

# ***GREAT DISASTERS***

## **Hillsborough**

For 53 thousand football fans, that Saturday afternoon promised an exciting ninety minutes of sports. It was the FA Cup semi-final, and almost everyone there had made a special trip to cheer their teams on towards victory.

Just five minutes after kick-off, however, it was clear that something had gone terribly wrong. People were spilling onto the pitch from behind the goal at the Liverpool end. A police officer ran out to speak to the referee, and the match was abandoned.

And Hillsborough became a name that football fans would never forget.

I'm Kari Fay and this is Great Disasters.

Saturday afternoon on the terraces is a tradition that has brought millions of people together. Football is a part of English culture that transcends many boundaries; it doesn't matter if you're young or old, male or female, rich or poor, on match day all that matters is which side you're supporting.

That's one of the things that makes this tragedy so poignant. The victims could have been just about anybody. These 96 people were just doing the same thing thousands of people did every week - and it cost them their lives.

It was the 15th of April, 1989, and Liverpool FC were facing Nottingham Forest in the FA Cup semi-final. Hillsborough Stadium, home of Sheffield Wednesday, had been chosen as a neutral venue, so supporters of both teams had to travel to the match.

Because it was such a high profile game, there were live broadcasts on both radio and television. You can find television footage of the incident online, but be warned, it is hard to watch.

In footage from that day, the cameras focused on the players until the moment a police officer ran onto the pitch to halt the game, just five minutes in. Already, fans were spilling out onto the pitch around the goal at the Liverpool end. Some collapsed onto the ground. Others wandered around, looking shocked. The commentators at first told the television audience that the game had been halted because of fears the crowd would encroach upon the pitch.

As more and more Liverpool fans climbed over the high security fences onto the pitch, emotions were running high; the cameras caught some fans comforting each other while others clashed with the police.

Supporters in the upper tiers started pulling people up from the crowd below, as other fans tried desperately to climb over other people's shoulders to get into other pens or out onto the pitch.

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"The word has just come through as to precisely what the problem was," one of the commentators said. "there was a gate broken, one of the exit gates was broken, this enabled fans without tickets to gain access to the terrace and that is the precise cause of the problem."

Just to be absolutely clear, this was not true; it was just what they were told at the time.

Finally, an ambulance drove onto the pitch, sirens blaring as it tried to make its way through the gathering crowd around the goal. The cameras caught sight of CPR being administered to several supporters who had been pulled out and laid on the ground.

Chants, whistles and jeers continued from parts of the grandstands which were unaware; no announcement had been made. Police officers lined up across the pitch to create a barrier between the two halves. The Nottingham Forest fans, still unaware and expecting the pitch to be cleared for the game to continue, carried on chanting, inciting a reaction from the Liverpool fans who had made their way out.

"The police opened the gate," one Liverpool supporter told an interviewer at the side of the pitch. "There's people dead there, lying on the floor."

Eventually, everyone in the stadium realised something terrible was happening. Advertising hoardings all around the pitch were torn down to use as makeshift stretchers for injured fans, and the crowd in the unaffected stands applauded as other supporters carried them out.

It took almost an hour before the pitch began to clear; an hour and a half before it was announced that the game had actually been abandoned. It would eventually be announced that 94 people had died that day. Four days later, a 95th victim died in hospital, and then in March 1993 the death toll officially reached 96, when treatment was withdrawn from a young man who had been in a persistent vegetative state for nearly four years with no sign of improvement.

It would take a lot longer to resolve the questions which hung over the tragedy; how did this happen - and who was to blame?

To understand the Hillsborough tragedy, first you need to understand a little about the way the terraces were laid out. Standing terraces were common in English football grounds at the time. They offered cheaper tickets than seated areas, but they were designed to give all the fans a good view, with a series of steps rising to the back, usually built out of concrete. Standing on those steps allowed you to see over the heads of those in front of you, but a lot of younger fans pushed for a spot at the front. Metal crash barriers stood here and there, because the crowd tended to sway and surge back and forth. The barriers were intended to disrupt the sway and allow the crowd to push back.

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There had also been a history of violence in the stands at football matches in the eighties. Supporters of one team would try to infiltrate the terraces of the opponent, and fights would erupt. To combat this, and other effects of hooliganism, the terraces were separated from the pitch by high wire fences, and further fences split the terraces into pens, so that the fans would be corralled into smaller sections.

