Interview with Christabel Gurney by Hana Sandhu, 16 October 2013 for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom
http://www.aamarchives.org/

Hana Sandhu (Interviewer): Please give me your full name.

Christabel Gurney (Interviewee): I'm Christabel Gurney.

HS: When and where were you born?

CG: I was born in the South of England, in Hampshire, in 1943.

HS: What do you – or did you – do for a living?

CG: Well, I was a [...] typesetter and then a copy editor and that's what I did for a living but actually, as will emerge in the interview, I spent a lot of my life working in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, voluntarily but more or less full-time.

HS: Have you been involved in any other political or campaigning activities apart from anti-apartheid?

CG: Well yes when I was very young, partly how I got involved in Anti-Apartheid, I was involved in CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), then I've been a member of both the Communist Party and more recently the Labour Party.

HS: Can you tell me a little about it?

CG: About ... ?

HS: CND.

CG: Well, that was just – well I was very young in the very late 1950s and early '60s – CND was really the biggest grassroots campaigning organisation around and so I got involved and I went on I think the second Aldermaston march and I was a teenager with my big sister, which was probably in 1959.

HS: And your involvement with the Communist Party?

CG: Well that was from ... I joined the Communist Party really as a result of my activities in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, which may sound odd, but I knew a lot of South African Communists and some British Communists, so I was involved in that from the mid-70s until the mid-1980s.

HS: When and how did you first become aware of the situation in Southern Africa?

CG: I think [...] almost my first job was working for an overseas aid organisation called Youth Against Hunger and because of that I got to know South Africans, in particular one South African who been deported from South Africa because he was the president elect of the students union there and then I got involved in Anti-Apartheid through going up through him to the Anti-Apartheid Movement office, which was then in Charlotte Street, and volunteering and generally helping out filing newspaper cuttings. And I think it's interesting that Anti-Apartheid had no money in those days, never had any money, and it relied very heavily on volunteers. And so if you were a volunteer you very quickly got pulled in and you got to do

really interesting things, which now, you know, when I go through a lot of job applications [I realise it's hard] to get to do. So I quite quickly became ... I filed the newspaper cuttings and then I started helping lay out and edit *Anti-Apartheid News*, which was the organisation's monthly newspaper, and I quite quickly took over and became the editor and did that for the next 10 years.

HS: Why did you feel you should do something about it?

CG: Well, it was very obviously a terrible situation and, well, I think what was very important was getting to know – there were a lot of South African exiles in London and they were very committed to the cause. And I think interestingly it was their commitment that kind of rubbed off on some of us British people, and they were very good at involving people and making you think that you were part of the struggle. And so there was a very strong personal commitment involved, because in those days we read about South Africa, but there was not a lot of opposition going on in South Africa, so we knew that it was all – not academic – but a bit remote. We, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, had a ban on South Africa and said people shouldn't visit South Africa and we didn't, and if you'd been involved a bit you weren't going to be let in anyway, so it was very much the commitment here. But also in the 1970s we knew that a lot of people were being detained and tortured, and there were a lot of deaths in detention, and once that started happening that was a tremendous motivating factor, so that you felt that however hard you were working here, and whatever sacrifices you were making here, you absolutely had to do all you could because people were suffering so much more inside the country.

HS: Yeah …

CG: But also at the beginning I got involved, as well as doing *Anti Apartheid News*, when I first got involved there was the sports campaign and one of the first things I did, in the summer of 1969, was to try and disrupt a South African cricket tour, the Wilfred Isaacs Tour, with some people from the South African Non Racial Olympic Committee, who were South Africans. We went and sat on pitches and I remember going and disrupting the match at the Oval, which was the only time I had been to a cricket match. And then the following year there was the Springbok rugby tour, which went all over Britain, and that was a huge campaign. And, for example, the first match was moved from Oxford to Twickenham because the police got wind of plans to … and I remember very clearly how we all went and they only let people into one side of the ground and we shouted 'Sieg Heil', gave the Nazi salute, and tried to run on the pitch. All that was tremendously motivating and, you know, it was slightly risky because you were liable to get arrested but in a way, it was kind of, you really felt part of a big campaign.

HS: Were you on a committee or a local group?

CG: I was later, well no, I was early on. One of the first things I did in the early '70s was that I was the secretary of something that was called the Dambusters Committee. Somebody once asked if we were against all dams [laughter], or just one dam, but the Dambusters Committee was set up against one particular dam, to campaign against the Cabora Bassa dam in Mozambique, which was being built by Portugal, which was the colonial power at the time in Mozambique, to supply electricity to South Africa.

