



JOAN DANVERS (LEFT)
WITH DR SUSAN
SCHONFIELD
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celebrating our sisters



HOW did I arrive here? In my case, as with many other lives, the route taken is not always clear or chosen, but meanders through different episodes, times and circumstances.

There are diversions that dictate unplanned roads, possibilities that may be attempted and persons that we meet on the way that will suddenly change direction. What I consider not to have changed is a philosophy that as a child I could not fully understand, but which I felt I must be involved. Like many children in school, there was an early desire to achieve in bookishness as I was seldom picked for games. Arriving at this point shows that the

point is never fixed, and can only be seen in retrospect or as markers along the way.

As a teenager in British Guyana (now Guyana), I realised that there were many things that seemed strange, but were nevertheless accepted as unchangeable. Politics were in the air and while at the time I was too young to vote, the demise of colonialism allowed ideas to be voiced. For example, my grandmother did not agree with the fact that she should always be in debt, yet that had been a permanent economic state in which she lived. She was always in debt. Since only people with property were able to vote, she voted for the people who had given her a mortgage in order to keep her home. She seemed genuinely afraid to do otherwise. I decided to contradict her reasoning as soon as I found the opportunity to do so. When I gained an early scholarship

at school, she decided too much education would not be a good thing and lost no time in removing me from that type of contamination. She did what she thought was best.

With the country moving towards independence, there was a heightened political atmosphere, a passion for questioning, a drive for change, and in various ways a calling to account of those situations that were previously accepted. Awareness was everywhere, but when I was a mother with young children, the time was not in my favour. Employment was nearly always linked to political affiliation. Has that changed? In some ways I think not.

Significant involvement in politics commenced, when I became a member of a trade union in Cheshire in the 1980s. At the same time I became a member of party politics. It was through the education channels of the union that possibilities arose, many which had not been previously considered. I could strongly trace my entry into higher education and public life from the membership of the trade union to which I belong. I was surprised in that environment of knowledge, encouragement and support. Courses on assertiveness, leadership and women's work are bulwarks and signposts in my decision to stand for election in a constituency where I became the first black person – and woman – in the council chamber in the town I reside. On an amendment I received the lifetime award of the title Honorary Alderman two years ago.

The NAW continues to be a political and social transfusion on the way. The NAW educates and inspires to action the changes needed because of the ruthlessness of power. It clarifies situations that are global, national and domestic. It allows comparisons to be made and friendships to blossom. These are some of the answers, the point where I commenced this article has since moved on.

BY ALIFT HAREWOOD

from the editor

On 5 May 2011, Alift was elected to the Local Council representing Cheshire East and on 31 July, was elected Deputy Mayor of Macclesfield. As if that wasn't enough to be going on with she is still a working nurse in a local nursing home and reckons she must be one of the longest serving nurses in the UK, without a break of service since she first qualified. When I spoke to Alift recently she had just finished a local council meeting about transport services for the local community. She said "services must be closely linked with the availability of public transport and there should be shared access between services". As you can see she is one very busy lady.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SRIYANI ARIF, MARIE LYDFORD, JOAN DANVERS, MARGARET LAIRD

WEST London branch of the NAW hosted a special 90th birthday tea for their treasurer, Joan Danvers, who has been the driving force of the branch for so many years. Despite two knee replacements in the last two years, she has attended – and hosted – most of our regular bi-monthly meetings and led our fundraising efforts for many world movements. Her allotment produce, especially the much sought after jams, has played a key role in raising funds which the branch has contributed to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Medical Aid for Vietnam and Cuba, The World Development Movement, Stop the War and others.

Joan has had a special interest in supporting the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and has visited Cuba several times. She worked energetically, with

other NAW members to raise funds for Medical Aid to Cuba and made special links between our NAW branch and a home for older people in Cuba. Our branch was able to send an ambulance to Cuba along with other much needed medical supplies.

