

MARCHING TO ALDERMASTON - TEN YEARS AGO!

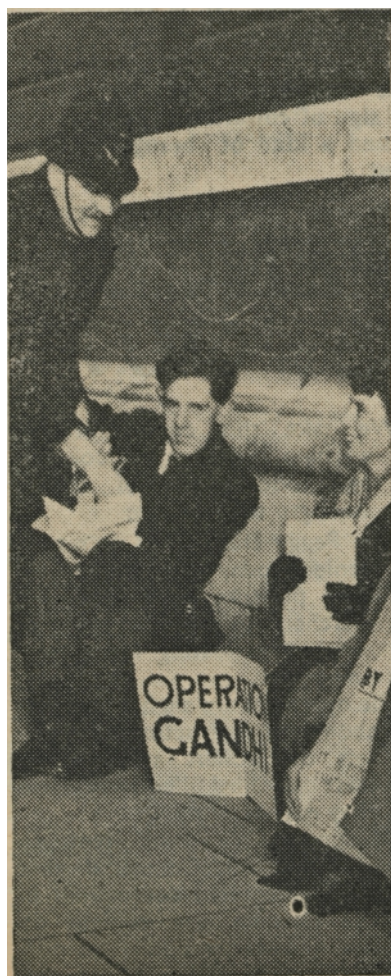
SOMEWHERE atomic bombs were being made in Britain; US bomber bases were being quietly established here too, while in Korea petrol-jelly bombs were being dropped on the straw and bamboo homes of peasant people.

What could we do about it, we who were members of a group which for two years had been studying and discussing the subject of non-violent action, and who wanted to get over the idea that war was useless in the defence of human values and human rights?

Twelve of us who were prepared to go to prison if we could find an effective method of civil disobedience, and others who were prepared to give moral support to non-violent action, formed a group known briefly as "Operation Gandhi" and later as "The Non-violent Resistance Group". The name was changed because Gandhi's friends in India told us that the Mahatma did not want his name perpetuated, he wanted his ideas practised.

During the winter of 1951 we came up with the idea of sitting on the pavement outside the War Office, with supporters giving out leaflets in Whitehall explaining our opposition to "the policy of indiscriminate war and the turning of Britain into an atom-bomb base for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation".

The story of this sit-down is told more fully in my pamphlet, *The Century of Total War*. It has to be mentioned here because it both brought new recruits to "Operation



Hugh Brock, editor of *Peace News*, tells here the story of the first, forgotten Aldermaston march on April 19th 1952.



This is how it all began. ABOVE, the first Aldermaston marchers walk round the perimeter of the new Research Establishment, ten years ago this Easter. BELOW LEFT, law and protest in combination at the "Operation Gandhi

War Office sit-down. Gandhi" and left us dissatisfied at being unable to demonstrate at the place where the bombs were being made.

Where was Britain's A-bomb plant?

We knew about the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell, the much boosted centre of research into the civilian uses of atomic energy, but had no clue to the bomb plant until someone suggested that there was another Atomic Energy Research Establishment in the Reading area which might be the place. It came from one of those types who are gluttons for bus timetables and seem to absorb every detail in them. He had noticed a bus stopping at "the AERE", and it certainly wasn't at Harwell. It was near a little village called Aldermaston.

"Well, if it isn't where they're making the bomb, we can protest about all this atomic secrecy," we said.

But we felt in our bones that this was the place.

So with little more than a hunch to go on, I was sent down to Aldermaston in the early weeks of 1952 to survey the area and report back to "Operation Gandhi".

It was an unforgettable trip. The walk from the station to the lovely village of Aldermaston (pop. 300); taking the wrong fork from the village green and so walking round the whole of the disused aerodrome which had been taken over for the AERE, then round to the tiny Falcon Inn—no extensions had been built to it then.

It was the vast stacks of bricks and piles of girders which most imprinted itself on my mind. This was at a time when people were crying out for schools and hospitals, for re-building after the bombing of World War II.

I ate my sandwiches, and hung

around to see what happened at mid-day when work stopped on the site.

Soon a fleet of buses and coaches left from a huge parking area, west of the Falcon and the present main entrance. They carried away a thousand or more builders and other workmen to hostels in neighbouring towns. Here was a "crash programme" being carried out of which almost everyone in Britain was ignorant.

I returned to London and reported. Operation Gandhi *Newsletter* No. 1 went out with a call for demonstrators to go to Aldermaston on April 19, 1952, the first of a series of demonstrations against atomic and bacteriological warfare plants and bomber bases spread over the next eighteen months.

"The plant," said the newsletter, "covers a large area of nearly two square miles. . . . Something like 50 squatters would be required to make an effective demonstration at the gate. This would not, unfortunately, be the only entrance: there is a contractors' entrance through which pass the lorries bringing building materials. The project is still under discussion and a further report will be given in our next newsletter."

The next newsletter announced that a coach had been hired to take demonstrators to Aldermaston. There were only thirty-five of us, however, and a sit-down seemed impracticable. A group, nevertheless, volunteered to sit if the police prevented the demonstration marching past the plant and leafleting the workers.

We got out of our chartered Grey Green coach (the same company last year supplied vehicles to the police for the hundreds arrested in the Trafalgar Square sit-down!) at the village and were met by two local policemen. They warned us that if the workmen at the plant became violent we could not expect any kind

of protection. Was the man in hiking gear sitting on the green behind them a plain clothes policeman? I've always thought so.

In single file we walked from the village green along the lanes to the Falcon. How silly we felt as an occasional farm-hand turned to wave at us. We had never paraded with posters in the country before, only in busy shopping centres.

But our moment was to come. We were walking past the bus park as the vehicles came out loaded with men from the site, and our leaflet distributors were there in advance, handing up bundles of leaflets to the men to give out on the buses. Some of them cheered, some jeered. Most of them read our posters: "Atomic secrecy breeds fear"; "Atom bombs disgrace democracy"; "Money spent on guns and bombs can't be spent on homes and schools".

We lunched by the roadside close to the Falcon, then trudged back to the village for a meeting on the green; and so home.

Looking back now, I see that the important thing about Aldermaston '52, was not so much the immediate impact of the demonstration, but the fact that our original dozen at the War Office had its numbers swollen by a teenage conscientious objector, Michael Randle, an ex-serviceman, Austin Underwood, and others who are today playing an active part in CND.

In 1958 Laurence Brown, who had organised leaflet distribution at Aldermaston years earlier, was route marshal and time-keeper for the march from London to Aldermaston. As he neared the plant he was met by a 400-strong column from the West of England, headed by Austin Underwood. And organising the advance leafleting was Michael Randle.

The signposts had changed, however. The letters AERE were now AWRE. Our hunch was right; it was the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment.

KENNETH KAUNDA

speaks on Northern Rhodesia at Conway Hall, 7.30 pm,

Thursday, April 26, 1962

Chairman: Bishop of Woolwich

Admission Is.

Organisers: Freedom Fund—
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