



# THE BATTLE FOR LEITH HILL

HOW A COMMUNITY CAME TOGETHER TO  
PROTECT THE BEAUTIFUL SURREY HILLS  
FROM OIL AND GAS DRILLING

With a foreword by Keith Taylor, campaigner and  
Green MEP for the South East, 2010-2019



# CONTENTS

- 1 KEITH TAYLOR: FOREWORD
- 4 TIMELINE: A HISTORY OF THE FIGHT AGAINST OIL AND GAS DRILLING AT LEITH HILL
- 6 LEITH HILL ACTION GROUP: ADVICE ON SETTING UP AND SUSTAINING A CAMPAIGN GROUP
- 11 A VOICE FOR LEITH HILL: PRESERVING BEAUTY THROUGH CREATIVITY
- 14 LEITH HILL PROTECTION CAMP: PEACEFUL DIRECT ACTION
- 18 RUTH HAYHURST: COVERING THE BATTLE FOR LEITH HILL



Simon Hodgson, Chief Executive of Forest Enterprise England, is represented by a twig after refusing an invitation to meet with residents and Keith Taylor MEP to talk about oil drilling in the Surrey Hills.

## FOREWORD BY KEITH TAYLOR

GREEN PARTY MEP FOR THE SOUTH EAST, 2010-2019

**What a difference a summer makes.** In the spring of 2018, the decade-long battle<sup>1</sup> to protect Leith Hill, a mixed woodland and heathland in the heart of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, from oil drilling almost seemed lost. The Environment Agency<sup>2</sup> and the Oil and Gas Authority<sup>3</sup> had already handed Europa Oil and Gas the permits and permissions they needed to drill. Surrey County Council was set to consider three planning applications<sup>4</sup> to extend the permission to drill Europa had already gained in 2015 from the Planning Inspectorate<sup>5</sup>. The final piece of the jigsaw would have been the lease agreement between Europa and Forest Enterprise England (FEE), the public body charged with managing our woodlands.

The agreement between Europa and FEE was due to expire in September. The decision loomed large over the summer months. I wrote to Simon Hodgson, Chief Executive of Forest Enterprise and the Forestry Commission<sup>6</sup>, with my concerns over the contradiction between the organisation's climate policies and plans to hire out the forest estate for oil drilling. I also asked Mr Hodgson to come to meet with me and locals to hear their concerns. And also their plans to crowdfund<sup>7</sup> to raise the money to buy Europa out of its lease.

Astonishingly, in July, Mr Hodgson flatly refused<sup>8</sup> my invitation and went even further to say that he had no intention of meeting me, or residents on whose behalf I was arranging the meeting, anywhere or any time. The FEE's decision, it was made clear, would not be influenced by residents or campaigners and their legitimate and urgent concerns. *"I see no benefit in having a meeting on site or indeed elsewhere,"* as the FEE chief so bluntly put it.

I could not believe a taxpayer-funded body would be so dismissive of those taxpayers and their elected representatives. We refused to let our voices be silenced so easily. Instead, we held the meeting anyway. Mr Hodgson in his absence was represented by a twig [9]. Residents shared with me their reasons for wanting to preserve the sanctity of the ancient woodlands at Leith Hill. But the meeting was as symbolic as it was enlightening; it also sent a powerful message to FEE. The organisation had failed to 'twig' how important protecting Leith Hill was to local residents.

The fight against drilling plans at Leith Hill has been taken up by local residents, many of whom have never protested anything before in their lives, working hand-in-hand with seasoned environmental campaigners and activists. The diversity of people on the frontlines of the Leith Hill demonstrations I have attended has been inspiring. For me, there is an undeniable environmental and climate impetus behind resisting any attempts to exploit new fossil fuel reserves. But the dedication of campaigners, like those at Leith Hill, reinvigorated my drive to support them, as best as I am able, towards victory.

