwiches, and our banner (very basic and home made at first).

Two year-old Jack wore his cloth cap and carried his 'BABIES AGAINST PIT CLOSURES' banner with great solemnity for the whole buggy-ride of the march. Three of our daughters walked at the head of the march carrying the Vane Tempest placard alongside children from other pits that were on the closure list. We sang, chanted and laughed throughout that cold February London day. There still seemed to be a chance of winning and we were starting to form strong bonds. We believed that public opinion was with us and ready to come out in force for us. We estimated that at least 10,000 people attended the rally and joined us on the walk from the Embankment to Hyde Park. Some put the estimates as high as 30,000.

After the speeches and the rally, the children were taken to Trafalgar Square to feed the pigeons before we all met again at Kings Cross for the Return journey.

One week later, on Sunday 14th February, Mr Ralph Jobes, a local caterer who consistently supported the miners, through 1984/5 and after, said he would like to make us a Valentine's lunch. That day, 25 women and children sat down to a three course meal, with wine for the women at the Vane Tempest Miners' Welfare Hall. Mr Jobes made a brief speech in support of our action and stressed how much his outside catering business depended on the pit being open.



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The women's march in early February was brilliant...the train down to London was packed. The organisation by the women was very effective and felt very significant. I remember Margaret Beckett was there, as well as Ann Scargill and the women and children from the other Vigils. It was the first all-women campaign for me and there was a great feeling of camaraderie.

What sticks out in my mind was the singing and joking between the women. We laughed all the way home in the train; Pat Buttle kept us going with her jokes. After the big march, I felt that the miners were more accepting of the effort we put in. It was a great confidence-booster.

Cynthia Robson



Valentine's Day

On Valentine's Day, a few of us turned up at the caravan expecting to spend our time decorating it, writing letters and receiving visitors. As usual on a Sunday there were some children with us who were looking forward to helping and playing in the pit yard. When Mr Jobes turned up to invite us to lunch all that changed. We adjourned to the Vane Tempest Club where we had the meeting that we had arranged before enjoying the lunch. It was good to know that we had such support and a treat to have Sunday dinner made for us and to be waited on!

Jean Spence



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We Need A Speaker

There are seven little words

That filled me with dread

And almost every time we met

I heard them said.
I understand the reasons

And had to agree,
As a group it did give us

More credibility.

Nevertheless those words

I'll remember for all my life

Yes, you've guessed
'We need a speaker:

IT HAS TO BE A
MINER'S WIFE!

Gail Price

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I belong to a mining community—being born and brought up in Seaham, County Durham. Seaham has a history of coal mining dating back over 150 years and many of the male members of my family through five generations have worked in the mining industry. My husband is currently employed at Vane Tempest Colliery - one of the ten pits under immediate threat. A town such as Seaham has at its heart a strong community spirit with family links as firm as ever.

[In 1987] there were three working pits in Seaham, employing three and a half thousand men. There are now several hundred men at the last remaining pit waiting to hear their fate. Male unemployment is significantly higher than the national average, therefore men are only too aware that alternative opportunities for employment just do not exist.

In a time of deep recession and against a backdrop of flawed economic evidence - the government is prepared to spend at least £2 billion to close pits - much of it on redundancy payments and unemployment benefits - sacrificing... the livelihoods of 30,000 miners and their families and at least as many again in supporting industries.

The support for the miners' case is overwhelming...Every day the pressure on the government is growing. We need to strengthen this tremendous movement of political and public support whilst fighting for a viable coal industry.

This country requires a balanced energy policy and that means a thriving coal industry. The 'dash for gas' and the rigged electricity market has been shown for what it is - a cynical manipulation of the so-called market at the expense of a secure long-term energy policy. Our deep-mined coal reserves will sustain our energy needs for the foreseeable future and not just for decades as in the case of gas or oil.

We have got to show them that they are wrong. We have to intensify the campaign to demand that coal is used for our benefit - our jobs - our prosperity.

We have now had the Trade and Industry Select Committee Report signed by Tory and Labour MPs. It did not recommend phasing out expensive nuclear power; halting subsidised coal imports; stopping the dash for gas; and, all important, it did not recommend that all 31 pits stay open. The Report also recommended what they call 'changed working practices' and reform of working hours. This means a 10 hour day; a longer working week; lower safety standards and more lost jobs. What they want is to go back to the working conditions of 100 years ago, conditions that were fought against by our parents, grandparents and great grandparents. All in the name of profit.

However, we are not just fighting for ourselves—we are only too aware that today it is the threat of pit closures for miners and tomorrow it is going to be rail, road, power and health workers and their families who suffer.

This is not an isolated fight, we must work to defend all workers under attack. The pit vigils are a visible sign of the fight against pit closures - they are keeping the community's spirit alive— raising public awareness and encouraging others to fight for jobs— resources and a decent future for ourselves and our children.

Our aim is to be there until 31 pits are saved.

Gail Price (Extract from a Speech delivered at the AGM of North Tyneside TUC, Feb. 1993)

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ALL OUT

On March 5th the miners voted on whether or not to hold a day of action. The days before this were spent by the women making posters and decorating the caravan and pit yard urging the miners to vote 'Yes'. On the day, the vote was 60-40 for a Day of Action to take place April 2nd - the deadline for British Coal employees to accept the enhanced redundancy terms on offer.



The miners were clearly experiencing pressure. Since October, 8,094 miners and 1,000 white collar workers employed in the industry had accepted the offer. To mark the deadline, a march and rally was planned to take place in London and a train was chartered to take people from all over the North East to London on 27th March. The march and rally were particularly memorable both for the numbers of people who took part and for the strength of feeling displayed by people who gathered from all sorts of organisations across the British Isles and abroad.

