

‘The Truth’ of the Hillsborough disaster is only 23 years late

John Williams was present on the fateful day in April of 1989. He places the event within its historical and sociological context, and looks at the slow process that finally led to the truth being revealed.



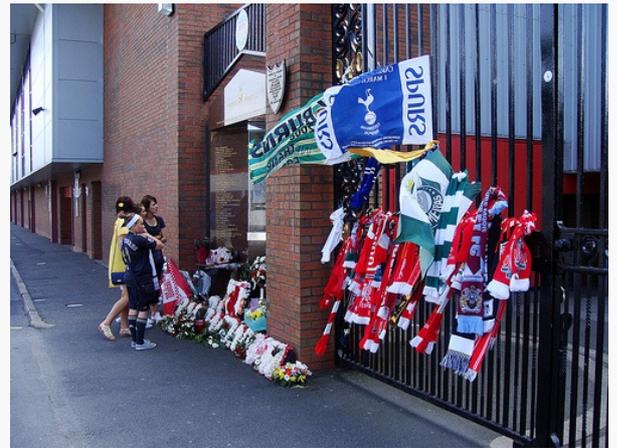
I have to begin by saying – rather pretentiously some might reasonably argue – that I am a ‘fan scholar’, an active Liverpool season ticket holder and a professional football researcher. I had followed my club on that FA Cup run of 1989 (Hull City away, Brentford at home) and was at Hillsborough on the 15 April – fortunately safely in the seats. But I saw all the on-pitch distress and the bodies being laid out below the stand from which we watched in disbelief as events unfolded on that awful day. Fans carrying the injured and the dying on advertising boards: where were the ambulances? As the stadium and the chaos finally cleared, Football Trust officials (I had worked on projects for the Trust) asked me to take people from the football organisations around the site of the tragedy to try to explain what had happened.

It was a bleak terrain: twisted metal barriers and human detritus – scarves, odd shoes and pairs of spectacles – scattered on the Leppings Lane terraces. The police were happy to put us straight on what had just occurred: young Liverpool supporters, wild with drink, had overwhelmed them and ‘forced’ their way into the stadium through Gate C leading to the fateful overcrowding. But when we examined it, the infamous Gate C seemed intact, not at all damaged. And Liverpool stragglers were also whispering to us, even then, that this was not how things had happened at all; that they had been freely admitted by the police in order to relieve pressure outside. They showed us their unchecked tickets (A chilling reminder, this, of events at the Heysel Stadium four years earlier when the organization was also shambolic and it was Liverpool fans who had disgraced themselves – 39 mainly Italians died).

The truth – as Lord Justice Taylor had concluded in his 1990 report – was that the police in Sheffield had failed to monitor the Liverpool crowds effectively both inside and outside the ground. There were too few turnstiles to properly process fans and the police responded to pressure and overcrowding outside by allowing supporters entry. But they then failed to direct these Liverpool fans to less crowded pens in the Hillsborough Stadium, assuming they would ‘find their own level’ under CCTV cameras on fully penned terraces. They did not.

Twenty-three years on from that day in Sheffield and the veil has finally been lifted because of a couple of principled politicians and the work of the Hillsborough Independent Panel. You now all know what we (Liverpool supporters) have been aware of pretty much all along. So excuse us if we didn’t exactly leap up and gasp as members of the House of Commons audibly did this past week as they heard about the conspiracies and the cover ups that immediately interlocked like some great corrupt and impenetrable jigsaw of closure and deceit.

Because, actually, ‘we’ knew much of this already; discussed it regularly in pubs and cars, protested about it vigorously. That it was the neglect and mismanagement practiced by the South Yorkshire Police which ultimately caused the deaths of 96 Liverpool supporters near the start of the FA Cup semi-final meeting with Nottingham Forest; that the police officer in charge was untried and inexperienced at this level; that the stadium itself was a potential death trap, uncertificated and not fit for purpose; that the



Scarves and flags at the Hillsborough memorial, Anfield.
Credit: Ben Sutherland (CC-BY) via Flickr

coroner's office was later in cahoots with the police, concluding that all fans had died at 3.15pm in order to mask what had really gone on, including the woefully inadequate response of the emergency services; that *The Sun* newspaper (Murdoch again) had happily swallowed, wholesale, the lies provided for it by the police and a Conservative MP about 'drunken' and 'thieving' Liverpool fans; and that before the bodies had even cooled the police had started taking blood samples from dead children and were using the National Police Computer to search (fruitlessly) for smearing evidence of criminal records among the dead.

In my recent book, *Red Men: Liverpool Football Club the Biography* I chart how English football clubs – including Liverpool FC – had long displayed too little care in its treatment of football fans. In the 1950s English football grounds were potentially highly dangerous places which were poorly regulated – hundreds of fans would often leave stadia before kick-off, justifiably afraid for their own safety. It was only good fortune and the care that supporters showed for each other which had avoided similar disasters, excepting the 1946 tragedy at Burnden Park, Bolton in which 33 people had died and the Ibrox fatalities of 1971.

The 1980s in Britain was a much harsher social and economic climate than pertained in the 1950s. It is easy to forget now the deep-seated problems of violence in English terrace cultures and the concomitant tensions between some young male football fans and the police. Policing football matches was no easy task. After all, the Sheffield ground was argued to be one of England's best appointed stadiums, but only because of the way it was designed to deal with potential hooliganism. The English game was plagued by problems of crowd misbehaviour and had gone down what proved to be a fatal route in terms of crowd management: it was routinely treating all of its travelling customers as potential threats. Only when the Hillsborough victims began to be identified in the press as fathers, sons and daughters, as 'ordinary' mothers and sisters, did the wider British public begin to see English football supporters through a slightly different lens.

Football crowds were certainly more volatile, less consensual and rather less caring in the 1980s than they had been before or since. Some commentators argued at the time that events at Hillsborough were symbolic of a general attack by the British State on working class people in Liverpool and elsewhere. Certainly the role the South Yorkshire Police had played in the miners' strike in 1984, the widespread hooliganism in English football, and the antipathy Mrs. Thatcher's government had shown towards the game and its supporters (and people from Liverpool), guaranteed the police more than a fair wind for their account. The lack of prying eyes may well have been a reward for their demonstrated class loyalties. But Hillsborough was also part of a pattern of general deterioration of 'public' facilities in Britain at that time, a development which had also brought a range of recent fatal disasters on public transport as neo-liberal Tory policies had routinely prioritized the rich and the private over the poor and the public sector.

As a response to the frustration and deep sense of injustice felt locally over Hillsborough, Liverpool supporters have since ingested the disaster, the public response to it and the local 'justice' campaigns which have followed as part of the identity of the club itself. No football match at Anfield over the past 23 years has been complete without some supporter demonstration in support of 'the 96.' On the 20th anniversary of the disaster in 2009 an extraordinary 28,000 people turned up to hear the annual service for the dead at Anfield to convince the then Labour government Minister, Andy Burnham (an ardent Everton supporter), that a new direction was needed. It was finally agreed in July of that year that over 400,000 documents pertaining to the events in April 1989 be released at last for public scrutiny under the auspices of the Hillsborough Independent Panel. So this is where we are.

As Trevor Hicks (who lost two daughters on 15 April) from the Hillsborough Family Support Group put it last week, on average in Britain it seems to take around 25 years for miscarriages of justice to be reversed. The corridors of power are pretty well sealed. By this estimate we still have another two years to finish the job.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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