Another important issue for Joan was the campaign against the Iraq war and we built excellent links with Stop the War. In her eighties, she was with a group on the anti-war march. More recently, the branch was able to send a donation to the Gaza convoy. Her strength has always been to build personal links and ensure that any funds we raised went to a cause where they would be put to direct use. Locally, Joan worked voluntarily for many years with the Vineyard Project, supporting a local homeless hostel and working alongside another of our active members, Penny Wade. Joan's leadership qualities have been evident in her role as branch treasurer where she has always made the links between fundraising and political commitment and action.

Her 90th celebration party was hosted by Dr Susan Schonfield who provided a full afternoon tea – but true to form – we held a meeting as well and Mary Stephens agreed to represent the branch and take our branch donation in person to the Medical Aid for Vietnam AGM at the Vietnamese Embassy. Our active group owes a lot to Joan and we celebrate her long contribution to the NAW and to so many progressive causes. Long may it continue!

BY ROZ CARTER, SECRETARY OF THE WEST LONDON NAW BRANCH

news and updates

hurray: more older people!

PAM FLYNN WRITES:

A few of us were round a table chatting a week or so ago, and the subject came up of how the projected growth in numbers of older people in the UK is somehow being presented as a problem, rather than an issue for celebration. In particular, women in their 40s and 50s, who are watching their pension age move further away as a result of government imposed changes, have expressed their disappointment and frustration in sometimes inappropriate ways – by alleging to their older friends that “Well, YOU’RE alright!”

We need to be clear; the attack on pensions is not the fault of women currently in receipt of a pension.

And at the other end of the scale, young people are caught in an appalling trap whereby unemployment amongst people aged 16 to 24 is surging; shortly to be added to by more than 100,000 school leavers with A-levels who cannot secure a university place because of retrenchment in higher education. Other young people who might have hoped to go into further education cannot afford it or access it because of the abolition of education maintenance allowance and the dismantling of the 14 to 19 education strategy. Young graduates too, are finding it difficult to get employment as the private sector fails to grow and the public sector downsizes.

We need to stay solid; be clear where the source of our problems lies – in the crisis of capitalism and in speculation on the stock markets.

Looting, rioting, havoc aren’t generally in the thought processes of older people, but we share the frustrations and rage engendered by feelings of powerlessness against attack.

Let’s remember who the real enemies are and not get caught up in sniping at people younger, or older, than ourselves.

future of the state pension

MARGARET BOYLE WRITES:

In June the NAW responded to the government’s Green Paper *A State Pension for the 21st Century*. This response is on www.sisters.org.uk and includes our response to the specific questions posed by the government.

More broadly, however, we questioned its underpinning ideology sidelining any discussion about the responsibility of governments to look after their citizens in retirement, leaving it in the shameful position of appearing to aim to be one of the worst countries in the EU instead of one of the best. We felt it over-emphasised the projections on longevity to support further increases to the state pension age and with its “cost neu-

tral” approach reduced its scope for wider reforms for both current and future pensioners.

The government has now published a summary of responses to the consultation which does not set out what it will do next or any timescale for bringing forward legislative proposals. It does say that “there is broad support for reform of the state pension system, and in particular for the idea of a single tier pension. We need to think carefully about the issues raised during this consultation before making any decisions”.

Meanwhile, the government propaganda machine churns out bleak stories on the problems caused by increasing longevity and switching the debate from state to personal responsibility, promoting fear and inter-generational conflicts as it does so. Somewhere in all this the left needs to find space to argue for fair taxation policies and for national insurance as principles of a fair and civilised society. We need to set this debate on state pension provision alongside the plans the Tories and their LibDem allies have to merge the tax and national insurance systems and more immediately to abolish the 50 per cent rate. We need to make the case for paying more and fairer tax as a country to halt the slashing of public services and the welfare state.