HS: Right …

CG: The ANC and FRELIMO were very opposed to this and asked the AAM to set up a broader campaigning committee to campaign against it and I was asked to be secretary of that. And at the beginning of the campaign we discovered that Barclays Bank was one of the funders of the scheme and that was how the campaign against Barclays actually started. So one of the first things we did was … one of the organisations on the Dambusters Committee was the Haslemere Group and people in the Haslemere Group bought shares in Barclays. And I organised, in 1972 I think, distributing these shares to protesters, and we all went along to the annual general meeting of Barclays Bank. And I think that was the first time anyone had done anything like that that and we really had great fun because Barclays just wasn't used to people asking awkward questions, and there were a number of people who got up one after the other and said 'Why is Barclays involved South Africa?', 'Why is it funding the Cabora Bassa Dam?'. And the Chair just couldn't cope [laughter], they were used to sedate shareholders meetings, and Mike Terry, who later became the secretary of AAM, was there – he was then involved in NUS. He was great, he was wearing a suit and tie and the Chair called him to speak thinking 'I'm safe here', and then he also launched into a speech about why was Barclays supporting apartheid, and we got good press coverage. Then the Barclays campaign took off because it emerged it was the biggest bank in South Africa and it was taken up by student unions and in 1986 Barclays finally pulled out of South Africa.

HS: So what happened to the dam in the end ... ?

CG: The dam was built in the end, the dam operates today and now it's not big enough and I think Mozambique is considering, in completely different circumstances now, which we would support, building the dam on the Zambezi …

HS: Can you describe the general dynamic in that committee?

CG: I don't know about that committee, but in general the dynamic I think in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, was it was very invigorating and you met a lot of interesting people and people you liked, and in the local group – we had a local group in this area that was called the West London Anti Apartheid group, which later became the Notting Hill Anti-Apartheid group. It was very friendly and sociable and so there was a lot of socialising at the same time as a lot of hard work. In the early days I said about how the South Africans drew people in and some of us who were involved with the Anti-Apartheid office in central London were friendly with people from the ANC, and so there was a lot of cross-friendships and general kind of parties and socialising as well as campaigning. So it was all together ... it became a way of life.

HS: So the Springbok campaign and the start of the Barclays campaigns, were there any other campaigns that you were involved in?

CG: Well, yes, I already said about campaigning against deaths in detention. I was very much involved in the '70s in the general campaigning for disinvestment because almost – in the '70s anyway before we joined the EU – investment in South Africa from Britain was huge and almost every major British company had a subsidiary in South Africa. So we used to compile lists of these companies and subsidiaries and try and work out which – we couldn't campaign against investment from all of them, but we tried to sort of highlight the ones that could most obviously be shown to be supporting apartheid like the computer company ICL

which sold computers to the South African police and Rio Tinto Zinc, which was involved in the uranium mine in Namibia. And so I was very involved in kind of campaigning, in doing the research actually behind the campaigns on company investment.

HS: Was it difficult to find these investing companies?

CG: No, it was quite easy, but it was laborious. It's important to realise that in those days there was no internet.

HS: Yeah …

CG: So we used to go to Westminster Reference Library and there was a book called *Who Owns Whom*, and literally copy out longhand information from it, which we then typed up and Anti-Apartheid printed. And it is interesting that all this was done without any internet or email, which was why Anti-Apartheid produced so many hundreds of thousands of leaflets which we distributed, and one of the main campaign activities in those days was going out and handing out leaflets to people outside shops, outside Barclays Bank, outside tube stations.

You asked me about organisations. I was later, not all the time, but later involved in the local anti-apartheid group, which was the Notting Hill Anti Apartheid Group. And Notting Hill in those days wasn't the expensive smart area it is now, it was a very multiracial area, with Carnival. So it was a good place to campaign on anti-apartheid and our local group did what a lot of anti-apartheid local groups did, we campaigned against the opening of the big Sainsbury's at the top of Ladbroke Grove sometime in the '70s to try and stop it from the very beginning selling South African fruit. I remember the grand opening with the Mayor and dignitaries and we were outside with our placards, which Sainsbury's didn't like very much, and the manger did come out and tell us that he would take our views into account. But of course they did sell South African fruit and then we used to go up there every other week, every other Saturday morning, and give out leaflets to shoppers and have interesting conversations with people about why, and sometime you persuaded them. We had some success with the small Tesco in Portobello Road which had, I think because it had a black deputy manager who we kind of had conversations with, and for a while they didn't stock South African goods. That was a small victory. We always found in the market, Portobello Road market, you got a good response, especially from shoppers, from black shoppers, who were originally from a Caribbean background, who used to say, I remember, 'How do we know [where the fruit comes from]', and we had a campaign to get goods labelled so people knew where goods came from.

HS: So what was the dynamic like in the Notting Hill Anti-Apartheid Group?

CG: Well, again there was a high turnover of members, but that wasn't because people got disillusioned, it was because of the housing in the area, people moved in and out, mostly young people. And so we – there was a large number of, as I remember it, it was so friendly and I got to know a lot people who I liked very much, some of whom I am still in touch with. And it was very noticeable, I think, that most of the people involved weren't actually involved in any other political organisation. I think people did feel, certainly in the '80s – Anti-Apartheid got quite big, with a lot of people involved – that this was something they should be doing something about, in response to what was going on in the '80s inside South Africa. Because there was kind of mayhem in the townships and for a little while the television news

showed the South Africa armoured cars going into the townships. In '85, '86, a lot of people saw that and joined in, so it was very committed and friendly. It had its ups and downs, I remember one meeting, a committee meeting, and only one person showed up, so it was not always like that, but we kept going.