We visited Parliament to lobby MPs and were offered hospitality by Easington MP, John Cummings.



Meanwhile, back home, the newspapers reported that some 'unknown persons' had dumped a pile of manure at the doorstep of Gateshead East Conservative Office!



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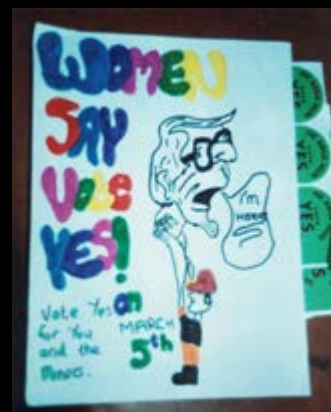
The whole pit yard was festooned with balloons, banners and notices urging the miners to support the union. Then we had the inspiration to plant bulbs and shrubs around the caravan and in the disused bogies at the pit gates.

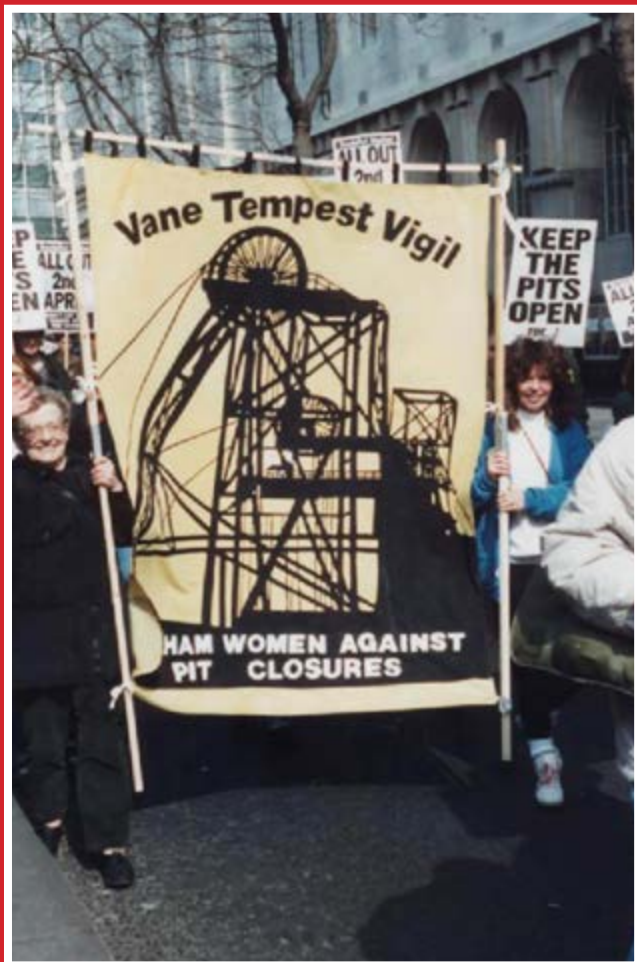
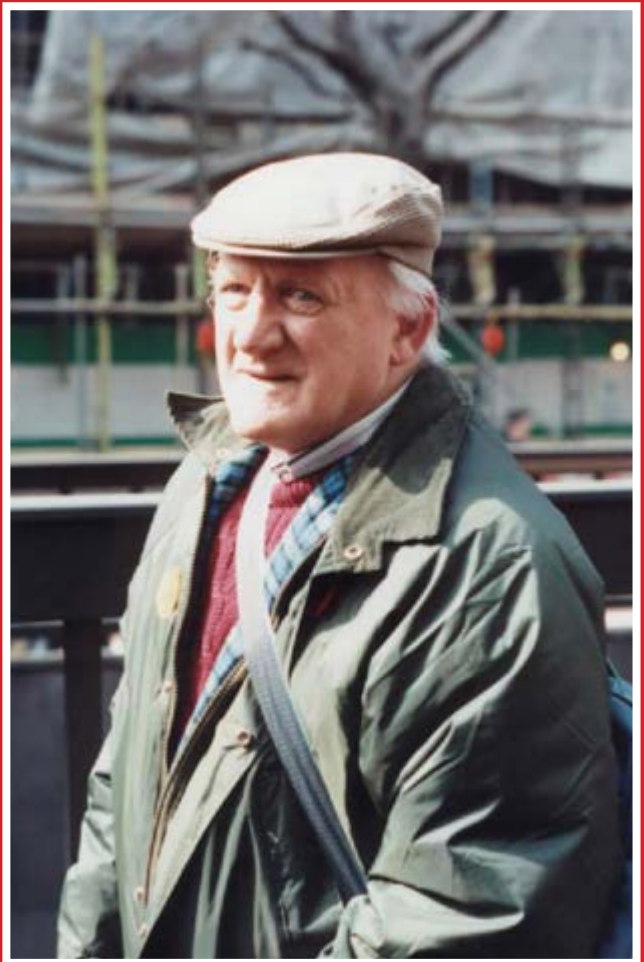
There was a lovely display of crocus, daffodils and shrubs outside the caravan door. We felt that this really signified that we were there to stay.

Perhaps that was why the management took away the bogies one night without telling us!

Cynthia Robson

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Following the vote for the Day of Action, the women on the caravan turned our attention to organising for 8th March - International Women's Day. We considered this an important day to draw attention not only to a women's campaign, but also to the fact that pit closures would have a significant effect on the lives of women.

We wanted our own events to be a celebration of our presence at the pit and so with great enthusiasm we set about organising a barbecue on the beach below the pit site.

Eventually, we realised that optimism was overtaking us and that weather on our beach was unlikely to be kind on 8th March. In addition, Ralph Jobes had offered to provide food for the occasion but said that there would be problems transporting it to the beach. So we decided instead to have a party in the Vane Tempest Hall.

