**Nine-year protest camp over**

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* **BY** MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS

ECO-WARRIORS are dismantling their tree-houses and tepees and preparing to leave Britain's longest-running protest camp. For almost nine years they refused to budge from the site near the ancient Nine Ladies Stone Circle as they battled to prevent an area of the Peak District National Park being used for quarrying.

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The protest was sparked when quarry company Stancliffe Stone announced plans to reopen Endcliffe and Lees quarries, at Stanton Moor, near Matlock, Derbyshire, to extract high-quality sandstone.

Fearful of the environmental impact the scheme might have, protestors moved in - living in a caravans and in tree-houses where they remained despite bids to evict them.

Geoffrey Henson, of Stanton Lees Action Group which opposed the plan, said: "We are delighted and all we are waiting for now is the revocation notice, which should come back from the government in the next 12 weeks.

"It is a formality and the dismantling of the camp has already started.

"This is what we've been fighting for and now everyone at the camp will up sticks and go.

"This was based on principle, it was proposed for a national park and this was never right.

"There are no plans for a celebration yet, we shall talk about that when it is over."

Last September Hazel Blears, the local government secretary, decided Stancliffe Stone's planning permission would be revoked in exchange for the right to quarry at Dale View, a quarry in an area which is less environmentally sensitive.

But the remaining 20 protestors refused to pack up until they had it in writing that there would be no quarrying at the site.

Now, after lengthy negotiations the final legal documents have been completed and are expected to be rubber stamped before Christmas.

It will bring to an end years of controversy, court cases and concern over risks to the bronze age remains such as the Nine Ladies Stone Circle.

Stancliffe Stone is voluntarily giving up the planning permission granted in 1952, ending the possibility the quarries may be re-opened.

In exchange, the company will be allowed to extend Dale View quarry, further away from the most-sensitive sites.

Narendra Bajaria, chair of The Peak District National Park Authority, said: "This is a great result for the authority, the company, the community, and most of all for the nationally-important heritage and wildlife of Stanton Moor.

"It brings to an end to years of uncertainty for villagers, parish councils, action groups and the company concerned. We are grateful for the community's support and patience while the negotiations were taking place, but it was necessary to secure the best solution that could have been achieved."

The new Dale View quarry permission allows an extension of around three hectares and extra extraction of around 950,000 tonnes of gritstone - most of which will be used for building, walling and monumental purposes.

The operator will be required to manage nearby biodiversity habitats throughout the quarry's 20-year active life, and commit to 20 years' aftercare of the restored site as hay meadows.

Ian Pearson, estates manager of Stancliffe Stone, commented: "We've been working closely with the national park authority, local community and other interested parties to reach an agreement on Dale View. The quarried stone will be used for new build, heritage and restoration projects.

"We would like to thank all of the stakeholders involved in finalising this agreement, which will help protect the Nine Ladies Stone Circle, wildlife and surrounding landscape."

Ben Hartley, 29, who is originally from Cheadle Hulme, has lived in a tree house on the site 'on-and-off' for the past nine years.

He says the plans to re-start quarrying at the site would have been devastating for those living in the nearby village. And he says he is delighted that by working together with the residents they have been successful in over-turning the plans.

They may not have enjoyed four-star luxury at the site during their stay, but the eco-protestors have installed their own creature comforts over the years, by rigging up wood burners in the tree houses, as well as outdoor baths and showers.

And beneath the ground they have installed an intricate network of underground 'defences' - tunnels that could be occupied by protestors should anyone have come to try and reclaim the site.

"Our presence prevents them from coming onto the land and quarrying," said Ben, who says that at the height of the threat of eviction in January 2004 there were more than 100 people on the site.

"There were in excess of 30 tree houses at one time, although a lot of them have now been taken down. They are all made from things that have been recycled, stuff that people have thrown away. "It's beautiful living in trees. I really enjoy it with the birds twittering around you."

The tree houses are built around wooden floor joists, with a domed structure of willow or hazel poles that are then covered with blankets and plastic tarpaulin. Ben says the structures - which even have oil burners - can be toasty, even in winter. There is a bath, which is made of cast iron, which is heated from beneath with a fire. And there are showers that have been rigged up with water butts, that are then hauled into the trees. However despite the touches of 'luxury', Ben admits, that everyday chores can be a challenge - even with the support of nearby residents, which he says has been crucial.

"It isn't easy and day-to-day chores are a lot harder than when you are living in a house," said Ben.

"You have to make a fire whenever you want to cook and go and get water, which usually has to be collected with water butts. But it is thoroughly enjoyable.

"The local people have been absolutely supportive. The campaign has been successful because it has been a combination of local people and us. Working together is absolutely the way to go.

"Without local people it simply would not have worked. They have been writing and rewriting the same letters. And they have helped us with food and resources; letting us charge their batteries in their houses, letting us take baths and washing clothes."

Nearby resident Geoffrey Henson, aged 69, and his wife Julie have been keen to support the protestors during their stay. Retired veterinary manager Geoffrey said: "It has worked very well. We were a bit surprised when they turned up, because they turned up out of the blue.

"It's been about having respect for one another. They have respect for us as local residents and we have respect for them because they have come to protect the area and not to cause any trouble.

"When you see how tough life is on the site, you realise they have to be dedicated to what they do. We will be sorry to see them go, but we now know we have won the battle. They have become friends."

Before they leave the site the campaigners have vowed to make sure the site is returned to its original state - removing the tree houses and the underground structures.