With that in mind, I wrote to the Environment Secretary Michael Gove<sup>10</sup> pleading with him to intervene over Europa's lease agreement with FEE. I sent the letter in June 2018. I did not receive a response. But two months later, with the Met Office confirming anthropogenic climate change had been the driving cause of England's hottest summer ever recorded<sup>11</sup>, Mr Gove made a decision that suggested he had taken heed of the call I and many others had made. On 4 September 2018, almost ten years after the firm first announced its designs on Leith Hill, Europa announced<sup>13</sup> it was pulling out of the site as the Environment Minister had rejected their bid to extend their lease.

The Conservative government is openly pushing policies to support and subsidise the fossil fuel industry<sup>14</sup> while handicapping the emergent renewables sector<sup>15</sup>. With that in mind, the

victory at Leith Hill is one we must savour. It is an example of just how powerful organised and peaceful protest can be. We owe this result to the dedicated campaigners who put their lives on hold to take up the fight.

The lessons learned from the battle for Leith Hill need to be shared far and wide. And that is what this publication aims to do, by giving voice to the frontline campaigners and activists who were there every step of the way. Contained within this booklet is invaluable insights and perspectives on running a successful anti-drilling campaign. Representatives of *A Voice For Leith Hill*, the *Leith Hill Action Group* and activists from the *Leith Hill protection camp* discuss the strategic highs and lows of a decade-long campaign. I have also invited the well-respected and genuinely independent journalist behind *DrillOrDrop.com* to give an overview of the campaign as it developed.

Each chapter is as fascinating as it is unique, but they all contain one clear and overarching message: protest and public pressure works. Despite a series of setbacks, a dedicated and determined campaign has emerged victorious in Leith Hill. It is my hope that their experience can inspire others to success.

Share the wisdom far and wide and who knows what we will have achieved by this time next summer.

1 <https://drillordrop.com/bury-hill-wood-holmwood-surrey/>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/environmental-permits-issued-for-holmwood-drilling-site>

3 <https://drillordrop.com/2018/07/25/leith-hill-oil-site-europa-seeks-three-more-years-plus-updates-on-licence-extension-and-permit/>

4 <https://drillordrop.com/bury-hill-wood-holmwood-surrey/>

5 <https://www.surreycommunity.info/lhag/assets/documents/second-public-inquiry-inspe>

6 <https://www.keithtaylormep.org.uk/news/yew-cannot-be-serious-local-residents-snubbed-forestry-commission-surrey>

7 <https://www.voiceforleithhill.co.uk/2018/06/04/single-released/>

8 <https://www.scribd.com/document/383794581/FEE-reply-to-Keith-Taylor-MEP-26-6-2018>

9 <https://www.keithtaylormep.org.uk/news/yew-cannot-be-serious-local-residents-snubbed-forestry-commission-surrey>

10 [https://www.keithtaylormep.org.uk/sites/default/files/download/2018-09/Gove\\_Forestry\\_Commission\\_06.06.2018%20%281%29.pdf](https://www.keithtaylormep.org.uk/sites/default/files/download/2018-09/Gove_Forestry_Commission_06.06.2018%20%281%29.pdf)

11 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/sep/03/summer-2018-uk-joint-hottest-on-record-met-office-says>

12 <https://drillordrop.com/2018/09/04/environment-secretary-blocks-oil-drilling-in-the-surrey-hills-to-protect-ancient-woodland/>

13 <https://drillordrop.com/2018/09/04/breaking-oil-companies-pull-out-of-leith-hill-exploration-site-in-surrey/>

14 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/fracking-development-government-plan-accelerate-shale-gas-carbon-emissions-a8355756.html>

15 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/jan/16/uk-green-energy-investment-plunges-after-policy-changes>



## ADVICE ON SETTING UP AND SUSTAINING A CAMPAIGN GROUP

BY MAX ROSENBERG,  
CHAIR OF THE LEITH HILL  
ACTION GROUP



### A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE LEITH HILL ACTION GROUP

The Leith Hill Action Group (LHAG) was formed in March 2009 with the sole intention of preventing Europa Oil and Gas drilling for hydrocarbons at Leith Hill, under the small village of Coldharbour<sup>16</sup>, near Dorking in Surrey. The village is located within the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty<sup>17</sup> (AONB); inside an Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV) and within the Metropolitan Green Belt. Throughout its campaign, LHAG attracted considerable media interest and gained more than 100,000 supporters from all walks of life and from right across the world. LHAG raised £100,000 from individual donors, families, businesses and Mole Valley District Council and with this astonishing level of support, LHAG campaigned tirelessly and consistently for nearly ten years. Then in September 2018, the Environment Secretary decided that he would not extend Europa's lease to drill on Forestry Commission land at Bury Hill Wood, Leith Hill and so Europa was required to withdraw the application.

### WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITHIN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS OF THE PLANNING SYSTEM

Right from the very start, the LHAG committee needed to check and question every single plan, map and document submitted by Europa to Surrey County Council (SCC) and, yes, there were many errors, inconsistencies and anomalies. Likewise, we also scrutinised and critiqued every single reply from SCC back to Europa because of errors, anomalies and, at times, SCC's total misunderstanding of planning regulation and planning law. LHAG responded robustly to every single planning application and condition that Europa presented to SCC and we kept all of our supporters updated of events and issues as they unfolded, in a bi-monthly newsletter. We kept in regular contact and received support from parish councillors; district councillors; some county councillors and some occasional support from our constituency MP. We received excellent legal counsel from Landmark Chambers, whilst the Surrey branch and Kent branch of The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) provided some financial and consultancy support.

### SOME OF THE LEITH HILL ACTION GROUP'S KEY WINS ALONG THE WAY

In May 2011, more than 2,000 letters of objection were submitted to Surrey County Council's Planning and Regulatory Committee<sup>18</sup>. The sheer volume of this mailbag and the points raised helped to persuade this committee to overturn their own planning officers' report. In doing so, SCC refused Europa's first planning application outright. Then in December 2011, an appeal against this refusal was lodged by Europa. LHAG was granted Rule-6 status<sup>19</sup> to be a full party alongside the appellant and SCC in the first Public Inquiry, which took place in July 2012 and in which Europa was unsuccessful. In November 2012, Europa launched a challenge in the High Court with LHAG as third defendants. LHAG produced several witness statements and were represented by a barrister in the High Court hearing during July 2013. Europa won that appeal and so the Inspector's decision from the first Public Inquiry was duly quashed. LHAG then took the case to the Court of Appeal and we were unsuccessful and so a second Public Inquiry with a different Planning Inspector was held for 7 days during April and May 2015. This time, the Inspector found in favour of Europa, however, he still imposed 23 conditions. The hardest condition to fulfil was for Europa to mutually agree on a workable road traffic plan with SCC and this never happened as the traffic plan was deferred by SCC on two separate occasions.

Additionally, Europa made several contentious attempts to increase the size of the drill-site which included extending the perimeter fencing by stealth. The original permission granted by the Inspector at the second Public Inquiry was strictly for 18 weeks only. However, for some bizarre reason, SCC concurred with Europa and gave consent for the fencing to be

extended for a period of 52 weeks. LHAG disagreed and then challenged this decision, with legal representation. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government agreed with LHAG that the 52 week period would require a brand new Environmental Impact Assessment and strongly implied that the 18-week fence would need the same.

## OTHER CAMPAIGN GROUPS

From 2015, A Voice for Leith Hill (AVFLH) added its weight to the campaign. Then in October 2016, the Leith Hill Protection Camp became heavily involved which was totally predictable from the very moment that SCC received over 2,000 letters of representation against the development. People feel strongly and deeply about 'protected areas' of the countryside and will protest to defend the right to protect them from destruction and harm. Currently, right across our green and pleasant land, penny-share hydrocarbon cowboys are drilling for oil and gas reserves at incalculable cost to our precious environment. Moreover, our water supplies are being compromised and earthquake activity in the north and the south-east of England is being directly linked (by independent experts) with the highly contentious practices of 'acidisation' and 're injection'.

## ADVICE FOR OTHER CAMPAIGNERS FIGHTING SIMILAR DEVELOPMENTS



Always try to network with key decision makers even if it takes years to get their confidence and support

Never ever, ever give up, even if it takes a decade!