The NAW plans to re-visit our first pensions policy paper, written more than a decade ago; this will set out the principles of a fair pensions policy meeting women’s needs. We would welcome any contributions to this debate at naw@sisters.org.uk.

women, power and politics

PAT PETERS WRITES:

Come and celebrate International Women’s Day on 10 March 2012 at Wortley Hall where a day conference is being organised by the South Yorkshire branch of the NAW alongside the Sheffield branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and sponsored by trade union Unite. The conference is centred on the empowerment of women from *Witches to Parliament*.

The organisers want this to be a fun day as well as a day where women will be inspired to do more politically.

Confirmed speakers include

- Megan Dobney talking about the role of women, past and present, in the trade union movement
- Angela Smith MP talking about the influences in her life that led her into politics and how she juggles family life with her responsibilities as a parliamentarian
- Linda McAvan MEP on how we as women can influence policies within Europe to be more family friendly.

For more information contact me at peterspat@blueyonder.co.uk

THE EDITOR WRITES:

The above conference is just one of the events to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the NAW in 2012. Don’t forget folks we need your pictures, posters and memorabilia for our NAW 60th anniversary celebrations.

abortion rights

LORENE FABIAN WRITES:

Action Alert: Anti-Choice Counselling – email your MP today!

As many of you know, plans are afoot to introduce new pre-abortion counselling for anti-choice organisations to receive public funds to advise women facing unplanned pregnancy. We need as many supporters as possible to contact their MP to urge them to vote against these proposals if they are debated in Parliament 6 September. We’ve set up an easy-to-use lobbying facility on our website. It only takes a minute to do – all you need is your postcode! It’s so important we stop these anti-choice plans in their tracks. Just last week we saw further evidence of the appalling misinformation and bad practice used by some faith-based pregnancy counselling groups in their quest to deter women from having abortions. What’s more Nadine Dorries is already indicating that she wants to reopen the debate about the abortion time limit. We have to send a clear signal to politicians of all parties that our rights are not up for negotiation and we must make sure anti-choice MPs are not emboldened to continue chipping away at abortion access. So please email your MP today and stand up for abortion rights.

[HTTP://WWW.ABORTIONRIGHTS.ORG.UK](http://www.abortionrights.org.uk)

diary dates

- NAW Executive Committee meetings are open to all NAW members. Dates: Oct. London (to be confirmed), 28 Jan. Manchester, 24 March London
- Charter for Women Conference 29 October – NUJ Offices London
- STUC Women’s Conference 14-15 November – Glasgow Concert Hall – NAW stall – come along and say hello!
- NAW 60th Anniversary Celebrations at the South Yorkshire Festival at Wortley Hall near Sheffield on 7 July 2012
- An evening event is being arranged to pay tribute to Terry Marsland, a great defender of women’s rights who never tired of encouraging and motivating women of all ages. Dates will be posted at www.sisters.org.uk when confirmed

Contact Val Duncan, NAW Secretary, on naw@sisters.org.uk for further information.

the story of Marzia

For many years under various regimes, women have lived as second class citizens in Afghanistan. Under Islamic Law they have to conform to a strict set of rules that govern their daily lives and their place in society. Women are being denied the right to work, education, health, justice, recreation and the freedom to travel. There are numerous and regular cases of severe violence against women and girls including public beatings, rape and honour killings. It is clear that the Afghan culture is currently a completely repressed and conservative society, where there is no possibility or consent for women to develop as individuals. The seriousness of their situation cannot be stressed enough.

Marzia lived in Afghanistan, doing the work that she loved as a Qasi (Judge), in family courts, helping and educating Afghan women and children for as long as she could in terrible conditions and because of that she has been forced from her homeland. She now lives as a refugee in her adopted homeland, she attends college and she is still working to help Afghan women and children.

I am an Afghani national, I am 45 years old. I am a Qasi (Judge) and a Women's Rights Activist.

My full name is Marzia Babarkarkhail. I was born in the Pol Khumri area of Afghanistan in 1966. I am the daughter of a wealthy family. My family owned a hotel, agricultural land and various other properties throughout Afghanistan. I inherited property from my grandparents; my inheritance made me a wealthy women. It is our custom not to sell your inheritance; you keep it out of respect for your family, but the income that came off the land was mine.

