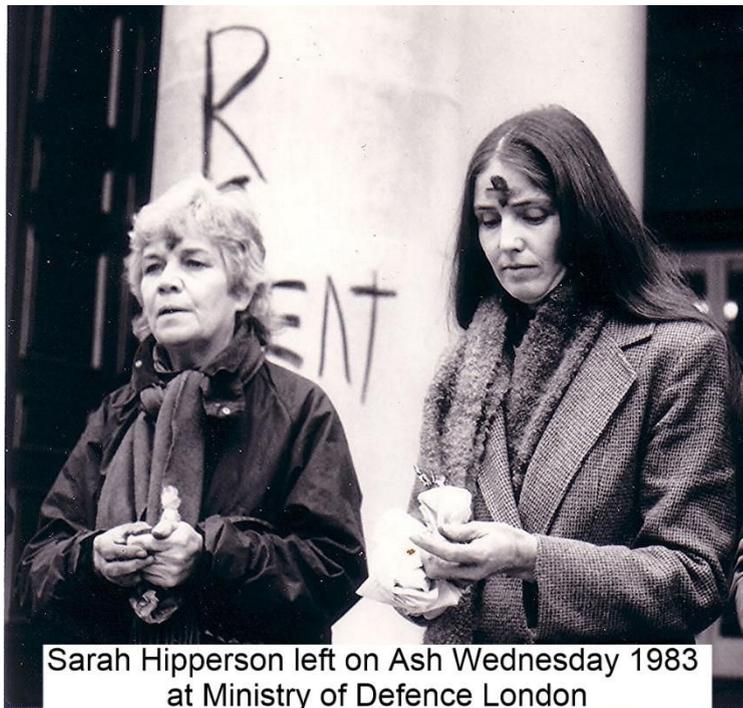




Sarah Hipperson who died at the age of 90 in 2018 spent 17 years living at the Main Yellow Gate of Greenham Common protesting against the siting of 96 nuclear cruise missiles and was a founder member of Catholic Peace Action in 1982. Her non-violent protests resulted in over 20 imprisonments and numerous court appearances. She lived to see the removal of the nuclear cruise missiles from UK and the transformation of Greenham Common back to its original purpose for the common use of the public. See [link](#) for more of her story.



Sarah Hipperson left on Ash Wednesday 1983 at Ministry of Defence London

Sarah Hipperson who died in 2018 is most importantly remembered as arguably one of the most committed Greenham Common women peace activists who from 1983 to 2000 lived at Greenham Common Yellow Gate and watched its transformation from an RAF military base to an American nuclear cruise missile base to an open common for the public with a commemorative peace

garden. She was born in 1927 in Glasgow and her early life was disrupted by the separation of her parents when she and her sisters were sent into care under the supervision of the Sisters of Charity in Glasgow. She recalls her time under the Catholic nuns' supervision with affection and her First Communion day with special joy. There is no doubt that from an early time her faith was a most important force in her life and which gave her a sense of identity and value which was to be an important part of her self confidence in all the struggles that were to follow.

Her formal education was limited and when she applied to join the nursing school in Eastern District Hospital Duke Street Glasgow the matron initially

refused her entry on the grounds that she had not completed the necessary educational requirements. Not to be put off by such obstruction from authority even at that early age she argued her case with the matron saying that she should be given a chance and was finally accepted. She repaid the matron's trust by winning the anatomy and physiology prize in her first year. She went on to qualify as a nurse midwife and to work in some of the poorest parts of Glasgow after further training as a district nurse. She had a great respect for how her very materially deprived patients coped with the harsh conditions of life in Glasgow during this time but her desire to travel and to see more of the world led her to apply to become a nurse in the army. She was however refused entry to the army on the grounds that she failed the medical having what was to prove to be an insignificant heart murmur. One can only wonder how her life might have evolved if she had been then accepted into the army.

Her continual desire to travel led her to emigrate to Canada where she married and had five children. She returned to London in 1969 where to all appearances she had a materially secure middle class life and was even appointed a magistrate. Her experience on the magistrates' bench proved to be a strain as her discordant voice in support for the often poor and poorly represented defendants made her unpopular among her fellow justices of the peace. She finally resigned from the bench sensing that her presence was giving the legal process a legitimacy she could not support.