## 10 steps for setting up and sustaining a campaign

- 1 Planning application notice** – This is issued by the County Planning Authority (CPA) and marks the commencement of the consultation process. It details the proposed site area of the development and gives the planning application number (e.g. SCC ref 2017/0027). It is normally sent to properties adjoining/surrounding the development and should be pinned to a gate or tree at the entrance to the proposed site.
- 2 Set up and meet as a steering group/committee** – Do this as soon as possible, as the consultation process might only last a few weeks and this timeframe itself might need to be challenged. The ideal size for an action group is as large as you can make it and the steering group between five and 10. Ideally, the steering group members will have skills such as planning, legal, marketing, press, finance, environment etc. It also helps to have a member of the local parish council in the steering group. Download all the application documents and note the key points so you are prepared for step three.
- 3 As a steering group set up a meeting to form an action group** – Do this as soon as possible to guarantee local awareness and to encourage a high number of letters of concern/objection. Sign people up with their email details and skills and collect donations. Agree at this meeting to a name for the action group. Invite the local MP, county councillor, district councillor, parish councillors, CPRE and local press to this too.
- 4 Open an action group bank account** – To receive donations and pay for essentials like stationery, printing, consultants, legal etc.
- 5 Set up an action group website** – Do this as soon as possible.
- 6 Maintain regular contact with your local MP, councillors, local press and radio** – To maximise awareness in the community and to benefit from their own experience and their contacts. It can take years to build trust so keep at it.
- 7 Produce newsletters** – Do this as soon as possible and, if possible, every two months or so. But, obviously, more regularly at the start of the campaign and when urgent action is needed.
- 8 Establish a named contact at the Environment Agency** – Do this as soon as possible and build a meaningful rapport with them. For initial contact, you can use [enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk) or phone 03708 506506.
- 9 Establish a named contact at your local Wildlife Trust** – This can help considerably with ecology and habitat issues. In Surrey, for example, you can email [info@surreywt.org](mailto:info@surreywt.org) or phone 01483 79544. For Sussex, the email is [enquiries@sussexwt.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@sussexwt.org.uk) and phone number is 01273 492630.
- 10 Establish a named contact at your local water company** – As they are often left out of the loop and can be very supportive.

## WHAT NOW FOR LHAG?

LHAG continues to monitor the situation at Leith Hill as Europa passed control of the Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence (PEDL 143) from the Oil and Gas Authority (OGA) for exploratory drilling under the village to UK Oil and Gas (UKOG) in March 2019. So they might conceivably lease a site from a local landowner to enable them to drill the prospect, or they could sell the PEDL licence on again to some other penny-share outfit.

## THE GOVERNMENT INTENDS TO RELAX PLANNING LAWS FOR THE HYDROCARBON INDUSTRY

It is an absolute affront to our democracy, that, in 2019, the UK government is still looking to relax planning law and planning regulations for hydrocarbon companies. This conclusively demonstrates the government's cynical contempt for the Localism Act and the Paris Agreement 2015 and Katowice 2018. Ministers show precious little regard for our fragile environment and the flora and fauna that would be threatened as a direct consequence of their obsession with fossil fuels. Planning laws and planning regulations urgently need to be reviewed and reinforced, in order to reduce our dependence on hydrocarbons and to encourage renewable energy supply. By Europa's own admission, there was only ever a 33% chance of finding hydrocarbons at Leith Hill and then there might be anything in their own estimation from zero to six million barrels. In real terms, six million barrels would equate to just 0.0012% of the UK's energy demand. Or put another way, six million barrels represents just six days of the UK's current total oil production. This clearly shows how hydrocarbon companies are willing to wreck our environment and contaminate our water supplies for such a highly speculative and risky proposition!

