

A most extraordinary scandal: Hillsborough

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A few days over 27 years and justice may finally have been done. After new inquests that have been sitting for two years, a jury decided that the football fans who died in the Hillsborough stadium disaster on 15 April 1989 were unlawfully killed. Local Merseyside MP, Andy Burnham, described what occurred since that day as 'the greatest miscarriage of justice of our time'. Why? [Tim Newburn](#) gives his reaction to the verdict.



For those unfamiliar with the Hillsborough tragedy, it occurred at an FA Cup semi-final at Sheffield Wednesday's football ground, Hillsborough. This was a time – the late 1980s – when football had been beset for many years by problems of hooliganism. As a result, there were wire cages erected both at the front of terraces – to stop fans getting on to the pitch – and within the terraces – to keep fans separated from each other.



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Early on in the match it became clear that something was very wrong in the middle two sections of terrace at the end of the ground (the Leppings Lane) where the Liverpool supporters had been allocated tickets. Fans were attempting to climb over the wire mesh at the front of the terrace, out at the sides or even attempting to scale their way up to the upper tier of the stand above. There were chaotic scenes as police officers pushed fans back into the terrace whilst hundreds pleaded for help.

Ninety-six people died, in the main of asphyxia as a result of crushing. Accusations and counter-accusations flew. The police claimed that the gate at the Leppings Lane had been forced open by fans; there were suggestions that typical hooliganism was to blame; the Prime Minister's press advisor [said](#) events were caused by a 'tanked-up mob'; and the *Sun* newspaper, to its enduring shame, under the headline THE TRUTH, [claimed](#) that fans had

attacked rescue workers and stole from the bodies of the dead.

The police investigation that followed focused more on the behaviour of the fans – specifically on whether they had consumed alcohol – than on any other aspect. From the outset it looked like a cover-up. The lies and the slurs continued, even in the face of an [official inquiry](#) conducted by Lord Justice Taylor that pointed to widespread police failures and which exonerated the fans.

For the families of the 96 and for survivors, worse was to come. The official inquests, held in Sheffield, were so circumscribed in their approach that there was never any real prospect of anyone being successfully held to account. The outcome was verdicts of ‘accidental death’ and a sense of betrayal among the families. That there was seemingly to be no accountability was confirmed by the failure to bring prosecutions against any of the responsible South Yorkshire police officers. Even disciplinary proceedings against the officer in charge, Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield, were dropped when he took early retirement.

How, then, a quarter of a century later has *the real truth* finally been confirmed? Fundamentally it is a story of extraordinary courage and resilience by the indefatigable Hillsborough family campaigners. The parents, siblings, and other relatives who refused to give up. Those who, despite the lies and the willingness of those in powerful positions to traduce the memory of their loved ones, were resolute in their determination to see justice done.

A huge number of people have played an important role in supporting the Hillsborough Justice campaign. Among them, the playwright, Jimmy McGovern, whose Granada TV drama helped to keep the injustice in the limelight. Local MPs, such as Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram, who were central to the eventual establishment of the Hillsborough Independent Panel that scrutinised all documentary evidence relating to the events of April 1989. Radical lawyer, Michael Mansfield, who represented the families, and critical criminologist, Professor Phil Scraton, whose research from the early days on, and whose work on the Independent Panel, put a huge amount of new information in the public domain.

Though they had seen their hopes raised only to be dashed on so many occasions, in 2012 the families’ campaign again seemed to have reached a crucial stage when an application was made by the Attorney-General to quash the original verdicts and to establish a fresh set of inquests. After two years of hearing evidence, the verdicts from these inquests came in today. They could not have been clearer. The jurors returned verdicts of ‘unlawful killing’ in the cases of the 96 and ruled that there was no behaviour by the fans that contributed to or caused the disaster.

In short, what everyone on Merseyside had known to be true for 27 years had finally and officially been confirmed. The fans had been failed by almost everyone in authority: by the police, by the emergency services, by government and by the media. Fans hoping for a happy day out watching their team were hopelessly mismanaged. Many paid with their lives. Those who survived then had to deal with being blamed for what had occurred. Finally, in order to prevent the detail of what occurred being revealed the most extraordinary cover-up took place. It has taken over a quarter of a century in the unpicking.

Faced with a choice between ‘cock-up’ and ‘conspiracy’, I am always naturally disinclined to believe in conspiracy; not in this case. Now, thanks to the bravery and determination of all involved in the campaign, and contrary to the deeply unpleasant claims published in the aftermath, *the truth* has now very clearly been established. Lest anyone should still be in any doubt the following six questions, out of 14 being [considered by the inquests](#), and the jury’s answers to them, make it absolutely clear where responsibility for the tragedy lies:

2: “Was there any error or omission in the police planning and preparation for the semi-final match on 15 April, 1989 which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation that developed on the day of the match?”

A: Yes.

3: “Was there any error or omission in policing on the day of the match which caused or contributed to a dangerous situation developing at the Leppings Lane turnstiles?”

A: Yes.

4: “Was there any error or omission by commanding officers which caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace?”

A: Yes.

5: “When the order was given to open the exit gates at the Leppings Lane end of the stadium, was there any error or omission by the commanding officers in the control box which caused or contributed to the crush on the terrace?”

A: Yes.

6: “Are you satisfied, so that you are sure, that those who died in the disaster were unlawfully killed?”

A: Yes.

7: “Was there any behaviour on the part of football supporters which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles?”

A: No.

About the Author

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