



Feminist Archive North

Newsletter No. 4 Winter 2009-10

www.feministarchivenorth.org.uk/
blog - <http://fanorth.wordpress.com/>



T-shirts from the Helen John archive

This bumper Newsletter celebrates Women's Activism, with reports on recent donations to FAN and activities we have been involved in over the last year. These activities are the reason why it's been so long since the last issue. Primarily, the two volunteers who usually work on the Newsletter have been totally focussed on completing our Education Pack, now on-line and called a Learning Journey. But more of that later.

Here, you can read about exciting new donations from the Bolton Women's Liberation Group Archive, which chronicles the wealth of their achievements from 1971 to 1994, and about the ongoing work of the Justice for Women campaign. The Treasures series features an archive donated by the veteran women's peace campaigner Helen John.

Activism takes many forms, and different methods emerge. One form of activism is to

ensure our materials are properly preserved, so we have an article on the Life of a Donation, and news of a recent grant from the Co-op, which was only achieved through the initiative of a volunteer.

It's also important that FAN makes use of new methods for the electronic age. One example is the Learning Journey, which went live in April, as *Feminist Activism – Education and Job Opportunities*, thanks to training from the MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives). Another is the user-friendly guide to blogging.

But until everyone has the blogging habit, we still include brief news items.

Finally, it's good to note that this issue has been much more of a team effort, with six volunteers making contributions. Thanks to all concerned.

Ailsa Swarbrick



Bolton Archive comes to FAN!



July 31st 2009 saw a grand gathering in the Brotherton Room in Leeds University's Special Collections, for the official presentation to FAN of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group (BWLG) Archive. Vivian Jones, Pro Vice Chancellor, opened the proceedings and underlined for us all the historical and current importance of the Women's Liberation Movement. There were contributions from seven of the group's members, telling us their memories about the National Abortion Campaign, Bolton Women's Aid, Greenham, rent strikes, street theatre, Bolton Lesbian Line and the Clause 28 protests.

BWLG, one of the most dynamic and long-lived of our northern feminist groups, collected much of their history from 1971 to 1985 and 1994, and somehow, unlike most of us, realised it might be valuable. In 2006 BWLG was re-established as Bolton Women's Liberation (History) Group, and with project funding from National Heritage Lottery, worked their socks off archiving 12 boxes of material – and then donated it all to us here at FAN!

So, what have we got in this fabulous collection? As well as the 12 boxes, there are 2 carved female figures, inscribed with all the things society says women should and shouldn't be and do – they are in the temperature-controlled 'cold store' and we get spooked by them every time we go in! In the boxes there are scrapbooks, seven minute books, newsletters, handouts, leaflets and posters, mostly produced by BWLG. There are papers relating to their Nursery Campaign (1971/72), their local campaign for a free contraceptive service, their attempts to set up a women's centre and letters relating to all of these. We can see copies of the

Bolton Women's Guide: Part 1: Medical, and papers relating to that work. Sadly, no Part 2 was ever published, but we have the work begun on Part 2 (1977/78), which was to cover educational, careers and work opportunities for women, and the question of childcare (including care in hospital) for children under five.

The collection also includes some audio-visual material, developed by BWLG: the slideshow plus script entitled "How it is", copied onto DVD. We have street theatre scripts, discussion papers, questionnaires on maternity services, documents relating to the National Abortion Campaign, and to Bolton Women's Peace Group – in all, a unique record of the concerns and activism of a committed women's liberation group. We all know that there were other wonderful groups like this all over the country in the 1970s and 1980s, but BWLG have kept the evidence. In admiring the energy and commitment of this group, we can allow ourselves to give considerable credit to the achievements of our younger selves.



All of this material, impeccably recorded by Elaine Glover in the Catalogue which accompanies this amazing collection, will surely bring joy to the hearts of future researchers into our rich history. These are the women responsible not only for an admirable record of activism, but also for spending hours archiving the material: Kath Fry, Elaine Glover, Liz Perry, Hilary Eastham, Eileen Murphy, Rita Hudson, Moira Hill, June Clayton and Gay Bennett. Our thanks to them.