The celebration lasted twelve hours! We invited guests from Trade Unions and Community Organisations, including Women's Aid in North Tyneside. Men women and children came for lunch and food was provided both in the afternoon and in the evening by Ralph Jobes. Numerous performers of note gave their time and talents free of charge. Bob Fox and Benny Graham played for us as well as the local band, Hawthorn. 'Strong Women' came out of retirement to perform their comedy act for us. The Old Rope String Band, who had visited the caravan on the first day of the Vigil came for the evening. The South African Women Singers and the Women May Band, who had also been there on day one, sang for us in the bar after lunch. Vane Tempest hall was packed and we were overwhelmed with all the support.

During March we felt very optimistic. We were now the proud owners of a new banner and we were receiving regular donations and letters of support not only from the UK but across the world. Two women fire-fighters came from London and handed over a donation of £250 and it seemed that the whole Labour Movement was on our side. How could we fail?

Nevertheless, two days before the London march and rally, the Government White Paper 'The Prospect for Coal' went through the House of commons with a majority of 25. This confirmed the intention to close Vane Tempest. Only four Conservative MPs voted against it. MPs were not given the opportunity to vote on the Trade and Industry Select Committee Report which had been published in January and Richard Caborn MP who chaired the Select Committee admitted that this committee had been used by government as a means of pulling the wool over people's eyes. The signs from government were not in our favour.



“

We were not all feminists, but some of us were and we had learned some lessons from the women's movement about organising in a way that enabled every woman involved to play a part and have her say. Some of the best feminist ideas and the best socialist ideas about equality, justice, respect for one another, and collective action, we put into practice and these gave us some of the best moments of the campaign.

Jean Spence



The aim was to 'woman' the camp on a 24 hour basis, inspired by Greenham Common Peace Camp. The political concerns and feminist principles of some of the group encouraged my involvement.

We had a caravan in the pit yard...

...it was something to do with coal

And women's role.

Sue Robson

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“

I felt anger building up at the thought that the Tories were once again out to destroy not just the NUM and the mining communities, but were out to weaken and ultimately try and destroy the resistance of the labour movement.

I thought the upsurge of activity across the country in October 1992 was to be a turning point in the fight against the Tories. But we underestimated, not the Tories and their determination, but the weakness of our own movement's leadership (with some fine exceptions).

It also became clear to me that we women in the WAPC, despite running the vigil at the pit gates and organising support far and wide, were not treated as equals by the NUM. We could be clapped and patted on the back but at no time did the NUM respond to our suggestions for meetings or discussions about the way the campaign should be going.

We as women are still not treated seriously by our brothers in the movement, and we are all, ultimately, the losers.

Margaret Mound

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Strike threat to miners' pay-outs

As the Vigil settled into a routine of occupying the caravan, meeting regularly and arranging events and actions, we soon realised that other struggles and campaigns were linked to ours. A glance at the Visitors' Book showed that people from all over the country, as individuals and as representatives of organisations had made the effort to visit to demonstrate their support. The entries are impressive. One South African woman who was touring Britain, visited because she had heard about the Vigil in the international press before she had arrived in England. Nearer to home, the women fire-fighters from London had reminded us how important it was for women to participate, and to be seen to be doing so, in campaigns to protect jobs and terms and conditions of work for everyone. It was with this in mind that a delegation from the Vigil travelled to Dundee to support Timex workers in their mass demonstrations against a lock-out by their company. They in turn attended the Day of Action Rally in Newcastle on 2nd April.

On the morning of 2nd April, women decorated the Vane Tempest pit yard and the caravan and then went off to join the rally at Grey's Monument.

Ironically, a couple of days earlier British Coal had confirmed that the region's 4,700 miners had completed the financial year with their best ever productivity rate of 4.17 tons per man-shift. But British Coal was capturing the headlines with less positive figures too. By the end of April, it would be reported that 10,000 miners had accepted redundancy terms. The NUM responded with its own study of the cost of closures and the viability and profitability of the pits.

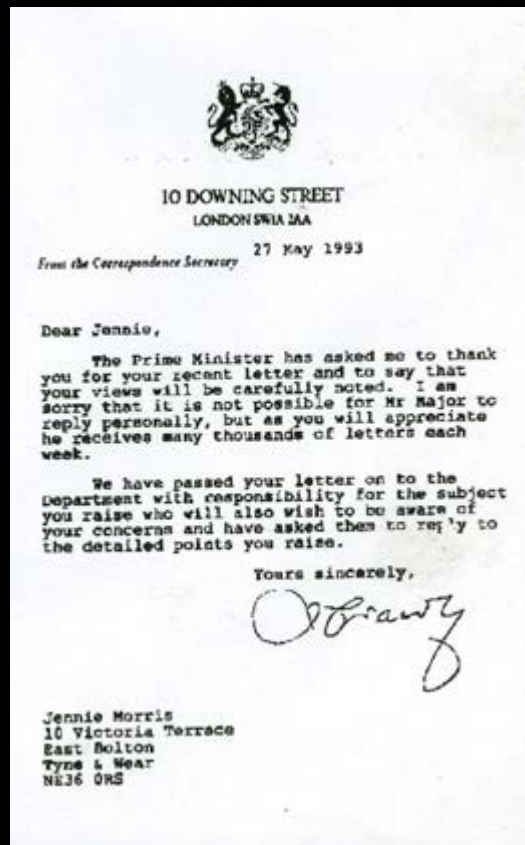
Meanwhile, the Vigil stepped up its campaign, focusing on the issues of threatened communities, lost opportunities for the future employment prospects and, with the encouragement of the local environmental campaign group, the possible environmental consequences of closure, including water pollution. We were not unconscious of the past negative effects of coal mining and of coal burning on the environment, but we thought that with careful planning and investment, these could be mitigated. Our efforts to decorate the immediate pit environment with spring flowers and balloons were a very small attempt to show how things could be improved with colour and plants.

