

THIRTY YEARS OF DIRECT ACTION

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It is hard, if not impossible, to say when the Animal/Earth Liberation movement first started. A study of the subject literally takes you back thousands of years to 200 B.C. when people like Pythagoras advocated vegetarianism & animal compassion on spiritual grounds, and to the 1st century A.D. when Plutarch wrote what is widely regarded as the first animal rights literature.

However, the reader will be delighted to know that I am not going to bore you to death with 2000 years of waffle. Instead, I merely intend to look at what occurred 30 years ago this year. But first, to fully understand the events of 30 years ago, we must look slightly further back than that, to the events of 1964.

During the 19th and 20th centuries Britain saw a wealth of Animal Welfare and Rights groups established. However, these groups by and large relied upon the parliamentary way of legal reform to achieve their aims. This process was incredibly slow and achievements were minor. Even the 1911 Animal Protection Act treated animals as property and offered no protection to wild-born creatures. By the mid-nineteen sixties people started to look around for other ways of campaigning and in 1964 John Prestidge found that new style.

In 1964 in Brixham, Devon, England, John Prestidge founded a group that would actively oppose blood sports. Rather than campaigning for parliamentary reforms, John's new group was prepared to directly go out into the fields of Britain and do everything they could, within the law, to prevent the killing of British wildlife: John founded the Hunt Saboteurs Association (H.S.A.).

The popularity of this new form of campaigning was instant. Just a year after the H.S.A. was founded, hunt saboteur groups were active across the English Westcountry in Devon, Somerset and Bristol. Groups also started to emerge outside of the Westcountry in places like Birmingham, Hampshire and Surrey.

Originally a single Devon-based group, the H.S.A. soon became a national network of dedicated activists using lawful methods to disrupt blood-junkies of Britain and to prevent the "green and pleasant lands" from literally becoming the killing fields.

And so it was, in 1971, as part of the ever-expanding H.S.A. network, a new hunt sab group was formed in Luton. The group was founded by a law student named Ronnie Lee. The Luton hunt sabs, like a lot of other hunt sab groups, soon became very successful in saving the lives of animals. Many a hunt soon found their sadistic days entertainment ruined by the Luton Gang.

However, despite the success of the Luton hunt sabs in the field, it soon became apparent to some people within the groups that the strictly legal

actions of the H.S.A. could only ever go so far to preventing animal suffering. The problem was that if a hunt is allowed to be active, no matter how good a hunt sab group may be, there is a chance that an animal may be harmed or killed.

Even if the sabs do manage to prevent an animal from being killed, the fear the animal goes through whilst being hunted is tremendous. Contemporary vet reports, gathered at the end of the 20th century, have revealed animals do suffer incredible stress whilst being hunted.

It was out of this recognition (that strictly legal hunt sabotage couldn't totally prevent the suffering of an animal) that Ronnie Lee and a few close friends started to look around for other ways to help prevent suffering. They realized that the only real way to prevent any sort of suffering is to assure that the hunt is never allowed to become active in the first place. As soon as an animal is being chased, she is psychologically suffering as she fears for her life. Therefore she has to be assured that 'the chase' is never allowed to start in the first place. With this aim in mind, Ronnie Lee, Cliff Goodman and possibly two or three other people, decided to form the Band of Mercy in 1972.

The name the Band of Mercy was chosen because it had been the name of an earlier animal liberation direct action group. During the 19th century, an anti-slavery activist named Catherine Smithies had set up a youth wing to the RSPCA called the Bands of Mercy. By and large these youth groups were just normal young supporters of the RSPCA who told stories of heroic animal deeds and who took oaths of compassion to the animals. However some of these young Victorian animal rights activists were a little more zealous than others and went around sabotaging hunting riffles. The activities of the Victorian Bands of Mercy became so great that there was even a theatrical play written during which a group of children sabotages a hunting rifle.

For Ronnie Lee and his companions the Victorian Bands of Mercy were a fine example of direct action, so they decided to adopt their not-strictly-legal approach to saving lives.

Initially, the Band of Mercy concentrated on small actions directed against the hunt during the cub- hunting season. Cub hunting is when young hounds are taught to tear young fox cubs apart in order for the hound to get the taste for killing.