Lou Lavender

Treasures:

Helen John – a Life of Activism



Helen John to run against Blair in Sedgefield on a *No Weapons in Space Platform*

Candidate Angered at Lack of Debate on BMD Facilities in Britain

This summer we were thrilled with a major acquisition. Helen John - a founder of the Greenham Common and Menwith Hill women's peace protests, recidivist prisoner, retired midwife, Independent parliamentary candidate, grandmother and indefatigable campaigner, gave FAN a vast quantity of her personal material. This adds significantly to our holdings on the women's peace movement (featured in Newsletter 3). It also gives a unique insight into an individual's unswerving opposition to militarism and all forms of violence over at least thirty years. We are still working on basic preservation (see 'Life of a Donation') before cataloguing, so this is an impressionistic preview and not a full detailed account of Helen's collection.

What comes over from this very wide range of material? First, I was struck by the personal tone of the letters and cards from supporters world-wide. People across continents wrote as though to a friend, offering sympathy and admiration for her continued willingness go to prison for her beliefs. Many claimed solidarity through their local campaign groups. Their thanks also revealed anxieties about their children's future. Then, from the mass of court orders, fine demands, transcripts of interviews on arrest and other legal papers relating to the many cases of 'criminal damage', emerged a picture of Helen's calm persistence in painting slogans or breaking windows on military bases; and of her patient responses explaining her actions. She was clearly well known to the Menwith Hill police, with the exchanges revealing polite incomprehension.

There are two items I was particularly interested in, and look forward to examining properly. (It's easy to get diverted into a lengthy browse with so many of our donations.) One was a hand-written draft of a Prisons Booklet for Peace Women, which she wrote while serving a prison sentence herself. The contents cover a definition of Non-Violent Direct Action; Arrest and police cells; Courts; a Guide to the various women's

prisons; Leaving Prison; Hints for Outside Supporters; and a list of women's groups currently engaged in NVDA. She wanted to make positive use of her own experience (and combat boredom) to help prepare future peace activists to cope with a potentially traumatic situation.

The second was the packet relating to her contesting the 2001 election as an Independent against the sitting MP Tony Blair in the Sedgefield constituency. Her aim was to "expose the secrecy and misinformation surrounding the ballistic missile defence programme ..." which could have led to the upgrading of Menwith Hill and Fylingdales, and to make links between the Star Wars programme and economic justice for all.

After announcing her candidacy she was sentenced to 3 months for £300 worth of damage to the fence at Menwith Hill US spy base. With the help of volunteers and donations, and the slogan "No to Star Wars" she ran her minimum-cost campaign from Low Newton prison in County Durham, gaining 260 votes. At the count, to which she had no access, eight women wearing sashes in the suffragettes' colours of green, white and violet gave leaflets and interviews to the media, and accosted Tony and Cherie Blair.



Helen's archive will be testimony to the suffragettes' slogan "Deeds Not Words".

Ailsa Swarbrick

Co-op Collaboration

The **co-operative** membership

We're delighted with the recent boost to our funds by an award of £840 from Leeds and Wakefield Co-op Area Committee – and by how much it can help our work in FAN.

First, this grant from their Members Activity budget will support our day-to-day work of preserving donated items safely. We need to continually replenish our stock of very expensive - but necessary - acid free materials. It will also fund an innovatory day of (cooperative) archiving of as yet undocumented materials currently held by FAN. **This will be in the form of an open workshop, to be held early Spring 2010, to**

which Cooperative members in the Leeds and Wakefield areas and FAN friends, volunteers and supporters will be invited.

The project will be a great opportunity to make links across the two organizations and to get some hands-on experience of archiving. We are extremely fortunate to have the services of two qualified archivists who have agreed to take an active role and share their knowledge and experience.

Participants will have an opportunity to learn what archiving entails and have a go at it themselves. They will also be able to share their own stories and knowledge of campaigns since 1969. A further benefit is that it will hopefully enable us to make inroads into the preservation work still needing to be done. We hope participants will want to use their newfound knowledge and skills by becoming FAN volunteer archivists.

Jean Horsman

Life of a Donation



Repackaging



Tools of the Trade

When most of us started volunteering at FAN, we had no idea of the detailed and careful work of an archive, or of the meticulous processes needed to meet professional standards. Thanks to training from our one-year archivist Sarah in 2007, we now feel confident that FAN is in much better condition, and we can pass on our experience. This brief account gives any potential new volunteers an idea of what is involved practically. It's also a lot of fun!