From the very outset of the campaign, we attempted to put into practice the larger ideals that we held. We were aware that our campaign to save the pit was but part of a much larger set of principles about social justice. Ultimately, we hoped we were contributing to a struggle for a more humane world where everyone would be included and recognised for what they could contribute.

It was in this spirit, as well as the reality of childcare needs, that children were integrated into the Vigil. They were present from the first day. Our motivation for fighting to save the pits included our concern for the right of children to live in prosperous communities with a positive future. It included the hope that children would be able to remain in the locality on reaching adulthood if they chose to do so, that they would enjoy the security of a regular income and that they would be able to retain the values and traditions of our local culture.

As well as our own children, we sought to encourage other local children to find out about the pit camp and to visit the caravan. A group of girls from Seaham Comprehensive School came along and wrote an article for the local newspaper. Children who were simply out and about sometimes dropped in for a cup of tea, to warm themselves and to talk to us, knowing that they could do so in complete safety. Children were present on the last march through Seaham, and attended the last rally in the pit yard.

A number of children sought knowledge and information about what was happening. Their participation was not a token, nor was it entirely the result of parental encouragement. They positively wanted to be involved and those who were old enough to understand were genuinely outraged. In April, Jennie Morris, aged 8 at the time, wrote to the Prime Minister, John Major, to express her anger, and when she was not satisfied with his impersonal response, returned his reply with 'This is not good enough', written across it!



“

I wrote to John Major

I wrote to John Major and when I got the reply I was angry. He hadn't taken any notice of what I was saying, it didn't seem as if he had read it. He just wrote back. I've learnt that John Major doesn't listen and he won't listen.

To be honest, I don't think everyone tried hard to keep the pits open they just went along with it and didn't really do anything. Whoever had the idea to have the caravans it was a good idea because it made some of the people try a bit harder to keep the pit open.

I'm glad we went to the caravan it made me feel happy that I was trying to do something about it as well as the other people like Hannah and Gail and Jean and Jackie and Joan and Myrtle.

Everyone was nice to me. I think they thought it was good that the children were even bothered. When I went to school and asked my friends if they voted Tory or Labour they didn't even know what I meant. I can still remember the words to 'Raise your banners high' and 'Union Miners Stand Together' and so can my sister.

Jennie Morris, aged 8.

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“

Washing and Worries

She hangs out the washing
and her worries.
It's a good day for it,
sunny, windy,
enticing the creased cares
of pillow cases,
a full blown sail of a sheet
and his best white shirt.
into a lively tribal dance,
praying, exhorting,
not for rain
but for better times.
'Hiya!' draws her to the fence,
no boundary,
but bound with a shared knowing,
they stand and talk.
'What'll yours do?
Take the pay-off? '
'Take the money and run!'
'Where to?'
The sleeve waves,
willing her into a fight
with the load of tangled times.
Got to get it all out,
get it dried, sorted,
smooth out
the uneasy crow's-feet of creases,
press out
the wrinkles of irritation,
fold away dissatisfaction
and trap it
in the airing cupboard
with all the other bitterness -
remember the strike?
The work-a-day jeans hang stiffly
sobbing blue regretful tears,
they need something to do.
Men can't walk straight without
grains of black dust
along the seams.
When bent into the corrugated,
twisted
shape from market forces,
they crumble
and it'll take more than an iron
and willing fingers
to undo that knot.
She sees the tee-shirt,
her own, alone, red and defiant,
it billows in full rage
and beats the air for beating it
strongly and soundly
even so.

June Portlock

”

The constant presence of the children during the Vigil reminded all of us that political action is not just about party politics, government machinery and institutional debates and decision making, but that it is also about everyday life. As the slogan of the women's movement claimed 'the personal is political' and our personal lives were deeply tied up with our political activism. The personal is as much about our relationships, our histories and our identities as it is about our families and immediate communities, but it is sometimes hard to talk about all this without sounding nostalgic or romantic.

We found that for many people who visited the caravan, or offered us support, even when they had no active ties with mining, mining culture was associated with deeply held personal values and qualities that they wished to see preserved. Standard political language does not really give people the opportunity to express this. So we conceived the idea of a poetry competition to encourage a different way of speaking about what mattered in relation to mining and what was threatened by pit closures.

We had a very positive response to the competition, and some of us were able to read our poetry at the Officials Club in Easington. A group of us had invited Katherine Zeserson of the Women May Band, who had sung at the pit gates on the first day of the Vigil, to teach us some mining folk songs, and we were brave enough to perform a couple of these songs for the first time at the Officials' Club. The poetry reading in Easington had been organised by Mary Bell who had sent us a supportive hand painted card containing one of her own poems during February.

Two of the miners from Vane Tempest were asked to judge the poetry competition which was won by June Portlock with 'Washing and Worries' in the adult section and by six-year-old Hannah Price with 'Hannah's Poem' in the children's section.

“

Hannah's Poem

My name is Hannah
My brother is called Jack.
The Tories want to give
Our Dad the sack.
Dad works at the pit
That mines the coal.
He doesn't want the sack
Or be out on the dole.
We need our Dad
To earn his wages,
Not be unemployed
For ages and ages.
We have been on rallies
All over the land,
Miners and their families
Are making a stand.
We have to show the Tories
What we say is right.
Miners and their families,
Must keep up the fight.
Enough is enough
That is our cry.
Mining communities
Cannot be allowed to die.