16 <https://www.surreycommunity.info/coldharbour/>

17 <https://www.surreyhills.org/>

18 <https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=122>

19 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-for-rule-6-status-on-a-planning-appeal-or-called-in-application>

## PRESERVING BEAUTY THROUGH CREATIVITY

BY LUCY BARFORD  
AND JULIAN EVERETT,  
A VOICE FOR LEITH HILL



**A Voice for Leith Hill came into existence in 2015 when the Government Planning Inspectorate overruled previous decisions by both Mole Valley District Council and Surrey County Council and gave Europa permission to drill for oil on Leith Hill. Mole Valley Green Party held a family picnic on the proposed drill site to raise awareness of this. The event brought a group of local residents together who wanted to use peaceful protest to try and stop the planned oil drilling.**

Residents from Coldharbour (the small village nearest the drill site) had already been fighting Europa's plans through the legal and planning systems as the Leith Hill Action group for at least five years. We wanted to support them and use a complementary approach, raising awareness of the proposed oil drilling as well as wider climate change by using art, music and family-friendly events. We also wanted the campaign to be non-party political, so it would be inclusive to everyone in the community. This led to the setting up of a community group which we named 'A Voice for Leith Hill', the name being inspired by a piece of art painted by a local artist and founder member of the group.

It was our explicit aim to use creativity to gather support for our campaign and raise awareness of the proposed drilling at Leith Hill. In the first year of campaigning, we held art, live music and family events at local pubs and on Leith Hill itself. We also ran regular high street stalls in Dorking, the nearest town. A local artist designed t-shirts, which were very popular and raised hundreds of pounds for the campaign. We set up a Facebook group and website, which helped further raise our profile. The local community response to our campaign was overwhelmingly positive, most people were unaware and shocked to hear that oil drilling was being proposed at Leith Hill.

The setting up of the Protection Camp at Leith Hill in 2016 sparked a huge amount of interest, making local and national news. This culminated in a huge community walk up to Leith Hill tower by over 500 people (and bikes and dogs and horses)! This increased profile and momentum led to the creation of Facebook groups supporting the camp and a food rota which provided the camp with a hot meal every day donated by local residents.

Our campaigning methods then broadened to include speaking at district and county council meetings and coordinating community responses to Europa's planning permission applications. Key wins included successfully campaigning for a Tree Preservation Order for 20 trees along Coldharbour Lane, presenting the Environment Agency with a petition that achieved over 100,000 signatures, and challenging Europa's traffic management plan, they had reached version number 14 by the time they pulled out. Creativity remained at the centre of our campaign, however, and memorable events included the making of a music video, light projections onto Leith Hill Tower, film screenings and a May Day pop-up event on Dorking's main roundabout.

The wider Leith Hill campaign had several main elements; the Leith Hill Action Group and the Leith Hill Protection Camp, who had quite different approaches. AVFLH supported both of these and tried to act as a campaign with a broad appeal to the local community. We also made links with other UK anti-fracking groups, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. We received funding support from Lush towards marketing materials, and also raised money via T-shirt/car/art sticker sales, tickets for music events, quiz nights and donations at high street stalls.

In September 2018, Europa pulled out of the site after the Forestry Commission announced it was not renewing its lease. After several celebratory events, we have now put AVFLH to one side and are supporting other local fossil free campaigns in Surrey, including those at Horse Hill and Brockham. Core group members continue to be part of the wider Weald Action Group and some are also involved in the Extinction Rebellion and/or Divestment campaign.

We learnt a lot about campaigning in general, and the oil industry and local government

in particular, in a very short time. Key lessons that we learnt included the importance of holding regular planning meetings, and supporting each other as much as possible. Also trying to channel the enthusiasm of new members constructively, being transparent about all the issues your group is already aware of in order to avoid demotivation of both the new and existing members. Supporting new and existing members to avoid burnout and promoting the need for levels of engagement which are sustainable in the long term is vital.

As with most campaigns of this nature we had limited funds and time, so it was really important to be clear about where those resources could be best applied and to be aware that priorities would change over time (e.g. from raising awareness to calls to action with planning committees to fundraising for legal challenges, through to lawful protest and non-violent direct action once the drilling rigs arrive). Similarly, we realised that we needed a wider focus than just the oil/gas company. We tried to understand the economics and incentives of the entire supply chain and wider market context and then looked for areas where we could also apply pressure. This included landowners, investors and commercial partners of those in the supply chain.