The initial actions of the Band of Mercy were very simple and were basically designed around the idea of disabling the hunt vehicles in order to slow down or even stop the hunt from carrying out its murderous activities. However, the Band of Mercy was very clear from the beginning that it was not merely carrying out acts of wanton vandalism against those whom they opposed but instead their actions were designed around the idea of 'active compassion'. To this aim the Band would always leave a message to the

hunters explaining why the Band had carried out their actions, the logic of animal liberation and to show that there was nothing personal against any one individual person.

The success of the Band of Mercy was soon clear. By carrying out illegal direct action, the Band was able to prevent the hunts. By preventing the hunts from ever becoming active, the Band was safe in the knowledge that not only have they saved the lives of innocent animals, but they had also prevented the psychological suffering of 'the chase'.

Recognizing their true potential for the prevention of animal suffering, the Band then started to think about ways to expand and develop their campaigns. Following on from their early successes the Band soon became much more daring. Towards the end of 1973, the Band learnt about the construction of a new vivisection laboratory. The research laboratory was being built near Milton Keynes for a company called Hoechst Pharmaceutical.

Having learnt about its existence, two of the Band's activists visited the vivisection lab building sight a few times whilst trying to decide the best course of action to be taken. Together these activists realized that if they could prevent the building from ever being completed, then they could prevent the suffering of animals destined to be tortured within its four walls. The Band had to assure the construction could never be finished and eventually decided that the best way to destroy the construction was through the use of arson.

By destroying the building, the Band would prevent the vivisectionists from ever being able to start their brand of sadistic 'science'. And even if the damage caused by the fire could be repaired, the restoration work would all cost money that would have to be paid for by Hoechst Pharmaceutical (thus meaning less money to spend on torturing animals).

On November 10th, 1973, the Band of Mercy conducted its first ever action against the vivisection industry. Two activists gained access into the half completed building at Milton Keynes. Once inside the activists set fire to the building. This action was a double watershed for the movement as it was not only the Band's first action against the vivisection industry; it was also the Band's first use to arson.

In that first fire an amazing £26,000 worth of damage was caused. More incredible was six days later, the Band of Mercy returned and started another fire in the same building causing a further £20,000 damage.

To make sure everyone knew why the building was set alight, the Band of Mercy sent a message to the press. The statement read:

"The building was set fire to in an effort to prevent the torture and murder of our animal brothers and sisters by evil

need someone to stand up and fight on their behalf. Being imprisoned in a cage, like the animals Ronnie was so determined to help, gave him a new sense of solidarity and understanding. Above all, it made him even more determined to fight for animal liberation.

Upon his release Ronnie gathered together the remains of the Band of Mercy. He was also able to find a couple dozen more new recruits for the illegal direct action animal liberation movement. Under Ronnie's gaze the new gathering (of approximately 30 people) was able to plan its future. With Ronnie as a leading light, the group could develop and expand the work of the Band of Mercy. This was a revolutionary group and everyone knew it.

The only problem for the group was the name the Band of Mercy. The name was no longer appropriate. It didn't fit the new revolutionary feel. A new name was needed. A name that would haunt the animal abusers. A name whose very mention could symbolize a whole ideology of a revolutionary movement. A name that was more than a name. With all this in mind Ronnie selected the name the Animal Liberation Front the A.L.F.

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his hunger strike demands to include issues revolving around Porton Down, the Government's chemical and biological warfare research station, where horrific animal experimentation goes on.

The media focus about the hunger strike was spectacular. With all the much-unwanted attention, Winchester prison soon had to back down and supply Ronnie with his vegan provisions. Sadly the same outcome did not occur for Porton Down. In tactical manipulation to assure the media spotlight did not cause the Ministry of Defense any embarrassment, all of the media attention was focused on Ronnie himself, even though it wasn't what he wanted. So it was, that in recognition that the media was moving the debate from animal abuse and onto the hunger strike, Ronnie decided to end his protest.

