

In the shadow of Drax, not so much a fight as a festival

- 38 held as police foil plan to halt 'dirty' power plant
- Protesters outnumbered in siege that wasn't



📷 The climate change protest camp near Drax power station in north Yorkshire. Photo: John Giles/PA

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They didn't cost Drax power station even a second's electricity generation yesterday, but 600 climate action campaigners got 13-year-old Lauren Lofthouse thinking - and in the long run that may be more significant.

Like a very small wave, the much-advertised assault lapped at the huge plant, one of the biggest buildings in Britain, and was broken with 38 arrests by a far larger force of police. The quieter campaign for local hearts and minds was a different matter.

Billed in advance as "the Battle of Drax", the day was mostly nothing of the sort but a charm offensive of patient argument, good manners and jokes. It was the last that got Lauren and her twin sister, Daisy, hooked when a clown with a painted face, luminous red wig and combat jacked bounced down her garden path and announced: "Sustainable energy is fun - really fun - I promise it is."

Moments earlier, the girls had been saying shyly that they did not have any views about the 12 cooling towers and Britain's tallest chimney, which

pumps out the country's largest single carbon footprint right in front of their kitchen window. After listening to the clown - a student called Jane from Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire - they were beginning to wonder, and that is what the Climate Action Camp is really after.

"It's when we have our own kids, isn't it?" Daisy said. "We don't want to do anything now which could affect them. It all seems OK, but when you think about it, it's what's going to happen in the future." Jane and her fellow protesters, one a GP from Hackney in London, beamed.

The Siege that Wasn't didn't turn entirely into doorstep debates. Promptly at 9am the highly organised camp in a legally squatted field (compensation payments ready for the brothers who farm it) disgorged a series of raiding parties in the direction of the cooling towers. Two protesters clambered up a lighting pylon on the edge of the mile-long perimeter and four others broke through the fence. They were vastly outnumbered by police from seven forces and were collared and taken away in vans within the hour.

A larger force of demonstrators then squeezed through a police cordon on a twisty lane that cuts across the flat land of the Humber estuary between the camp and the power station. There were 22 more arrests, including two people with what officers called weapons - thought to be boltcutters and poles - which the deputy chief constable of North Yorkshire, Ian McPherson, said "makes me feel upset".

It was fair comment in the context of the exceptionally gentle policing, code-named Operation Harmony. All campers were given a leaflet from the force that started "Welcome to North Yorkshire and the Selby area in particular" and went on to promise every assistance with demonstrating provided it was peaceful.

Chief Superintendent Barry Smith chatted with protesters and said how good it was for his officers to deal with something "different". The police were also happy, in a different way, to pick up a couple of people who have been the subject of arrest warrants for weeks. They publicly read section 60 of the Public Order Act (the modern version of the old riot act ritual) and made it clear that the "closing Drax" notion, which brought us, the media, in droves, wasn't going to happen.

It would not be right to say that life sailed on as normal behind the wire, however. Quite a few staff didn't turn up. And everyone was instructed to lock office doors and open them only in response to a code of knocks. Like a children's story, all the Drax staff had to wear bright red jerkins. The police had luminous yellow and the protesters every colour.

There were occasional outbursts of temper, and the day's one casualty was a farmer who objected to the road being closed, tried to tractor through the crowd and ended up half-capsized in the ditch with a split head. The camp's symbol of an ostrich lifting its head from the sand was also confiscated,

because the police considered its lock-on bolts (for attaching, in the protesters' wildest dreams, to the huge chimney) potential weapons.

The little army went home at teatime, and their shuttle bus started taking people to Selby railway station, but they will be back. The medic from Hackney, Douglas Carnall, who writes in the British Medical Journal, summed up the feeling: "This issue is too important for one-offs. There will be protests, more persuasion and no doubt more camps."

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