We found it very productive to make extensive use of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. In addition to the direct information they provide, they also often reveal lots of other useful information (e.g. about an organisation's strategy, goals, anxieties, pressure points) which the supplier might inadvertently disclose as it does not directly relate to the submitted request. We also found it useful to build relationships with the county planning officers, committee members and chair; and to understand how the planning process works – e.g. dynamics/incentives of getting an application passed by officers under delegated powers is often very different to an application passed/rejected by the planning committee. We found that having a good relationship with planning officers helped us have early visibility of candidate applications in preliminary discussions, and more open to hearing our case when we needed to assert it.

We found door-knocking to be labour intensive but very effective, and social media essential for wider reach. People wanted to be involved but often didn't know how best they could help. We learned we were most effective when we had a clear goal for each awareness campaign and gave people simple, clear and prominent calls to action.

Finally, we learnt never to give up. We certainly had periods where we couldn't see how we could possibly win and had many setbacks along the way. However, maintaining the creativity at the heart of our campaign and supporting each other during the tougher times, helped us to keep going and ultimately succeed in our goal of stopping the oil drilling at Leith Hill.



# PEACEFUL DIRECT ACTION

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ETHERLEY HILL FROM THE LEITH HILL PROTECTION CAMP



**What follows is an interview with a member of the Leith Hill Protection Camp, we have chosen to change their name to Etherley Hill to protect their identity.**

### HOW DID YOU BECOME AWARE OF THE LEITH HILL ISSUE AND WHAT WAS IT THAT MADE YOU WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

I'd been horrified about climate change and fracking for a while, and then heard about what was happening with unconventional oil extraction in the South East, through London-based campaign groups. I first became aware of Leith Hill through the camp's Facebook group and visited when local campaigners organised a walk to Leith Hill tower. The impact of seeing the proposed site was huge, after that, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

### HOW DID THE IDEA OF A 'PROTECTION CAMP' COME ABOUT AND HOW DOES ONE SET UP A CAMP?

The idea of living somewhere to protect it has been part of environmental campaigning forever, for example in the UK road protests of the 90s. In the case of Leith Hill, I arrived after the setup and missed that hard work. From what I've learned, to set up, you need a group of people you trust who are willing to put some time into staying the camp. You need basic equipment for shelter, cooking and building – the first thing to build is a toilet. The camp should be established discretely but once you're there you should create defences that will make it harder for camp residents to be evicted as soon as possible. You also need to do the groundwork for getting more people to swell your ranks by publicising the camp.

### HOW DO YOU STAY OCCUPIED AND COPE WITHOUT EVERYDAY LUXURIES?

If the camp is off the grid and low budget, like the Leith Hill camp, day to day activities like getting hot water for washing up take a lot of time – especially in the winter when it's a full-time job just trying to keep warm. There is also the work of keeping the camp secure, talking to the public and building defences and other necessary structures. It's really a satisfying endeavour though. Especially pulling together and working as a group on things. When you don't have many luxuries, little luxuries like chocolate or a shower become all that more special.

### WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE ON THIS APPROACH TO CAMPAIGNING?

Occupying the site seemed the most direct way of protecting the land from development. Then once we were evicted many of us decided to stay on in the second camp which was opposite the entrance to the site, to keep an eye on Europa and publicise what was happening.

### WHAT KIND OF OPPOSITION DID YOU FACE AND HOW DID YOU HANDLE IT?

Europa's security team Eclipse became more and more aggressive. During the occupation, they would film the camp in person or by drone. During the time of the second camp, they were more in your face. Their intention was to gather information to incriminate and smear the campaign and to use the surveillance to try and intimidate people. For example, filming locals as they arrived to support protection camp residents to try to scare them, and trying to provoke, then film, arguments with camp members. They filmed us frequently. The best tactic against this was to discuss what was happening as a camp and keep a cool head, supporting people who found the intrusion particularly stressful. We didn't always manage this but we tried.

## WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT DID YOU RECEIVE?

The support the camp received was incredible. We worked closely with the local campaign group A Voice for Leith Hill and that was deeply helpful in lots of practical ways as well as helping with wider community acceptance, through the links they had. Locals formed a food rota which kept us going during the cold months and, in some cases, all year round. This was a big morale boost! We also had exceptional support from local people who trained as legal observers and came up very quickly when things were happening. In addition, activists with expertise from other campaigns came and helped build the camp.

## WHAT WERE SOME OF HIGHLIGHTS AND LOWLIGHTS ON THE ROAD TO VICTORY?

The time leading up to the eviction when we were occupying the land was magical; it's hard to describe the levels of trust and the connection to the land we had built up. The support from the food rota was incredible; it was such a boost every time someone arrived with food. The highs were day-to-day incidents: working as a team to fix problems and build things, talking to members of the public and changing their minds. There were also lows. There will always be tensions when you get a group of people living together in a stressful situation, many of them will be relatable to most people. The eviction itself was both a high and low: we were proud that we had stuck to our rota and been awake when the bailiffs arrived and there to defend the land for two days. As ever, the support from locals was wonderful. The absolute high point was probably when activists managed to break into the camp fortress while it was surrounded overnight, doubling the number of people who had to be removed. Once we'd been removed and the land was fenced off it was devastating, but instead of giving up hope we set up another camp opposite the gates, which was more outreach focused. There were loads of lovely moments there as new people stopped to chat and large groups came from all over the South East for events. You really got to see the good and selfless side of people. It was also really eye-opening to live and work in a group where you make decisions communally rather than having a boss.

## HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR EFFORTS COMPLEMENTED THOSE OF OTHER CAMPAIGN GROUPS WORKING ON THE ISSUE?

The campaign ended up with a three-pronged approach with the Leith Hill Action Group focusing on high-level legal and planning objections, A Voice for Leith Hill focusing on planning objections, creatively raising awareness and mobilising the public, and the camp focusing on occupation, monitoring and outreach. All of these were important in stopping the drilling from happening.

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU HAVE FOR OTHER CAMPAIGNERS FIGHTING SIMILAR OPERATIONS?

Try to work in unity with any other people who want to help, whatever their politics (except the far-right obviously). And don't give up, it is always worth it. Even if the fight seems hopeless, there's value in carrying on; you never know what's going to happen.

## WHAT NOW FOR YOU?

Good question!



With the threat of drilling receded, the area is free to return to its normal tranquility.

# COVERING THE BATTLE FOR LEITH HILL

BY RUTH HAYHURST,  
JOURNALIST AT  
DRILLORDROP.COM



**I have been a journalist for more than 30 years, working for newspapers, magazines, websites and national broadcasters.**

Since July 2013, I have reported on the onshore oil and gas industry. My work is currently published on the news website DrillOrDrop.com

What began as a small project, reporting on the reaction to exploratory oil drilling at Balcombe in West Sussex, has grown into a full-time job covering the whole of the UK.

My original reason for focusing on this industry remains. I am curious about what motivates people to support, facilitate or oppose onshore exploration and production. Why would an investor risk their life savings? Why would a campaigner risk arrest? How do police officers feel when they (lawfully or unlawfully) inflict pain to remove protesters? What is it like to be a security guard at an oil or gas site?

I also continue to report on this industry because I think its development and setbacks should be chronicled consistently, comprehensively and accurately. Coverage by the mainstream media is very mixed. Some is excellent, some is patchy, some is so superficial as to be unhelpful. And some is just plain wrong. I think there is still a gap that needs to be filled.

## WHEN AND WHY I BECAME INTERESTED IN LEITH HILL

I first became aware of Leith Hill in 2015 when preparations were made for a second planning inquiry into Europa Oil & Gas's drilling plans. I reported on every day of the inquiry in Dorking and then followed the campaigns for and against through planning meetings, environmental permit applications, petitions, protest camps and injunction hearings.