I mentioned Sainsbury's in Ladbroke Grove. Once we went in and we loaded South Africa fruit into trolleys and pushed them to the side, and somebody did go to the checkout and load the trolley and refuse to pay. I always felt that was a bit dodgy because the customers in the queue behind you got quite annoyed. So I always favoured just putting the kiwi fruit, I remember, in the trolleys and parking them on the side.

We also had social events, fundraising social events, which were hard work but fun. We had an unfortunate event where we had Courtney Pine and it happened the date coincided with the Football World Cup and we didn't know it would be England playing Cameroon, so hardly anyone came [laughs]. So that was a down moment. But we had some good fundraising events at the Tabernacle Community Centre.

HS: When you look back what particular incidents stand out and can you describe them?

CG: I think one of the things that was most moving and emotional was in the '80s. The South African government started hanging young ANC – MK the armed wing – freedom fighters. There was always a big campaign for reprieve, and sometimes there were reprieves at the last moment, but Anti-Apartheid always organised an all-night vigil because they were hanged at dawn, and so we would go in the evening and stand outside South Africa House and stand outside all night, and then you knew, early in the morning, that was when the hanging would take place. That was one of the things I remember most because that was tremendously kind of moving and obviously emotional and never to be forgotten.

The other thing I remember, the much more upbeat, wonderful moment, was the end of it all. There was the election on the 27th April 1994 and Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President in May. And we had stood outside South Africa House for all those years protesting and only ever been inside for a couple of brief sit-ins. But on that day we were invited to go to a reception inside South Africa House and it was a very strange occasion because the old apartheid ambassador was still there and acting as High Commissioner – things didn't change that fast. So all the old people he had invited were all the kind of right-wing Tory MPs and business people who supported South Africa. But also the ANC had an invitation list, so there were a lot of ANC people and people from the anti-apartheid group. They had a screen with a video link to Pretoria with Mandela giving his acceptance speech. Then they sang Nkosi Sikelel', the new national anthem, which had been the ANC national anthem. At that stage the old apartheid supporters didn't know the words, and we knew the words, and that was somehow very symbolic, and it felt like they kind of melted away. I remember seeing the apartheid High Commissioner standing on the edge of the room in conversation with just one person. Then the ANC people started toyi-toying, which was a kind of dance. It felt symbolically as if we were taking over and it was just the most wonderful moment and you felt we really had won.

HS: Can you describe what you think were the high points and low points of anti-apartheid campaigning?

CG: I think the high points were in the mid-80s. We had huge marches through central London in 1985 calling for sanctions. It was partly because Margaret Thatcher, who was prime minister, was so very opposed to any action, to any anti-apartheid action, and especially to imposing sanctions against South Africa. Margaret Thatcher was a very divisive prime minister and so people who were opposed to her for all kinds of other reasons also joined in anti-apartheid campaigns. So we had a huge march in 1985 and then the following year there was another huge event which involved marching through central London to Clapham Common all down Sloane Street, all through Chelsea, which had never seen such a demonstration before. And there were a quarter of a million people on Clapham Common for a big music gig organised by Artists Against Apartheid. And it was a lovely day, with a quarter of a million people there. Thabo Mbeki spoke on behalf of the ANC. Gil Scott Heron and all these big names of the pop world.

HS: Angela Davis …

CG: And that was great. And then the next big thing was the Free Nelson Mandela campaign in 1988, and the Wembley concert, which was a capacity crowd in Wembley for eight hours, which was the beginning of a six-week campaign. There was a march form Glasgow to London and at the end of the march, again, a huge event with Desmond Tutu in Hyde Park. And so we really did feel we had made it, making the British public take action, and calling for Mandela's release, so that apartheid's days really were numbered.

HS: And how about the low points?

CG: Locally, well again I remember when Mandela was released we went down the road from Ladbroke Grove, the other side of Notting Hill Gate, is the South African ambassador's official residence, High Veldt, which is next to Holland Park school. And we marched down to sort of celebrate his release and had a little celebration outside the ambassador's residence. I remember then meeting somebody who said that her garden overlooked the ambassador's residence and she had always made a point when she saw they were having garden parties of putting on *Free Nelson Mandela*, the Jerry Dammers song, and playing it very loud ...

HS: Looking back, what are your feelings about your involvement in anti-apartheid campaigns?

CG: I think it was a very large part of my life and it was a great experience. I still have strong links with people in South Africa. I still have a lot of friends who were involved, and I'm also involved in Action for Southern Africa, which was set up when Anti-Apartheid dissolved itself when South Africa had its first democratic election in 1994. Action for Southern Africa acts, campaigns, to promote development throughout the region, and especially now in Swaziland, which is an autocracy with a very high HIV rate. And so I'm still involved in campaigning on that ...

HS: Is there anything else you would like to say?

No, except that I do think that anti-apartheid was a sort of case study of what can be done where people can act in solidarity with people who are struggling a long way away, for no obvious personal gain. I think there are lots of places and situations in the world now, which may not be quite as straightforward in a way, but where action, you know, people should still

know that you can do small things that don’t seem very successful for a long time, but it can build up and you can have some effect.