My direct family consisted of my mother and father (both now deceased), two brothers and four sisters.

I attended both primary and secondary school in Pol Khumri before going on to Shariat University in Kabul to study Islamic Law on a four year course. After I finished my degree I trained at the Supreme Court in Kabul and in the Family Court in Pol Khumri. I became a Judge specialising in family matters. I was given the title Qazi which means Judge, I am still addressed by that title even though I am no longer actively working as a Judge.

In 1994 I decided to set up the NGO Gafari Rehabilitation for Afghanistan. The organisation was set up to help women. I used my income as a Judge to fund my activities. I became famous as a women's rights activist, everyone knew me.



In 1988 the Taliban came to Afghanistan. They took over bit by bit. It became impossible to work as a Judge. I was marked out by the Taliban because they do not accept a woman as a Judge, also because I had started a charitable organisation which helped to emancipate women. The Taliban threatened me. I received threatening phone calls, saying they would kill me. I had to flee. After we fled to Peshawar in Pakistan the Taliban seized my family home and destroyed it.

In Pakistan I became involved with the Afghan NGO Coordination Bureau (ANCB) which had to operate out of Pakistan because of the Taliban presence in Afghanistan. I registered my organisation (GRA) with them.

In 1999 I returned to Badakhshan in Afghanistan (an area not controlled by the Taliban) where I worked as Project Manager for the World Food Project (WFP). I organised teachers to teach women how to sew and make dresses

so that they could go out and get jobs.

When that project came to an end I used the salary I had saved to fund a school for Afghani refugee children in Peshwar, called Manoocheri Gohar Khatoon School. It was the first school of its kind in Peshawar, later other schools opened.

In 2001 the Taliban fell and the Hamid Karzai administration began. I continued my work in Afghanistan. The ANCB returned to Kabul at that time. I changed the name of my organisation from GRA to AWSCO (Afghani Women's Social and Cultural Organisation), my work with them was on a voluntary basis, I received a salary from the NGO. I was working for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and for women's rights. I attended international conferences in Japan, Italy and the US. My activities ensured I was a public figure in Afghanistan both with the media and television.

In about 2003 once again I began receiving threatening phone calls from

MARZIA BABARKARKHAIL FAR RIGHT IN THE PICTURE ABOVE AND ON THE RIGHT IN THIS PICTURE



another **great** lecture!

the Taliban and because the Taliban were not strong I didn't take these threats seriously, but after I returned from the US in 2005 the situation had changed again in Afghanistan. The Taliban were re-establishing and becoming much stronger. The Taliban had started killing women who worked.

I started to take the threats more seriously and varied my work routines in and around Afghanistan. The situation became more dangerous as the Taliban's power increased. However, because I continued to speak out against the Taliban, the threatening phone calls from the Taliban continued, telling me I was not a Muslim, they were very distressing. Another threat I received in a letter from the Taliban said that I was a woman who talked in public and that no matter where I was in Afghanistan I could not escape from them. Another said I always travelled to Christian countries, that I was a spy and that I was trying to convert Muslim women to Christianity.

In the beginning of 2008 the Taliban were more powerful than ever in Afghanistan. After I got another threatening letter in November 2008 I knew I had to get out of Afghanistan because my life was in danger. I asked for the earliest available flight.

When I arrived in my adopted homeland, I spoke to my family in Peshawar; my mother (who has since passed away) and my brothers and I also keep in touch with friends there.

I cannot return to Afghanistan. My family cannot protect me. My brothers are just ordinary people, they are afraid. If I go back to any part of Afghanistan it will be known, even in the small villages. The villages are lawless. The Taliban are everywhere.

Marzia is now settling into her adopted homeland, concentrating on learning the language and customs so that she can further use the education (she has passed her first year of her studies with top marks and has been invited to take part in the second year of education which she is looking forward to) and experiences she already has and to carry on the work she started 20 years ago, to help the women and children of Afghanistan wherever they are.