Hannah Price, aged 6

Mining Life

Give me a miner,
I'll show you his wife.
Who made his bait
and stayed up late.
Who shared his bed
and soothed his head.
Who sacrificed
her heart's desire.
Who heaped his coals
upon his fire
Who laboured long
each weary day.
Who shopped and cooked
and earned no pay.

Jean Spence

”

Women pledge to fight on

By May, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Government was determined to close all those pits on the original list, and more. The White Paper in March had made no concessions to the 10 collieries designed for immediate closure, and another two had been added to that original list. The remaining 21 included in October's announcement had had some minor concessions made, but it was clear that they would all be closed in the near future. It was therefore of no surprise to us that the High court gave the go ahead to British Coal during May to implement the closure programme.

Easington Colliery meanwhile was to be 'mothballed' and the miners there given one last chance to accept the redundancy payments. Effectively this meant that on May 7th, Easington closed.

In these circumstances many men who had held out over the previous months felt that they had little option now but to accept the inevitable and to take their redundancy. There was talk by British Coal that it intended to put Vane Tempest and Easington up for sale as soon as possible.

Despite this gloom, the women of the Vigil tried to keep morale high by continuing their activities. Throughout May we took part in a range of trades union and community activities in an effort to maintain public interest in the issue of pit closures.

On May Day we were marching once again in Newcastle from the West End to Exhibition Park to mark this important date in the calendar of the labour movement. This was a warm, pleasant day which we could never forget because we sang on stage helped by Katherine Zeserson and the Women May Band. Gail Price gave a speech to the massed audience about the Vigil and afterwards we had a picnic in the park, and celebrated Hannah's seventh birthday.

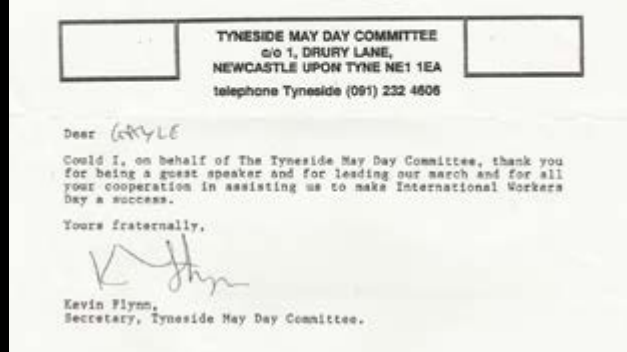


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I remember one of the best moments of Seaham WAPC as our rendering as a choir, with help from the Women May Band, of 'Miners' Lifeguard' at the Tyneside May Day. It confirmed my long-held belief that songs are one of the most powerful ways of getting our message across.

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Margaret Mound



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When we performed and when Gail spoke to the crowds at the May Day rally we were nervous, but confident. Over the months of the campaign there had been a persistent demand for Vigil women to speak to the media and at a variety of conferences and meetings. At first we were quite shy. None of us believed that we could speak well about the political and economic issues. Most of us had never spoken in public before. But we did know what we felt, and we knew about our own experiences. That, and our determination to publicise our cause made us brave. We learned quickly how to interpret the intentions of media representatives who requested interviews. We informed ourselves about the details around the Government's closure policy. We learned not to be afraid of cameras and microphones. We became very sensitive about our public image and the power of the media to misrepresent as well as to present our words.

Personally, I gained a great deal of confidence in talking to the media during the months of the campaign. I went to the BBC studios in Newcastle where I met Tom Hadaway in the waiting room. He told me that many miners who volunteered to fight in the First World War were turned away because they were needed in the mines. I was interviewed by Tom Pickard who was making a television film about global issues. People from Amber films came and spoke to us at Dawdon Pit site. I even began to enjoy campaigning like this!

Jean Spence

Throughout May, it was obvious that our energies were waning. No sound argument or massed rallies could sway the Government from its course. The only power left to us was to demonstrate that we were not beaten in ourselves. So we started thinking of ways to express our continuing dissent at Tory misrule. We wanted to maintain a presence until the very end and did not want to go out with a whimper.

We decided to hold a party in the pit yard (and to pray for fine weather!) Everyone who was on our mailing list, every organisation and individual whom we knew to have supported us was invited and lots came. On Friday 28th May we celebrated with our friends on what was a fine bright evening. We lit the brazier that had been donated by Gateshead steel workers; we brought food, drink and music; we laughed and talked and feasted and sang well into the darkness, and Vane Tempest Yard had never seen anything like it!



“

My best memory was the feeling of comradeship among the women, the friends I made and how a group of women from so many different walks of life could get together to fight the same cause. So many of those women who were not directly affected by the pit closure felt so strongly about the destruction of a pit and industry that they fought strong and hard, contributing massive effort, to try and persuade the government there was a future for the Seaham pit and the industry as a whole. The experience broadened my whole way of thinking politically and this stays with me today. At least I can say that I tried and will be proud to tell my children that I was part of the Vigil which supported a campaign to protect the pit community and the local miners' jobs.

Yvonne Robson

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THE FUNERAL OF OLD KING COAL

The miners who had not taken the redundancy offer signed on for the last time at Vane Tempest 4th June 1993. This marked the formal end of coal mining in Seaham. On that day, miners and their supporters marched from the old bus station, through Seaham town centre and along the sea front to rally in the Vane Tempest yard. Hundreds of well wishers lined the route, joined the march, clapped the miners into the pit and stayed to listen to the speeches. Some of the women from the Vigil joined the march, others stayed at the pit gates to applaud the miners as they entered. It was with some pride that the women's banner led the march through the town and the speech that Jean Spence gave was well received by all present. It was particularly moving on that day to see all the old people standing outside the care homes and listening to the speeches from their wheelchairs in the pit yard. All walks of society were present, young and old, to witness the occasion.