Those heading into the lower tier of the West Stand had several pens to choose from; two directly behind the goal, and two at either side. They weren't directed into any particular pen, and weren't counted in, so the most popular spots were often crowded. Once in, if you wanted to move to another pen in search of space, you had to get to a small gate at the back - there were no direct routes between them.

Although Liverpool had more supporters, they had been assigned to the smaller end of the stadium - the north and west stands, holding around 24 thousand people, while Nottingham Forest supporters were assigned tickets to the south stand and Spion Kop to the east, with a capacity of around 29 thousand. This was intended to ensure that fans wouldn't cross over each other's routes into the stadium from their respective homes. Again, this was a tactic driven by a disturbing rise in football hooliganism; the supporters were always separated from their opposite numbers as far as possible.

This set-up meant that the Liverpool fans were effectively funnelled through Leppings Lane, the only approach to their stands. For just over ten thousand fans with standing tickets in the lower tier of the West Stand, there were only seven turnstiles to let them in. Although the supporters began arriving at around midday for the three pm kick-off, progress was so slow that by 2:30 only 4,383 had gone through. With just half an hour to go before the game began, there were 5,700 ticket holders still to enter.

A bit of simple maths highlights the problem here. That many people through just seven turnstiles in thirty minutes? That would mean they'd have to get twenty seven people through each turnstile every minute. That meant just two seconds each, to check each person's ticket and admit them through gates that were designed for slow, controlled entry... Well, it wasn't feasible.

So the crowd outside grew. And the fans, excited for the game, pushed forwards - they wanted to get in, wanted to get a good place, they didn't want to miss a single moment.

Steve Hart, one of the Liverpool supporters arriving by coach, said that the organisation outside the ground seemed to be lacking: "... the first thing you noticed was that there was no stewarding. Normally for a game like that you'd be filtered through barriers, there'd be ticket checks and so on, random searches - but there was none of that."

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By 2:45 thousands of people were pressing into the turnstiles, making them even harder to operate. If you presented your ticket at the wrong turnstile, or if you were refused entry, the pressure behind you made it impossible to turn back, so people at the front couldn't escape. They were starting to get crushed.

Steve Hart again described the scene. "The pressure from behind was building up and building up and, even then, you could hardly breathe - it was bad. I got trapped up against the wall, by the turnstile, and I virtually couldn't move. There was people trying to push the crowd back and I managed to flip myself round into the turnstile itself. But the pressure from behind was so massive that I didn't stop. I just got propelled straight through. I still had the full ticket in my hand."

As the police officers in charge watched, they thought that somebody was going to get killed in the crush outside the stadium. They had to do something. A request was made by radio to the control room; could the kick-off be delayed? The answer was no. The policy set by match commander David Duckenfield was that a delay would be ordered only if there was some major external factor such as fog on the Pennines or delay on the motorway; not if spectators merely turned up late even in large numbers.

Still, something had to be done. Another radio request was made; could they open a gate that was intended to be used as an exit after the match, to relieve the pressure outside the turnstiles?

At 2:52, Duckenfield gave the order to open that gate. About two thousand fans flooded in.

After getting through the turnstile, Steve Hart had waited for his friends. He watched the stewards unlock the gate, and watched the fans come through.

"They never poured through, they weren't even jogging -it was a steady walk. When it all started being reported over the next few days, the police's official line was that a 'tanked-up mob' had stormed the gates and swarmed in. It weren't like that. People were walking. Loads came in, like, when the concertina gate was opened, but they were not running."

Most then went straight into a tunnel which led to pens 3 and 4, the ones behind the goal, because it was the most obvious route. Those two pens combined were officially rated to hold 2,200 people, and they had already been filling up.

There were signs to direct fans to the other pens, which were considerably emptier, but those signs were small and easily overlooked. In fact, the toilets were better signposted.

Fans elsewhere around the stadium could see the space; Martin Thompson, who was in the North stand, said that "You could clearly see the steps of the terraces either side... I'm sure the police officers who were right there must have been able to see it." At the

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other end, Danny Rhodes, a Nottingham Forest supporter, could see it too. "From where we were standing, the right hand pen and the one in the corner were virtually empty. And so were the pens to the left, and I remember my friend and me joking that Liverpool hadn't sold their allocation."

The problem was, those still trying to get in couldn't see where the space was. As they came through the turnstiles and the now-open gate, they saw a large sign above a tunnel which read, in large letters, "STANDING". And just about visible at the other end of the tunnel was the bright green grass of the pitch. It was natural that they should all be swept along that way. There was nobody telling them otherwise. Once they started through the tunnel, it sloped down sharply, and the momentum built up and up.