Marzia also acknowledges and appreciates the support she has had from the government, her local GP and support services like Refugee Action through their case work and mentoring services and local women's groups.

**MARZIA'S STORY WILL CONTINUE
IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF SISTERS**



DR JO STANLEY

THE tenth Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture *Suffrage Campaigners on the Ocean Wave*, a little known part of Sylvia's campaigning, was hugely successful and inspirational. Dr Jo Stanley brought it to life in August at Wortley Hall with an excellent visual presentation. This is her brief introduction to what was a very enjoyable hour.

Fighting for women's rights brought an inadvertent side-effect: it encouraged thousands of suffragists and suffragettes to seize the freedom of the seas, roads and railway lines. Women who had never before left their home town went campaigning and networking across the Atlantic and Pacific. They ventured thousands of miles, alone or with sisters from the movement, to give and attend key confer-

ences, make lecture tours and investigate conditions. It was a revolution in international connecting and as profound as the internet revolution of our times.

Sylvia was one of the many women to seize her rights to mobility by sailing on ships, be it cross-channel steamer to Paris, little ferries from Dublin or deep sea liners. In WW1 a tiny number of suffragettes such as her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel sailed with impunity for reactionary ends, whereas suffragists were effectively banned from the seas. However, Sylvia was a key fighter against the ban on peace campaigners' rights to attend the 1915 Hague International Conference of Women for a Permanent Peace; it could have ended the war. More than any other organisation, her ELF supported sailors' (and soldiers') wives.

The lecture told the stories of both gallant sailings and frustrations at quaysides. It celebrated the geographical mobility that accompanied women's new freedoms as they pressed impressively forward to build justice worldwide.

The slides are available on the website <http://sylviapankhurst.gn.apc.org/>

the statue

The campaign to erect a statue to Sylvia on College Green has been revitalised over the past few months with the determination of Baroness Brenda Dean who has sent 300 personally signed letters to Peers and MPs urging support. She was encouraged by the response and will be arranging a meeting of influential parliamentarians with a view to taking the campaigning forward and challenging the opposition.

BY BARBARA SWITZER



**SYLVIA PANKHURST
MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
MEMBERS PHILIPPA
CLARK AND MARY DAVIS
WITH DENISE CHRISTIE
FROM THE FBU**

naw in the 1980s

1984 saw one of the most vicious attacks in the latter part of the last century, that of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, on the National Union of Mineworkers. Again, as in so many struggles, women (some of whom were NAW members) bore the brunt of keeping families together and children fed and clothed. However, such was their commitment to the struggle that miners' wives support groups were born and a message went out to the government that the women stood shoulder to shoulder with the men. Throughout the country NAW groups joined with others to give what support they could. One member recalled that in Yorkshire, a heavy mining county, they ensured that every child had a selection box at Christmas and a chocolate egg at Easter-time. They also collected money and raised £800 – £1 for every child affected. Every contribution no matter how small was valuable.

This experience brought with it a new era of activity and when Thatcher dealt her fatal blow to the mining industry Women Against Pit Closures emerged and again women in the trade unions, other organisations and NAW members rallied in support.

The regeneration of activity on women's issues throughout the UN Decade of Women (1975-1985) provoked new interest in the NAW, which had the broadest appeal to all women and was capable of co-ordinating the work. It was decided therefore that efforts had to be made to gain and build branches, seek affiliations and increase membership and so make the NAW a force to be reckoned with. Since that date, much hard work brought a measure of success. New branches were formed and many new affiliations made. National and international conferences have been held and members have taken part in many international events organised by the Women's International Democratic Federation. Part of that success was the 120-strong delegation to the 1987 Congress in Moscow, uniting women from all walks of life who became richer for the experience of meeting sisters from all over the world. The commitment to participation in international sisterhood continued to be a major strand of the NAW's work and in 1988 we were represented on the WIDF delegation at a conference in Afghanistan on the role of Public Opinion in Resolving Regional Conflicts.