Sadly, despite Ronnie setting such a good example whilst in prison, the other activists in the Band of Mercy brought the Band to an almost grinding halt whilst the Bicester Two were jailed. The only major event to take place during the time of the Bicester Two's imprisonment was in 1975. In 1975 Mike Huskisson managed to rescue two beagles from I.C.I. The beagles were being used in tobacco smoking experiments and were appropriately labeled as the 'smoking beagles'. Mike was arrested for the action and charged with burglary. However, knowing how much public support there had been for the Bicester Two, I.C.I. bottled out of a trial fearing the adverse publicity. This meant Mike was acquitted of the charges, I.C.I. was revealed to carry out pointless animal testing and the Bicester Two were given moral boost by Mike's action.

Both Cliff Goodman and Ronnie Lee only served a third of their sentence and were both paroled after 12 months in the spring of 1976.

Being in jail had effected both of the Bicester Two, but in totally different ways. Cliff Goodman came out of prison with just one thought: he didn't want to go back inside. He decided he wasn't a revolutionary and wanted to stick to strictly legal campaigning in the future. Sadly, whilst in prison, Cliff decided to turn informer and gave the police a great deal of information about the use of radios by the Band of Mercy. For this act of treachery, Cliff was given the title of the movements first 'grass' (police informer).

Ronnie, on the other hand, was given a new sense of determination and realized there was widespread public support for animal liberation illegal direct action. Whilst in prison Ronnie read widely on the subject of the labor movement. With this knowledge and his pure determination, he started to plan a more revolutionary animal liberation group, a group that could indeed achieve animal liberation.

All the time Ronnie was imprisoned he was reminded of the animals that are imprisoned. Unlike human prisoners, these animal inmates have no 'release date'. All that await them are suffering and death. Whilst locked up Ronnie was reminded about how defenseless the animals are and how they

experiments. We are a non-violent guerrilla organization dedicated to the liberation of animals from all forms of cruelty and persecution at the hands of mankind. Our actions will continue until our aims are achieved".

After the Milton Keynes arson, the next major action occurred in June 1974 when the Band turned its attention to the bloody seal cull of the Wash along the Norfolk coast.

The seal cull was an annual event and involved hunters going out in two Home Office licensed boats and butchering seals. Seal culling is a bloody attack and the seal has no hope of escape. Knowing how sick the seal cull is the Band obviously wanted to prevent the cull from ever starting. With the goal of preventing the cull from ever starting and regarding the success in the use of arson in the November 1973 action, the Band once again decided to use arson as a campaign tool to destroy the tools of animal murder.

In June 1974 the Band of Mercy set out their second major action. Under the cover of darkness, two activists sought out the Home Office licensed boats. Having found the boats, these transporters of death were then set alight. One of the boats was sadly only slightly damaged by the fire; the other however, was totally destroyed.

After conducting this June 1974 action, the Band of Mercy decided that this time they wouldn't leave a message claiming responsibility. Instead they wanted to leave the sealers wondering what on earth had happened, if those responsible would return and if someone else provided two new boats, if these new vessels would meet with the same fiery fate.

That year there was no seal cull at all due to the actions of the Band of Mercy. Also, besides totally halting the seal cull for that year, there was another knock on effect. Because of the fire, the owner of the two Home Office licensed boats went out of business. And having seen one person's business totally destroyed by the actions of these anonymous arsonists, no one was keen to invest the money into a new business that might very well go the same way. Because of this fear no one has ever attempted to re-start a seal culling business and there has never been a seal cull at the Wash since. Because of the actions of two activists, countless numbers of seals have been saved from the bloody annual seal cull.

Looking back on the June 1974 action it is clear for everyone to see that what happened was an amazing success. Not only were de facto seals saved at the time, but generations of seals to come have also been saved from the seal cullers. Sadly, however, despite the fact the Band of Mercy was saving lives and preventing suffering, not everyone in the animal liberation movement approved of their tactics.

In July 1974 a member of the Hunt Saboteurs Association offered a reward of £250 for information that would inform upon the Band of Mercy. Speaking on behalf of the local sab group the person represented, the spokesperson told the press, "We approve of their ideals, but are opposed to their methods."