Although the pit was now formally closed, we continued to meet in the anticipation that we might continue to address some related and continuing issues. In particular, we were concerned that the government was denying that it had any responsibility for the possible pollution of the water supply if nine colliery pumping stations in our area were closed down. We also thought we might have a continuing role in supporting related struggles. Some of our members had become involved in a campaign to save Swan Hunter's shipyard on Tyneside which was threatened with closure. So we continued with a low key presence through June, and the caravan remained in the pit yard.



“

Although I had attended many rallies in the past and traditional mining community events such as the Northumberland Miners' Picnic and Durham Big Meeting, I'll never forget the emotion and sense of pride I felt walking with our banner through the streets of London, Northumberland and Durham and many other areas...

I learnt many things during my involvement, some of which were painful lessons. My political awareness increased as I began to appreciate the differing views, opinions and aims of the women involved. There were times when I felt confused, times when I felt used and many times when I felt totally naïve and foolish.

However, I have no regrets about becoming involved, I felt very proud standing up and speaking out, of doing what I could, against the odds and despite the pain of defeat, in that we did not achieve our aim. I feel richer for the experience, along with a sense of fulfilment for putting up a fight.

Gail Price

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Women in Protest

The women are fighting
for their husbands' jobs in
mines,
But to get what they
want will take more than
rhymes.
They need to get through
to British Coal,
That they can't afford to
live on the dole.
Most of them have families
to look after,
But will they listen or just
break out in laughter?
They might calmly say that
its not their fault at all.
If they keep the mines
open all the profits will fall.
All these men need good
jobs rather quick,
But British Coal just don't
care a bit.
That's what all the women
are fighting for,
And they will keep going
forever more.

Beverley Wilson
aged 12

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© Photograph by Stan Gamester

“

First of all I want to say how sad we, and I speak for all the women who have been involved in the caravan, how sad we all feel today. It is a sad day for the men who have lost their jobs. It is a sad day for the families who will lose a wage, and it is a sad day for Seaham which has now lost the industry around which it was built. But though we are sad, I also want to say that as women, we are proud to be here. We are proud to have been associated with this struggle. We believe we have fought the pit closures with dignity and with right on our side. We have gained good friends on the way and we have made links with people in other places and industries who are also fighting for the right to work and for decent working conditions. The Fire-fighters, Timex, and Swan Hunter's spring particularly to mind.

I have to say we've also had a good time some of the time. What's the point of battling if you're not prepared to enjoy yourself if you can? We might have lost Vane Tempest but we want to say goodbye to this pit not with despair and weakness but with hope and strength.

From the beginning of our Vigil, Women Against Pit closures have said that we were fighting for three things: firstly, and most urgently, we have been fighting for jobs—for miners' jobs at Vane Tempest; secondly, we were fighting for Seaham as a community, as a decent place to live; and thirdly, we were fighting for our environment and particularly for our water supply which is threatened if they turn the pumps off.

These reasons for fighting have not disappeared. The Tories are sacrificing our jobs, our communities, and our environment in the name of profit. They care about nothing else. They intend to undermine our strength and morale by casting people into poverty, creating apathy and hopelessness. They are closing or privatising everything which we had fought for and won in the past. They are stealing from us. The message today from Women Against Pit Closures is:

THE STRUGGLE IS NOT OVER!

We shall continue alongside all the friends who have supported our efforts to keep this pit open.

We will continue to fight for jobs: not just any jobs, but jobs with decent conditions.

Jobs which are safe and which pay a living wage for men and women alike. We will continue to fight for our community and others like it. We want towns where people feel safe and where people feel cared for. We want communities where young people have hope for the future. That is a community where there are jobs.

We will continue to fight for our environment. We have a right to clean streams and a clean water supply. We don't want to rely on nuclear energy with all its dangers.

Our environment depends on an energy policy that includes coal. So although we are sad and upset about losing the last pit in Seaham, we are not going to give up fighting this selfish, greedy, lying Government. We believe in the justice of our fight. We wish our Vigil could have done more, but we know that we did what we could. We hope that everyone feels like us that the struggle was worthwhile.

The WAPC group is proud to have been associated with the NUM and the Vane Tempest miners especially. We wish everyone well for the future.

Jean Spence

On behalf of the Women's Vigil. Speech delivered at Vane Tempest, 4th June 1993.

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Tributes as women end pits campaign

After the pit closed, we continued to meet as a group but it was obvious that the caravan had served its purpose in providing us with a visible base beside the pit. We therefore decided that it should be returned, with thanks, to Easington District Council. We wanted to choose a fitting moment for its exit and it seemed there could be no better day than that of the Durham Big Meeting. We organised a final party which was held in Dawdon Miners' Welfare, July 8th.



The next morning, Jacqueline Apperley made a presentation on behalf of Women Against Pit closures to Joe Goodwin, leader of Easington District Council, in recognition of the support of the Council. After that, the caravan was towed away to the Racecourse in Durham, ready for the Gala on Saturday, 10th July. As the caravan left the pit yard, we knew that it was only a matter of time before the pit itself would vanish forever.

On Gala day, as we marched through the city with our banner, we were once again given enthusiastic support from the crowd. All through the day, there were visitors to the caravan viewing our exhibition, and talking to the women about the campaign. Effectively, this was the last day of activity associated with the Vigil. At the end of a very fine day, we emptied the caravan, collected the exhibition and left the caravan in the good hands of the Council.



“

I can remember the skip full of all the hats and knee pads. It made me quite upset because the miners had stopped working and they didn't have any jobs.