As we all know there was a lot more going on in this decade, with Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government's crusade to sell everything that wasn't nailed down. It all sounds so familiar with another Conservative government, propped up by the Lib/Dems, and since there is nothing left to sell off they are hell bent on abolishing the Public Sector. We are seeing/hearing on a daily basis about services being cut, jobs being lost, millions of pounds being lost in payments to private companies who very kindly built schools and hospitals for us in PSI projects, money which should be available to provide vital services. We are hearing about more and more families being forced to try to survive below the bread-line and a generation of young women and men with no hope of employment, free education or a decent life. That is why it is vital that we the women of the world must once again rise to the challenge, to show this Con/Dem government that their policies brought the UK to its knees in the 80s and that's exactly where we are heading again.

BY JANETTE FERGUSON

statement on the new Peace Camp at RAF Waddington

Dear friends

I learnt recently that RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire had become the home base for the Reaper Stealth bombers (Drones). I was horrified.

Having lived through WW2, I witnessed the destruction of my grandmother's house, cut in two by a V11 rocket (as we then called them).

I feel deeply ashamed that we now in the 21st century are bringing back Nazi technology to blight the future. Killing and maiming others for oil it appears, while our 'pilots' sit in comfort and safety at their computer consoles, thousands of miles away

Murder by remote control. Whatever next?

Will we follow Werner Von Braun, the inventor of this weapons system? He hanged 800 prisoners of war and left the corpses hanging as a daily reminder to the captive workforce not to continue sabotage.

We have seen the back of Cruise Missiles, the son of Von Braun, now we have the grandson Drones. Do we want them? – NO.

Von Braun and other prominent Nazis were welcomed with open arms into the USA after a change in the constitution – what have we gained or lost?

Can we afford this criminal folly, I think not.

COME TO THE NEW (OPEN TO ALL) PEACE CAMP AT RAF WADDINGTON ON SATURDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2011 (Anniversary of the Onset of WW2)

BE VISIBLE AND VERY VOCAL

MAKE OUR OPPOSITION LOUD AND CLEAR

WE WILL NOT ACCEPT NAZI TECHNOLOGY

THINK AGAIN OBAMA AND THE MICE IN 10 DOWNING STREET

Hope to see you at the peace camp on the 3rd

IN SISTERHOOD AND TOTAL DEFIANCE
HELEN JOHN

hiroshima remembered

6 August 2011 was the 66th anniversary of that fateful day when the US dropped a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and on Nagasaki three days later. We ask ourselves: has anything really changed?

The words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at the Riverside Church in New York on 1 May last year, still resounds in our ears:

What I see on the horizon is a world free of nuclear weapons.

What I see before me are the people who will help make it happen.

Please keep up your good work. Sound the alarm, keep up the pressure.

Ask your leaders what they are doing... personally... to eliminate the nuclear menace.

Above all, continue to be the voice of conscience.

We will rid the world of nuclear weapons.

And when we do, it will be because of people like you.

The world owes you its gratitude.

BY JANETTE FERGUSON

naw history two perspectives

It was 1981 and we had just moved into our first house. Despite being burdened with a huge mortgage we were excited at having more space and a garden for our young son and baby daughter to play in.

I had lived in a council flat for many years and been deeply involved in the tenants' movement, actively campaigning against the Conservative government's housing policy which stopped local authorities building council houses, encouraged them to sell off existing stock, and promoted home ownership. It was therefore a sad irony that we became "home owners" – not purchasing a council house which my Tory local authority encouraged – but a private purchase of a terraced house in south London.

The move inevitably meant I had to stand down as the Chair of the London Federation of Tenants and give up my position on the Greater London Council Housing Committee, although I have never lost my belief in the need for good quality public housing.

During the school holidays I had volunteered to proofread articles for Mikki Doyle, Women's Editor of the *Morning Star*. We were good friends and comrades and I valued her political opinion so I asked her what I should do next. In her usual forthright way she said "Go into the National Assembly of Women!" and not being one to contradict her I duly joined the NAW.