Peter Carney was one of the fans still heading through that tunnel when the players came out on the field. "It was just a slow shuffle forward, inch by inch, but I was used to that. Then I lost my footing. I wasn't knocked over, nothing like that. I just lost my footing in the tunnel. But that was where I suddenly just went, whoosh! Because I'd stopped moving, I was just thrown by the momentum into the terrace - and I was facing backwards."

He worked his way to a spot that he thought would be safer, close to a barrier, but it didn't ease off. "It's like you're caught in a vice that's gradually increasing the pressure, getting tighter and tighter. All the time I was stood by the barrier, I was still getting moved around - I was never stood still. And this goes on for a while, like that: tighter and tighter. It goes on to such a point where I'm struggling for my breath. I was screaming out to the copper in front of us at first, but he was blanking us...I'm completely unable to move now - my legs have gone numb and my arms are trapped down by my sides... And now, for the first time, you really are starting to think about, you know... it crosses your mind that this is really, really serious. The fella next to me... I couldn't move at all by now and he's right there, turning blue. Still the copper in front of us was taking no notice."

Fans began trying to climb the fences at the sides to escape the crush and get into the less crowded areas, but the fences were specifically designed not to let people over. The crush grew and grew.

And at 2.59, a cheer rang out as the game kicked off. Fans at the back pressed forward, anxious not to miss a thing, while the fans at the front were crushed against the fences. A crush barrier in pen three gave way, and people fell on top of each other.

Carney could remember seeing one of the players in the periphery of his vision. "...my eye-line just goes higher and higher to the point where I'm just seeing clouds, but it's strange - it's like a pipe vision of a cloud... I'm looking down on myself in the pen, surrounded by this group of people, and my head is lower than them, I'm sinking, below shoulder height to them, and they're this perfect

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circle, and I'm getting crushed; I'm going down. I'm above their heads watching myself getting crushed. And the next thing is that everything's black."

A series of errors had led to this point.

The safe capacity of the standing area had been considerably overestimated. A safety certificate issued ten years before the incident had stated that 7,200 fans could safely stand in the Leppings Lane terraces. In fact, according to later testimony from expert stadium engineer John Cutlack, they could only safely hold 5,425.

Pen three alone should only have held 678 people but on the day there had been up to 1,430 people inside.

Despite annual inspections, those figures had never been recalculated.

The police had failed to set up a cordon on the approach to the stadium, to control the crowd as they arrived and regulate entry. This had been done the previous year, but in 1989 they had 172 fewer officers on duty. They had also closed some of the turnstiles into the stadium in order to keep fans of the opposing teams apart. This, along with the way the stadium itself was designed, made congestion worse. There was simply no way to get all the ticket holders in before kick-off.

There were no measures in place to count fans into the individual pens, or close them off when they reached capacity. It had been left to the fans to find their own level.

The signage inside the ground was inadequate. More prominent signs to the side pens might have encouraged more fans to go that way.

Instead, when the gate was opened, the fans coming through went straight down the tunnel to the central pens because it was the obvious route. If that tunnel had been closed off - again, something that had been done the previous year - fans could instead have been directed to the quieter side pens.

Match commander David Duckenfield did have the authority to delay the kick-off, something which had been done two years previously. From his position in the control room he could see the crowded central pens and, on TV monitors, the crowd outside on Leppings Lane. He decided that the game should start as scheduled.

Despite all these mistakes, at this point a good response could still have made a huge difference to those involved.

That response was not forthcoming.

Paul Eason, a senior ambulance officer who was positioned inside the stadium, noticed that something was happening at the Leppings Lane terraces at just past three o'clock and walked over to look. He later said that, despite walking in front of the central pens, he

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did not notice fans being crushed inside. He did not alert the ambulance control room to what was happening. He didn't declare a major incident until twenty two minutes past three.

When police requested "a fleet of ambulances" they were dispatched; 42 of them lined up outside the ground. Only two of them ever made it in to the Leppings Lane end of the pitch where they were so desperately needed. The police were still reporting the tragedy as a crowd control issue, so the ambulances were held back. Because they'd had no information on what was happening, those ambulance officers who did make it inside didn't bring essential lifesaving equipment in with them.

Instead, the response was largely organised by volunteers; the St Johns Ambulance who were in attendance, and the fans themselves.