Jennie Morris, aged 8

Lost Heritage

*No Dad's pit boots to follow,
No miner's lamp to shine,
No pitman's son will carry on
Tradition down the mine.
They'll never lift a shovel
To load in tubs black gold
Or know the pit face dangers
Like the stories they've been told.
They'll soon forget the skyline
Which shows the pithead wheel,
The horizon with its pit heaps
Which made the colliery real.
Remind them of their heritage,
Speak out to them with pride,
Stand tall and sing its praises,
It's not Dad's fault it died.*

Betty Elliot

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“

The spirit of comradeship was there throughout the campaign. It never left us. It kept us going when it became clear we had no hope of winning. We received piles of letters of solidarity and support. Bromley Labour Party which had adopted Vane Tempest during the strike, did so again for the Vigil.

Gaynor answered all the letters that we kept in two huge files. The labour movement and the opposition to the Tory Government is much stronger than the media would have us believe. We could be an amazing force for change if we could unite in the way we did around pit closures. The comradeship gave us optimism for the future and demonstrated in a very real way how treacherous it is to believe all we are told by the media.

Jean Spence

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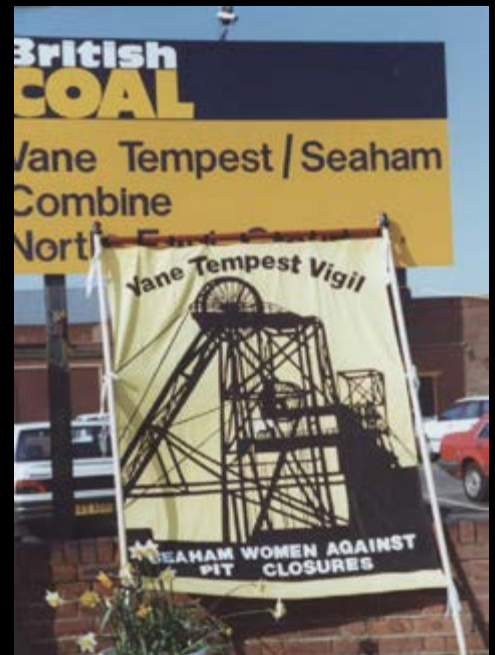




By the end of July, 1993, questions were being asked in Parliament about the situation regarding the pit pumps and the question of pollution. In August, the Timex factory whose workers we had supported was officially closed. Meanwhile, Swan Hunter's workers had developed their own local campaign. The women who had come together for the Vigil continued with various political and community activities, but we no longer had a common purpose and there was less and less reason to continue as a group. So we voted to disband.

Before the vote, we agreed that too often women's political action, and the records of that action are lost to history. We had our photographs, the file of letters, the poems, and other material that we had produced during the campaign, including an exhibition that Gaynor had worked on charting the significant events month-by-month. So we decided to authorise a sub-group to produce a publication, supplementing the material already available with some reflections and memories.

This booklet is an effort to fulfil that last decision of the Vane Tempest Vigil.



For over a year, my life and my family's and other people's lives were taken over by the coal campaign. I do not consider the time wasted even though, sadly, it was to no avail as the Government carried out its plans, which included the closure of Vane Tempest. The reason I do not consider the time wasted is that we knew, and still know that we are right! Events since this time have proven this, as coal continues to be imported from other countries, mostly dug using child labour - not something for the Government to be proud of. And more and more open casting is being carried out. We will all continue to pay for the Government's actions, taken stubbornly in the face of all the facts. But none more so than the miners who still remain out of work today.

Alison Dawson

German coal for our redundant pitmen

THE Government is to continue giving subsidised German coal to redundant miners in the North East.

Energy Minister Tim Eggar announced yesterday that British Fuels Ltd won the contract to supply concessionary coal to 21,000 former miners and their families in the region.

For the next three years, the firm

will hand out up to 85,000 tonnes of coal to men who used to mine it in the North East.

Marketing Director Peter Wells admitted a significant proportion of coal was imported - often from subsidised mines elsewhere.

"We import coal from across the world - Germany, South America, Poland and other parts of Europe."

"We've always imported some of

our fuel requirements. We endeavour to supply British fuel whenever we can, but it is a question of supply and demand."

Easington's Labour MP John Cummings, himself a former miner said: "It is not just a question of subsidised mines, there is coal coming in from Colombia where it is mined by child labour."

Sunderland Echo 22nd November 1994

“

As I write, Vane Tempest is being destroyed. I felt that our campaign to save Vane Tempest really ended this week when they demolished the canteen.

When we first started the Vigil, we used the canteen that was behind the caravan and were served tea by the women who worked there. Easy to forget, but they were also being made redundant. It took the manager only a matter of days to bar us. We stuck posters on the windows at one point, and right until the end there were traces of those posters on the building.

The view from my window will change once the pit is gone. Already I can see the old Seaham Hall where Lord Byron married Lady Milbanke in 1814 and from which the Londonderrys lorded it over this town for so many years. When the Vane winding gear goes, I'll be able to see trees and our ancient church. All that remains is our heritage.

Read any local history book and it will tell you about Byron, the Milbankes and the Londonderrys. It will tell you about the development of the docks and the pits and about the town growing around them. It might even tell you about the 1871 and 1880 mining disasters that claimed so many lives. What it will not dwell on is the everyday dirt and minor wounds, the cuts and bruises and broken bones. It will not tell you about men who found it difficult to cope with pit work but had no choice because the Londonderrys discouraged other industries from coming to the area in case the miners left the pits for the alternatives.

It will not tell you about women washing the pit clothes, about the soot falling on the clean washing, about cleaning out the grate and setting the fire going at all hours, struggling with different members of the family on different shifts, trying to keep children quiet when men worked night shift. Labour histories do tell about political struggles, about the organisation of the miners' union and the manner in which fostering solidarity and co-operation was a means of survival, but I don't know of any that focus on the role and importance of women in mining life until we come to the 1984/5 strike. Women's participation in that struggle was not sudden. Women have always been active in mining communities socially, politically and economically, but their contribution has largely been ignored.