The NAW had a South London Branch which had among its members a close friend of Mikki, retired primary teacher and former Filipina liberation fighter, Celia Pomeroy. Celia was a true internationalist and tireless campaigner for medical aid for the newly established Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The meetings never failed to expand my understanding and as I got more involved I took on the responsibility of editing our national journal *Sisters*, cutting and pasting articles by hand on the living room floor!

The 1980s were a turbulent time. Margaret Thatcher had come to power in 1979 and was determined to change the economic and social landscape in the interests of capital by whatever means necessary. Public spending was cut; competitive tendering and privatisation introduced in the public sector; trade union rights were seriously eroded and a woman's right to choose was under siege through the introduction of the Alton Bill. At the same time Thatcher engaged in a war against Argentina over their attempt to seize the disputed territories of the Malvinas Islands. Inevitably unemployment rose, the gap between rich and poor increased and we saw riots in the streets across England in 1981 and 1985. Organised fightback was intense with a sustained and bitter fight by



trade unionists, notably the miners, with women fighting alongside to save jobs and their community.

Like many other organisations the NAW was attempting to analyse the situation and decided to organise a major conference. It was held in Coram's Fields London and chaired by NAW Secretary, Dorothy Kuya, the charismatic Liverpool civil rights campaigner. Over 100 women from a variety of backgrounds attended the conference and the debate, whilst sometimes heated, provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the relationship between race, class and gender, a subject covered in the 1982 book by the American communist Angela Davis.

Despite the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 the fight for equality was far from won and the whole of the decade required women to continue the campaign for equality, particularly in the field of abortion rights, job opportunities, maternity rights and childcare. Responding to these issues the NAW organised a number of national and international conferences on these topics and marched to Hyde Park with our banner alongside many other women's groups on International Women's Day.

The NAW has always numbered amongst its ranks some of the most inspirational women, and as I reflect on my early days in the organisation I can see how it has helped to shape, refine and consolidate my commitment to the fight for peace, equality and social justice.

BY ANITA WRIGHT



I joined the National Assembly of Women in the 1980s – I cannot remember precisely when! Maggie Bowden who was at that time the Communist Party of Great Britain Women's Organiser told me about the National Assembly of Women's objectives both domestically and internationally. At that time I was working for the engineering union and I had also joined the CPGB. I was finding my feet politically and women in the NAW were both inspiring and supportive – so I joined. Like many other organisations on the left, the National Assembly of Women was not without its feuds and factions and there were times when this was more than tedious. However there were always good sisters in the organisation who were able to rise above petty personality clashes – Maggie, Terry Marsland, Megan Dobney, Barbara Switzer to name only a few. We also had some outstanding younger women involved such as Lynn Collins.

They introduced the politics of women's liberation into the NAW – support for a woman's right to choose, progressive policies on sexual orientation and sexual politics. These areas sat alongside the campaigning for peace and solidarity, for oppressed women throughout the world.

It was fascinating to listen to some of the older sisters who had a wealth of experience and a lifetime of commitment which they shared generously and patiently with us newer members – Connie Seifert, Celia Pomeroy and Adele Gierschick (who came to Sheffield as a refugee from fascism).

The NAW was also part of the other organisations which were teaching me so much – The CPGB, Wortley Hall, the Marx Memorial Library and of course the left in the engineering union. It was an exciting time. It was a time of optimism and energy. Whilst my determination to continue fighting for socialism is undimmed, my energy has dwindled – which makes me even more admiring of our NAW sisters who keep on fighting to right the wrongs of a society which is badly broken.

BY PHILIPPA CLARK

voices of Wortley Hall

VOICES OF WORTLEY HALL
THE STORY OF "LABOUR'S HOME" 1951-2011
BY JOHN CORNWELL

THEY call it "the workers' stately home", and Wortley Hall certainly lives up to its billing. Just for once, we can genuinely say that nothing is too good for the workers. For centuries it was the seat of landed gentry, the coal-owning Earls of Wharnccliffe, set among broad, rolling acres in the Pennine foothills north of Sheffield. Here, they lived the life of pampered English aristocracy, the Downton Hall of their times.