How anyone can say they approve of a person's ideals and then side against them by offering a reward for their capture is a total mystery. Fortunately, despite this act of treachery, the Band of Mercy had by now realized its power. By performing illegal actions the Band was able to directly save the lives of animals by destroying the tool of torture and death. Even if the weaker members of the movement rejected the Band's ideas, the Band realized its work had to continue. To stop would be to let the animals down. Following the anti-seal action the Band of Mercy then launched its first intensive wave of campaigning against the vivisection industry. In the months leading up to the action at the Wash, the Band of Mercy had been able to gather some inside information about vivisection laboratory animal suppliers. All of this information was gathered and stored, waiting for the day it could be used to its fullest effect. And so it was, that following the action at the Wash, the Band was able to launch straight into a wave of actions against the vivisection industry.

Between June and August 1974 the Band of Mercy launched eight raids against vivisection lab animal suppliers. The main emphasis of the actions was to cause economic sabotage by either damaging buildings or vehicles. But the Band also reached another landmark in their history by carrying out their first-ever animal rescue during this period.

The first Band of Mercy animal rescue happened in Wiltshire in the English Westcountry. A guinea pig farm was targeted and the activists managed to rescue half a dozen of the inmates. Besides being a landmark action for being the first Band of Mercy animal rescue, the action also produced an unexpected but very welcome outcome. The guinea pig farm owner was so shaken by the raid she began to fear that more activists would turn up during the night. With such a fear of the masked strangers breaking into her home, this uncaring capitalist who profited from animal torture took the only course of sensible action she closed her business.

Besides targeting the vivisection industry, the Band of Mercy also continued to take actions against the hunt. But not wanting to limit their actions to just two forms of animal abuse, the Band also targeted chicken breeders and the firearm lobby. In July 1974, a gun shop in Marlborough was attacked and damaged. The original Victorian Bands of Mercy could surely be proud that their great deeds were being continued in a twentieth-century form.

For a small group of friends, consisting of less than half a dozen activists, the Band of Mercy was able to make a tremendous impact against the a

animal abusers and their presence was truly feint. Sadly, however, the Band of Mercy's luck ran out in August 1974.

In August 1974 the Band of Mercy targeted Oxford Laboratory Animal Colonies in Bicester. The first action was a success. But then the Band of Mercy made the mistake of returning to O.L.A.C. two days late (I should point out its very easy with hindsight to say it was a mistake to return, but back then it was a perfectly logical action). It was on this second raid the activists, Ronnie Lee and Cliff Goodman, were spotted by a security guard. After being spotted the police were called and Ronnie and Cliff were promptly arrested.

If the police had hoped that the arrests would bring an end to the Band of Mercy, they were very mistaken. The arrest of Ronnie Lee and Cliff Goodman gave a fresh wave of publicity to the Band of Mercy. Rather than being regarded as terrorists, many people viewed the Band as heroes. These two young men were seen as a sort of latter day Robin Hood for the animals. Ronnie and Cliff were soon canonized as the Bicester Two. Throughout the hearing daily demonstrations took place outside the court. Support for the Bicester Two was very strong and came from the most unlikely of quarters. Even Ronnie Lee's local Member of Parliament, the Free Church Minister Ivor Clemitson, joined in the campaign for their release.

Despite the strong public support for the Bicester Two, both Ronnie Lee and Cliff Goodman were given three years imprisonment. A letter published in the Daily Telegraph shows the anger felt at the outcome of the first animal liberation trial.

"Many would sympathize with their action against the utterly diabolical and largely unnecessary form of cruelty involved in animal experimentation. These young men, while defying the law, showed great courage, and the sentences of three years imprisonment seems unrealistic and harsh."

Now, it is said you can't keep a good Animal/Earth liberation activist down. This is certainly true in the case of Ronnie Lee. After the sentencing, Ronnie and Cliff split up. Ronnie was moved to Winchester prison and Cliff went back to Oxford prison (whilst on remand both Ronnie and Cliff were inmates of Oxford prison).

At Winchester prison Ronnie discovered that provisions for vegans in prison were less than desirable. So once at Winchester, to try and assure a decent meal and proper vegan clothing Ronnie went on a hunger strike. This hunger strike gained a great deal of media attention and once again the issue of animal liberation was being openly discussed. With the spotlight once again being focused on animal liberation Ronnie soon expanded