When donations come in a volunteer creates an accessions record. This catalogues the collection name, who donated it, and any information about arrangement, restrictions, etc. The collection then usually spends a bit of time resting on the donations table, until someone can get around to doing the physical repackaging. This isn't because we don't appreciate donations, but because we frequently have a backlog and once we've

started the process, it's best to let just one person be in charge of everything. This means that new donations sometimes have to wait until another job is finished.

Sometimes, though, donations have been in a garage or attic and gotten musty. Then they'll have to be in the isolation room for a while, until all the mould spores or other material that could contaminate the collections are gone.

Once the donation has had a collections record entered in the database it can be repackaged. This means all the staples are removed, all paperclips are replaced with stainless steel and everything is placed in acid-free green boxes. Now the real fun, the box listing, can begin.

The box list pretty much does that – lists the content of each box in the collection in detail. All of this is typed up and then entered on the database as components of the collection. As this is the most complicated part of the process, it can sometimes take weeks, even months to finish.

Once everything is repacked, listed and entered, the boxes go to live permanently in the cool storage stacks. This is a temperature-controlled part of the archive, which will keep the donations mould and disintegration free for the foreseeable future.

Stevie de Saille

Justice for Women



The FAN archive is very much a living resource. It not only holds collections from past campaigns but also materials from groups who are still active, such as JfW.

Sandra McNeil writes - Justice for Women (JfW) was founded in Leeds in 1990, inspired by the Southall Black Sisters campaign to free Kiranjit Ahluwalia. Our aim was to change the laws and assumptions around "battered women who kill" so that in the future such campaigns would not be necessary. We are still campaigning.

From our first leaflet, on behalf of Sara Thornton, we were easily able to cite cases of men getting away with murder, walking free or getting very short sentences on the grounds that their wives or girlfriends nagged or were unfaithful. On the other hand women who had fought back after years of violence

were being jailed for life for murder. Women now as then have to provide physical evidence that they were “provoked”.

We used the media, picketed the Appeal Court, held demonstrations, in particular about women who were treated unfairly by the law. So we have contributed to far greater knowledge and awareness of male violence to women and how inadequately the law deals with it.

There are two ways to change the law. One is by cases setting precedent (case law). The other is by law changes through Parliament.

In 1992, London Justice for Women was contacted by Emma Humphreys who was serving a life sentence for killing her violent pimp. She was technically being held “at her majesty’s pleasure” as she was 17 when sentenced. London JfW persuaded experienced sympathetic barristers to look at her case. When Emma was freed in 1995 her case changed the law. Until then only what took place immediately before the killing could count as provocation. From then on courts have been able to look at the whole history of the man’s violence. This has helped many women. Appeal Court Judges are supposed to be completely impartial, which is why we can have demos there – they can’t be influenced! However judges do not take decisions in a vacuum. We know the campaigning was influential.

Most of our work though, has been supporting individual women – over 50 and counting. In some cases we helped women right from the start. Others came to us after being convicted. Some, like Emma, we were successful in helping. Others we carry on supporting through prison to release and after.

We are currently supporting two changes in the homicide laws. One will allow people to argue they should have murder reduced to manslaughter because they killed out of fear. The other seeks to prevent murder being reduced to manslaughter on the grounds of ‘infidelity’.

FAN Learning Journey

My Learning is a wonderful online educational resource provided by the MLA (Museums, Libraries and Archives). A suggestion by Sarah Prescott led to Ailsa Swarbrick, Jean Horsman and me meeting the local MLA worker and learning the intricacies of building a Learning Journey

(LJ). LJs can consist of text, images, audio recordings, videos and worksheets – really useful resources for hard pressed teachers and a great opportunity for any archive to publicise the richness of their materials.

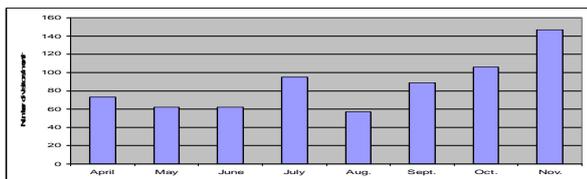


<http://www.mylearning.org/overview.asp?journeyid=551>

Part of the FAN National Lottery grant was to disseminate FAN materials to schools. The plan had been to produce an Education Pack on a CD. We realised the ML website would reach a much wider audience who would really use the materials – publicising FAN and it’s wonderful rich collections and making young people more aware of feminism and feminist achievements. This was an ideal opportunity.