Involvement in the Women's Vigil was for me a way of demonstrating commitment to the survival of Seaham and its community. I wanted to show the Tory Government that whatever they did, and that whatever the odds against us, we would continue to oppose their vindictive, self-interested divisive politics. The women of this area are not simply 'wives' but are people with a struggle and history of their own, intimately connected with the struggles of the men. Women have always had a significant contribution to make, in their own terms for justice in our society.

Jean Spence

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The Last Ten Years

I joined Women Against Pit Closures because I believe in my community and because I want to help keep our community alive and to have jobs for generations to come. My family and my husband's family have been in mining for generations, coming to the coast on promise of work for many years. Miners have worked to get coal to keep our industry going as well as to bring warmth to the majority of homes throughout Britain. With mining came whole villages of people who had so much in common they came together in one big family. This family looked after its old, sick and infirm.

In 1984 came my chance to put my beliefs into action-stand and fight. Although retired, I felt I must do something to help those brave enough to stand against British Coal and inevitably against the Tory government. I prepared and cooked meals with a small group of women five days a week for over 300 people a day, in the Working Men's club. I took my turn at the picket line, went out fundraising and attended meetings and demonstrations. A whole year of struggle was not helped by a biased press and media. We fought. Maybe we did not beat the enemy but we fought it. We kept our pride and maybe if others had fought by our side this country would be in a better state than it is today. Debauchery, Dictatorship and Destruction were the hallmarks of the Tory Government during the 1984/5 miners' dispute. It was a vendetta against the National Union of Mineworkers. The defeat of Ted Heath's Tory Government by the miners in 1974 had to be avenged. And it most surely was.

The last ten years have been hard but I will never forget the friendship and comradeship of the Women Against Pit Closures, the meetings and the marches, the hundreds of people I've met from all over the world.

We fought and we fought hard and at one point it looked as though some pits had been saved. But it was not to be. We stood for the truth: the Tory government lied and it will continue to lie. In years to come when the truth does come out, it will be seen that our cause was a just cause. We can hold our heads up high. We stood against the might of the extreme right-wing Tory government.

Determination and Dedication are our hallmark and we will continue to fight for justice, equality, employment and freedom.

Myrtle MacPherson

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Postscript 2017

Inevitably, much has happened since the pit closure programme of 1992-3, including the loss of all of Britain's deep coal mines and the decreasing dependency on coal to fire power stations. In Seaham, East Shore Village has been built upon the Vane Tempest site; the colliery's social club has been demolished and a small housing estate built on the land; Noses Point where Dawdon pit once produced the highest output of coal in Europe is now a recognised Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and much care has been put into regenerating the flora and fauna that thrives on its unique magnesian limestone cliffs; a new secondary school has been opened on the site of Seaham Colliery; the railway tracks that once took coal to Seaham Docks have all been decommissioned for footpaths or covered with car parks, roads, shops and housing; where once there were coal staithes at Seaham docks there is now a thriving marina and the north dock area itself has been developed transformed with shops, cafés, sculptures, a water sports centre and the restored lifeboat, the George Elmy in its refurbished boathouse. At its coastal edge, Seaham has significantly changed its character, looking towards the potential of the town to welcome tourists and visitors to its attractive seaside location.

The once thriving coal industry around which Seaham grew during the twentieth century exists now only in the memories of its older population, in the stories that are passed down the generations about the nature of mining life, and in the few remaining physical reminders – the pit wheel embedded in the ground at the entrance to the docks, the fenced off pieces of land at the head of what was once a pit shaft, where the pumps are kept operating to prevent metal pollution in the waters, the slag and metal and bits of conveyor belt remaining on the Blast Beach.

Yet for all the positive developments in the post mining period, many of the concerns of the women involved in the Vane Tempest Vigil remain pertinent today – not least the problem of employment and jobs in the East Durham area. Seaham itself has been relatively lucky because of the advantages offered by its geography and history, including its Anglo

Saxon Church, its Terrace Green, its sandy beaches and promenade, and the Victorian harbour. Many ex-mining areas do not have such advantages. Once thriving mining settlements have been corroded by the consequences of unemployment, or low waged, unskilled, insecure work, lack of business investment, and by the enclosure of land which often implies the loss of traditionally held rights as once accessible places are privatised, fenced and corralled or rendered 'out of bounds' for 'health and safety' reasons. Community feeling cannot thrive where people cannot identify shared interests and mutual values. Economic austerity has put a strain on local and regional council resources that often hits hardest those who are most vulnerable and most dependent upon services. Thus while there are sparks of hope for the future, as witnessed through the work of organisations such as the Heritage Coast Partnership, for some the impact of the pit closures has been severe. As the women of the vigil anticipated, the loss of jobs and skills, the fracturing of community life, and the degradation of local environments has not been mended yet.

The years since 1993 have also inevitably witnessed changes in personal lives. Some people have died. Others have moved to other places and experienced significant changes in lifestyle. Some have changed their opinions and allegiances. It is impossible in a publication of this nature to take account of all the personal changes. The best we can hope to do is to remain true to the original intention of the women of the Vigil and attempt to represent honestly the nature of the campaign as it was experienced in 1993. The tide of history was against mining in the UK but those involved in the Vigil believed that there was honour to be gained from campaigning.

This publication is therefore designed to publicly remember the campaign against pit closures in Seaham and to highlight the camaraderie, the learning and the international solidarities that can be achieved in the process of organising to support a just cause. These are virtues that we can sustain in the present, remembering that winning is not only in the outcome, but in the action itself.



The **Vigil**