

Why did I go to Lancashire to join the anti-fracking protest at Preston New Road?

Julia Wallond

When I first heard about fracking, I thought it might be a helpful technology. After all I knew about the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions as quickly as possible, and it sounded as if extracting and burning methane gas from shale rock, could be a necessary lower-carbon transitional technology while renewables get up to speed and better electricity storage technology is developed.

I have now profoundly changed my mind. [The Truth Behind the Dash for Gas](#) is a sober film that looks at the arguments put forward for and against fracking in the UK, in the light of the experiences of people in the United States and Australia where fracking has been happening for several years. It documents evidence of ground water poisoning, and the harsh effects of industrialisation in the fracked areas, with impoverishment of local communities as their land and properties lose value, and many health problems that could be related to the toxic mix of chemicals pumped into the ground and leaking into the water. What is more, it is clear it is a wasteful process in terms of energy and water use, and is deeply unpopular with the majority of the UK population. Yet the government has pressed ahead in England while Scotland and Wales have put moratoriums in place.

At the same time as fracking is being developed, the Environmental Agency that protects and monitors industry is having its budget cut, so it is less able to regulate and monitor fracking projects, whose risks are still unknown. Subsidies are being removed from renewables, but increased for fossil fuel industries.

All in all, the government is not indicating a brief use of fracking as a transitional technology but that it wants to use fracking as a major energy source for the UK into the future. However there are models that show we do not need fracking to develop a low carbon economy (such as the Centre for Alternative Technology's [Zero Carbon Britain report](#)) and there is concern that fracking is not even economically viable. Could the revolving doors in government between fossil fuel industries and senior government posts be relevant to their enthusiasm for this industry?

Another concern with fracking is the worrying incidence of methane leaks from existing fracking sites in the USA. Methane is a greenhouse gas 84 times more potent than CO₂. The risk of methane leaks at this critical time for the climate (5-10 years to avoid a 2°C temperature rise) is a frightening prospect.

Many countries have banned fracking after popular protests including France, Germany, Bulgaria, four provinces in Canada and several US states, including

heavily fracked areas within Texas. Others have a moratorium in place (Netherlands, Scotland, Wales).

In Lancashire fracking at the Preston New Road site was rejected by the parish council, borough council and county council on the basis of noise and visual impacts. But in 2016 their decision was over-ruled by the the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The local action group asked for a judicial review but the decision went against them in favour of the fracking company Caudrilla. Work started this year on the site.

I first visited the Preston New Road site in February this year for a 'solidarity day' to support the local campaign group. I discovered a vibrant local campaign, strong, passionate and authoritative leadership from the local 'Nanas' (a grandmother's group opposed to fracking) and masses of tea and cake. We walked up the road to the entrance to the fracking site and the diversity of the anti-fracking movement became apparent: pagans were conducting a beautiful water blessing ceremony outside the gates, a close harmony group were singing protest songs, and many banners were waving and people chanting, the security and police looking on.

I knew I wanted to come back to support them again. I had the chance in late July as part of a month of 'rolling resistance', a month of non-violent direct action hosted by the local Nana's group with support from Reclaim the Power, a national activist group. I and friends from the 'Dharma Action Network ([D.A.N.C.E](#)) joined the weekend that was themed around food growers against fracking.

There is well-founded concern that fracking poisons water and contaminates soil, as well as taking up valuable agricultural land. So on Friday a giant picnic was laid out on Preston New Road, with tables laden with local vegetables. When 100+ people gather half the road is blocked off by the Police, and our presence effectively closed the fracking site, while we listened to speeches by local farmers and supporters, and music. The other lane was open to traffic and the majority of cars hooted their support.

Down the road was the information hub and a camp for visitors. It was run on anarchic principles of self-organisation. People signed up for volunteer tasks, lightly coordinated by a small core team from Reclaim the Power and the Lancashire Nanas. There was a steady stream of visitors to the tea tent providing opportunities to listen to the impact this development is having on the local community, and participate in engaging conversation.

I found the camp joyful, friendly and creative. There was so much good will, and willingness to meet, talk with, and hug people with whom there was this common bond of care for the land no matter what our background.

Hearing a theatrical performance from [Three Acres and a Cow](#) about the history of struggle for land rights through the ages added a historical understanding to our efforts to support the Lancashire people and land.

On Monday morning back at the gate and on Preston New Road, actions were kicking off. A flashmob of 'Where's Wally?' characters disguised the fact that 2 pairs of people were locked on to each other (in arm tubes) in front of the gate. At times like this I found myself fearful and momentarily doubtful. As the police rushed around protestors, some of them friends, on the ground, pulling, pushing like a rugby scrum, I desperately did not want anyone to get hurt. (And thankfully they did not). I also had a deep seated conflict within me- that I was taking part in an event that was deemed illegal by police which justified them physically attempting to remove people from a public highway. Yet these were friends and people I loved and respected who were standing up for the local council who had said 'no', and standing up for the land itself at risk of pollution and poisoning.

Once the 'lock on' had happened, the energy changed remarkably and we all went back to peaceful waiting for specialist police to arrive to cut the lock-ons out of their tubes. We had friendly conversations with the police about their families, their responses to protestors and the concerns we have about the harmfulness of fracking.

It is hard to hold these different relationships and deep conditionings together in one mind. I witnessed some people falling into a hatred of all police, shouting at them, insulting them as vicious and savage. Yes I had seen some police pulling at people or pushing people to move them back, was this too much? How acceptable is this? Should this be challenged? Maybe yes. Yet at other times police were friendly and respectful. It made me reflect, at what cost do we dehumanise anyone, not acknowledging the seeds of violence as well as the seeds of care in all of us? What good can come of insulting?

Yet I also have a strong conditioning in seeing police as protectors and helpers, as they have been in other parts of my life. It was difficult to acknowledge these police were there to protect the rights of polluters (Caudrilla), and to stop the actions of those seeking to protect the community and the land, and that they could also be aggressive. I did not want to have to face them in disobedience. What helped was that it seemed to me that we all took up roles that themselves could shift and change. Protector, protestor, remover, policer, challenger. Maybe we all wanted a world of peace and health and happiness, and we were acting out an intense conversation about how to achieve it for the benefit of all....

I remind myself that we know enough about the world today to know that dangerous industries can be lobbied through government, to the detriment of communities and environment. The status quo is often not good and fair and things can be changed by popular protest.

I discovered at Preston New Road that to be on side of this particular protest, despite the complexities and fear at times, was to feel aligned with conscience, joy, community, connection and care. To stand up for these things in this situation has strengthened their importance in my life. And for that I am grateful and feel blessed to be a part of it.

The world is at an urgent point of need. We do have very little time to make the changes needed to avoid the more catastrophic scenarios of climate change, and the other world boundaries that keep the balance of nature are being pushed to their limit. We will suffer in the UK, and the suffering in other parts of the world will be much greater. This does challenge me and perhaps everyone one of us who dares to look and take this in, how to respond now.