The Education Pack, produced by Ailsa, Jean and others, had taken the archives from East Leeds Women’s Workshops as a case study and put it in the context of the Equal Opportunities legislation of the 1970s. We took this and the seven demands of the Women’s Liberation Movement as our starting point and built a LJ around demand 2 – Equal Education and Job Opportunities. In the LJ we wanted to emphasise the achievements of feminist activism and this fitted very well with the National Curriculum Citizenship area.

The challenge was how best to squeeze maximum impact into limited space. After much agonising, laughter and ruthless editing the LJ went ‘live’ at the beginning of April and we eagerly checked out viewing figures. One advantage of the Learning Journeys is that they aren’t set in stone, so tweaking continued for some weeks. We received very positive feedback from our MLA contacts and had a steady trickle of visitors but then viewing figures were boosted when Jean got an advert into The Teacher, the NUT magazine, in October.



In choosing to focus this LJ on one of the Seven Demands we started a journey of our own – to produce LJs for all the other demands! Each LJ can be developed separately, though we would recommend working in a group of 2 or 3. If anyone else is interested please contact us.

Lynette Willoughby

Brief Guide to Blogging

You may have noticed the link to the blog on our website and wondered what a blog is. Blog is short for web log, simply a personal log (diary) that is kept online and so available to others to read. There are millions of blogs on the web – some are fascinating and useful, and many are a complete waste of time. The idea is that they are quick and immediate rather than carefully crafted and edited, though many are very well written. Each entry is posted chronologically so when you visit the blog you see the latest entry, and can scroll down to see earlier ones. Older posts are archived and then usually listed on the right hand side of the page.

So what's the point? They are a quick and easy way of sharing information or thoughts - but of course the value of the blog depends on its quality. While gap year ramblings keep parents reassured they are hardly of interest to the casual reader. But there are many serious and useful blogs – mutual support groups, political commentators and citizen journalists covering news stories that never make the mainstream. Many blogs allow readers to add comments.

FAN is encouraging supporters to use the FAN blog – for sharing information on relevant events, interesting films, books or just thoughts. From the FAN homepage (www.feministarchivenorth.org.uk/) click on What's New?, then FAN Blog at the bottom on the page. That will take you to - <http://fanorth.wordpress.com/>. Anyone can add a comment on the blog but if you would like to add a post contact the FAN office about access details. Blogs are good for bouncing ideas about but remember they should be relevant to FAN and should be

respectful of other contributors and readers. A few interesting feminist blogs –

- <http://www.thefword.org.uk/> ;
- <http://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com/> ;
- <http://thebomb.org/> ; <http://feminist.org/>

Lynette Willoughby

News in brief

Women's Library History event

FAN took part in one of five nationwide events sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust through the Women's Library. Our one-day workshop on 31st Jan. in Beeston was on Violence against Women and was filmed. We now have 3 DVDs from events in Leeds, London and Northern Ireland, with others to come from Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Reclaim the Night

Hundreds of women marched through Leeds city centre to support a Reclaim the Night March on 28 November. The RTN campaign started in the 1970s, and this march demonstrated that the need for continuing efforts to end violence against women remains. Encouragingly, the march drew new supporters from the wider community on the open section.

The organisers aimed to publicise the low rape conviction rate, the need to expand support services for survivors, and to challenge public attitudes about this issue. 3 FAN trustees, who've been involved with RTN since the early days, were among the speakers at the concluding rally. The FAN archive has holdings from the 70s, and recently mounted an exhibition in Leeds University's Brotherton Library.

Award for FAN Trustee

We're proud to report that Sandra McNeill has received the Emma Humphreys award for her work in combating violence against women (see Justice for Women, above).

International Women's Day, 2010

Helen John will be the keynote speaker at our celebration of IWD on Tuesday 9th March. She will speak about Greenham Common, Menwith Hill and other peace activities. Further details of time, venue etc will be posted on the FAN blog. We'll also send a general email.

This newsletter was edited and produced by Ailsa Swarbrick and Lynette Willoughby