In the beginning, I thought it was newsworthy for several reasons:

- **Site location.** This appeared to me to be particularly challenging for oil and gas exploration: near ancient woodland and a well-known regional beauty spot, in an area of outstanding natural beauty, in the green belt, at the end of a long, winding and steep sunken lane.
- **Vigorous campaign.** At the time I began reporting on Leith Hill, the opposition campaign had already been running for six years and had been through one public inquiry and two court cases.
- **Experienced campaigners.** By then, members of the campaign against drilling at the site were highly skilled, articulate, had a good argument and understood the needs of journalists.
- **Event.** The second public inquiry was a good opportunity to learn about the arguments for and against the site
- **Context.** In 2015 I felt there was growing interest in southern England in the oil exploration issue. Wells had been drilled at Balcombe, West Sussex, in 2013 and at Horse Hill, Surrey, in 2014. Two applications for drilling in West Sussex, at Wisborough Green and Fernhurst in 2014, had triggered big campaigns and had been refused.

## WHY I CONTINUED TO REPORT ON LEITH HILL

I remained interested in Leith Hill as a journalist because the campaign continued in a newsworthy and creative way and because nothing happened to change the challenging location of the site. A series of events, from planning meetings to rallies and the creation of a protest camp, were newsworthy and kept the issue alive.

The various campaign groups were always willing to talk to me so I was never short of material making the case against the exploration proposals. It was campaigners who discovered, for example, that Europa did not have permission for a holding area for lorries at Ryka's Café or at the Cobham services. Campaigners also commissioned reports which highlighted what they saw as concerns with the environmental permit application.

It was particularly useful for me to be informed personally about key campaign events as they happened and to be able to talk off-the-record to campaigners about the background. The speedy availability of good-quality photographs was very useful and made it more likely that I reported on some events.

On the other side of the argument, it was very rare to get a comment or any information about Leith Hill from Europa or its representatives.

The only time anyone from the company made direct contact was by Facebook message. I understood later the message was from lawyers and was to inform DrillOrDrop that it had been named in a High Court injunction prohibiting various forms of direct action protest. But at the time I didn't open the message because I didn't recognise the sender and Europa's PR agency knew nothing about it.

To ensure that the company's point of view was represented in my articles, I relied on publicly-available documents, such as planning statements, or the company's public testimony to council meetings or the inquiry.

I may have visited members of the Leith Hill protection camp less often because of the injunction but the High Court order probably had no other impact on my coverage.

## KEY EVENTS

The surprise announcement, in September last year, that Europa was pulling out of Leith Hill had the fourth highest number of views of any article on DrillOrDrop in 2018.

The decision by the environment secretary, Michael Gove, to block renewal of the site lease, and the success for a near 10-year campaign against oil drilling at Leith Hill made this a very important story. On the morning it happened, I was lucky to spot Europa's statement early and published by just after 9am.

I also reported live updates from the two-day eviction of the protection camp in June 2017 and from every planning meeting on the application from 2016-2018. The eviction had stunning pictures and was a fast-moving news story. Each application to Surrey's planning committee was contested articulately with evidence by members of the public and argued from both sides by councillors.



A petition, signed by more than 102,000 people, against an environmental permit was also a big story. It was particularly newsworthy because of the large number of signatories and because the petition was presented publicly to the Environment Agency by two well-known figures, actors Sue Jameson and James Bolam. The strongly-worded criticism in two independent reviews of the environmental permit applications made this event even more interesting.

Other important news events for me were: the granting of planning permission in August 2015 after the second inquiry; the judicial review victory by Leith Hill Action Group over fencing plans in January 2018; Europa's withdrawal of all traffic management plans in April 2018 and the company's injunction applications.

## WHAT JOURNALISTS NEED FROM CAMPAIGNERS

Reporters covering a news event need accurate information quickly. They may not have time to wait until the following day, or even later in the same day, for a comment. News stories often get shaped by the people who respond fastest.

Some media outlets need more detail than others but information needs to be easy to understand for people working under pressure. It may sound obvious, but the rule that the most important points need to be communicated first, followed by the detail, is not always followed.

Good-quality pictures frequently make stories and pictures provided quickly help to ensure an event or issue is reported.

The chance to talk, off-the-record if necessary, about the background to an issue or event is very useful. Tip-offs about an event or development, either in advance or early on, is invaluable.



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