In the 80s as a parishioner of Our Lady of Lourdes Wanstead she became active in the Justice and Peace group and motivated by the Dr. Helen Caldecott film, *Critical Mass*, on the dangers of nuclear war she organised invitations to the local churches to a viewing of the film hoping to start discussions and social action. She noted that in fact the usual response was horror and awareness followed by social paralysis. In 1982 she noticed an invitation by Dan Martin who was then the Justice and Peace worker for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Southwark to meet in the forecourt of Westminster Cathedral to discern a Catholic response to nuclear war preparations. This was to form the beginning of Catholic Peace Action and her first introduction to non-violent antinuclear protests deemed by the authorities as illegal.

At that time the Catholic Church's teaching on nuclear deterrence was at the least ambiguous. The then Pope John Paul II's address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in June 1982 gave a moral acceptance to nuclear deterrence as a step towards nuclear disarmament. To many in the Church this was taken as an endorsement of the policy or as was often termed loosely the

“doctrine” of nuclear deterrence. Others in the Church saw this doctrine as a kind of heresy and saw no indication of genuine nuclear disarmament. This was a time when the cold war was at its height. Mrs.Thatcher’s government dominated the political scene in the UK with her ally Mr.Reagan in the USA. Mr.Heseltine the secretary of State for Defence was telling Parliament that protesters ran the risk of being shot if they trespassed onto military bases and to be a peace activist often meant regular visits to court and sometimes jail. Greenham Common was designated to be the place where 96 nuclear cruise missiles, each with a capacity of 15 times that of the bomb at Hiroshima, would be stationed to counter the Soviet SS20 missiles threat in the East. There was a general sense of uncertainty, the cold war rhetoric was fierce and the introduction of these intermediate-range nuclear weapons made nuclear war more likely. The debate and division within the Catholic Church at this time was heated but respectful. Senior well known Catholic lay people and senior religious leaders took opposing views in public. While some developed a theology of nuclear deterrence others not only voiced and debated opposite views but advocated and took part in non-violent antinuclear protests with trespass and cutting of the fences at military bases, and obstruction to the cruise missile convoys. To sustain people through the legal process and often jail time affinity groups which could be described as base communities were set up among which Catholic Peace Action was one in London and which Sarah became a founder member, see this link to a film where she speaks to camera ([CPA](#)). Her first arrestable nonviolent antinuclear protest was carried out with this group at the Ministry of Defence London and she described it as crossing an invisible line which marked out her commitment to no longer being a bystander.

In 1983 she moved to live at Greenham Common though continuing her discerning with and support for Catholic Peace Action and their support for her. She attended their regular meetings and while she focused her actions at Greenham Common the other members focused on non-violent protests at the Ministry of Defence London which often led to court cases and prison sentences.

The Imperial War Museum has recorded an extensive oral history of Sarah’s story, see this link, ([oral history](#)) where she describes the harsh conditions of living in the mud of Greenham Common, the brutality of some of the bailiffs and police, her over 20 imprisonments, her numerous court appearances, her fasting which on one occasion lasted 31 days in Holloway Prison when she lost

over 2 stone in weight. She records the moving experience of attending Mass on Sundays in Holloway Prison with the marginalised women whose faith was an inspiration.

She describes the grassroots non-violent spirituality of the Greenham women and her confidence in the ultimate removal of the cruise missiles. She relates the women at Greenham were neither saints nor sinners but were described by the authorities as “bloody women”. Sarah was proud of that description and that they were rooted in non-violence whatever faith tradition or none they claimed. She never hid her own Christian faith and roots at Greenham and the unifying spirituality among them was the women’s non-violence and their anti-nuclear position and willingness to cross that line of protest that put them at risk of arrest and jail. Sarah’s legal struggles with the state are well documented in her book, *Greenham non-violent Women-v-The Crown Prerogative* a copy of which is in the Pax Christi library and also a digital copy at [this link here](#). Greenham, S. Hipperson (1).pdf

Often peace activists like Sarah never see the results of their struggle and it may be another generation or even more generations that reap the benefit but in the case of the Greenham Common women history gives them a visible legacy. In 1987 the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was signed by Mr.Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev and soon after the cruise missiles were removed as were the SS20s from the East. The Ash Wednesday annual Pax Christi demonstration at the Ministry of Defence against nuclear weapons is a legacy that Sarah was happy to see in her lifetime and the Catholic Church is now no longer ambiguous about any “theology” of nuclear deterrence. The very possession of nuclear weapons is condemned with clarity at the highest level. Sarah was very aware that her prayer for a nuclear free world remained unanswered in her time, we still have much to do but considering one “bloody woman’s” contribution to the cause of non-violent peace building she will be to all who knew her an inspiration and a challenge.