All that changed with World War Two, when Wortley was requisitioned first by the British Army and then a unit of black US servicemen who camped in the sumptuous grounds while their white officers lived it up in the Hall. Their various depredations left the building in a sorry state, and the cash-strapped 4th Earl offered the lease to anyone who would take on the mammoth task of restoration.

He did not expect that the only bid would come from left field, from a remarkable man, Vin Williams, a self-educated ex-miner, local union leader in the 1926 General Strike jailed for publishing a strike newspaper, a member of the Communist Party and an admirer of the Soviet Union's palaces of culture. "Why should only the wealthy occupy grand houses?" he asked his comrades.

Why, indeed. On 4 May 1950, in what was once Lady Wharnccliffe's sitting room, the bemused Earl gave him the Hall on a 15 year lease, £50 rent for the first year and £500 thereafter. Renovation would be the work of trade union labour. And what labour it was. A small army of volunteers restored and re-equipped the empty shell of the building, which was reborn in 1951 as "Labour's Educational, Recreational and Holiday Home".

From the start, it was owned by shareholders who had to be members of a trade union, the Labour Party or similar labour movement organisations, and no-one could own more than 200 one shilling shares. All had only one vote in guiding the future of the enterprise. That principle survives today, though the shares cost £1 each, and I must declare an interest of owning 50. The Fourth Earl, nostalgic for his childhood home, was denied membership until he became a drummer and joined the Musicians' Union!

From the early fifties to the present day, Wortley Hall has kept faith with its original ideals, though it has been extensively (and meticulously) restored to its former grandeur. The rooms now have all mod cons. There are no barrack-style dorms for the men, and women no longer have to



kneel on the corridor floor to dry their hair. The grounds, including a walled garden, have been magnificently reinstated, and act as the venue for the annual South Yorkshire Festival, bringing together unions, Labour and progressive voices on the first Saturday of July each year. Political education and training continues, but you can get married there, too.

Wortley Hall is a success story of the Left, a showpiece of what enterprise socialism can do when left to its own creative devices. Its 60 year history is celebrated in John Cornwell's new book, published to commemorate the long march from ruin to rural revelation. There were some political spats along the way – this is the Left, after all – but what he gives us is a story of compelling dedication by a quite small group of working class men and women who realised a dream through sheer, bloody hard work. They left us something to cherish and enjoy. Don't just buy the book, go there and appreciate what they did for us.

AVAILABLE FROM WORTLEY HALL
WORTLEY VILLAGE, SHEFFIELD S35 7DB

TELEPHONE 01142 882 100
INFO@WORTLEYHALL.ORG.UK
WWW.WORTLEYHALL.ORG.UK

£10 SOFTBACK, £15 HARDBACK PLUS £2.50
POST AND PACKAGE

naw at Wortley

On Saturday 2 July 2011 the women of the NAW gathered at Wortley Hall, in its 60th anniversary year, for the South Yorkshire Festival.

We surpassed ourselves this year, our stall was double the size it was last year (the gazebo picked up in a sale at a very reasonable price!) and as you can see from the photo it gave us plenty of space to remind everyone about the Con/Dem cuts and their impact on women *and* we raised a substantial sum to fund the future work of the National Assembly of Women.



LEFT TO RIGHT: TREASURER ELEANOR LEWINGTON, EC MEMBER MEGAN DOBNEY, PRESIDENT DONA FELTHAM, EC MEMBERS ANITA WRIGHT AND JANETTE FERGUSON

join the NAW now!

*I would like to join the NAW. Here is £15 for the annual subscription (£5 unwaged) which includes my subscription to **sisters**, the journal of the NAW.*

Our organisation would like to affiliate to the NAW. Enclosed is: £15 (local organisation/NAW branch), £30 (regional organisation), £45 (national)

Name _____

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