One of the witnesses that day was Tony O'Keefe; originally from Liverpool, he had been working with the London fire brigade for the last three years. He was not only a trained first aider, but also experienced in emergency response; his watch had been called to the Kings Cross underground fire two years earlier. That day, however, he was not on duty. Like many others, he was just there to watch the game, but was quick to volunteer when he realised what was going on.

"I'm standing there, watching all these people who had little or no knowledge of first aid, just take over. It was the fans, not the authorities, who took control of the situation: getting people on to stretchers, getting them to the first-aid point, getting them seen to."

Along with several others, he helped to carry fifteen year old Kevin Williams to the first-aid point on a hoarding.

"At that stage, you think you've done the important part. You've got him to where the medical effort is being coordinated; you think, "OK, he'll get looked after now." I mean, he wasn't well, but his colour was good, he was breathing."

Steve Hart was one of the other fans carrying that hoarding. Like O'Keefe, he assumed that the teenager would be looked after when they left him. In 1994, he saw an appeal in the Liverpool Echo; Anne Williams, Kevin's mother, was looking for the people who had carried her son on that day. They arranged to meet.

"Anne's got the photograph and she points to this lad and she says, 'Do you remember him?' I says, 'Yes'. She says, 'Do you remember carrying him down on the stretcher?' Remember, the last I've seen of the lad, he's OK. He's getting looked after. So I was expecting her to sort of say, 'Here he is.' I was thinking he was going to walk in any minute. But she tells me, 'Oh, he didn't make it.' It was a bit of a shock. I'd always assumed that he'd been OK, the lad. I never knew he hadn't made it."

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Of the 96 people who had died, only fourteen had been admitted to hospital. The rest had been pronounced dead at the scene.

Almost unbelievably, the mistakes were not over. There was still worse to come.

Fingers were being pointed - at the very people who had suffered the most. The Liverpool fans themselves were being blamed.

It had already begun before the victims and survivors had even been pulled from the central pens; match commander David Duckenfield gave the order for the gate to be opened, but then just minutes later asserted that the gate had been broken open by fans outside. This was the message that reached the commentators during the live broadcast.

Before the day was even over, it seemed that the investigators had set an unsavoury course. The coroner, Dr Stefan Popper, ordered that blood alcohol tests be conducted on every victim - even the children, some as young as ten years old. Police questioning survivors and witnesses asked pointed questions about how much they'd had to drink. They also ran criminal record checks on all the victims, a clear indication of how they viewed the fans.

Martin Thompson described the way he was dealt with, just moments after identifying the body of his brother Stuart.

"There was no sensitivity about the way they spoke to you, no 'Do you want to take a few minutes to collect yourself?' or anything like that. It was straight into it -they slapped this sheet down and looked at me and said, 'What have you been drinking?' Not, 'Can you tell me if you've had a drink, Mr Thompson?' -which would have been bad enough. I was in shock, I was in a daze."

Barry Devonside had been in the seated area at Hillsborough. His son, Chris, had been in the central pens. After several hours searching, he finally found his son's body in the makeshift morgue at the gym. Like Thompson, he was given little time to recover his thoughts before questioning.

"And then - 'Mr Devonside, could you tell us how you got to Sheffield today?' I responded, 'What has that got to do with identification?' His reply was that they were trying to piece together what the fans' day had consisted of. I told him we had travelled to the game by car, with friends. 'Did you stop for a meal, or have a drink?' Already, distraught as I was, I could sense something about the questions they were asking. But he just said they were routine questions, the sort they'd always ask in a situation like this. So the next thing he asked me was, 'Did you have a meal? Did you have a drink?' Again I replied, 'What has that to do with identification?' At this point my brother nodded to me and I left the table to speak with him. He said, 'You know what's happening here, don't you?' I said, 'Yes, they're going to blame us.'

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The Wednesday after the disaster, national newspaper The Sun published a front page story under the banner headline "The Truth".

"Some fans picked pockets of victims", it said. "Some fans urinated on the brave cops. Some fans beat up PC giving kiss of life."

It seems almost unbelievable that these claims were even given credence, but they were widespread. Irvine Patnick, then MP for Sheffield Hallam, and Paul Middelton, secretary of the Police Federation, both gave interviews in the aftermath of the disaster blaming it on the behaviour of drunken fans, speaking about this as a fact.

One survivor, Tony Evans, had this to say about these claims.

"It's a question I've always asked people when they've asked me about the stealing from the dead, the urinating on the police and all that, I would say to them would you do it? And nobody's ever said yeah, they all go no, and I say well then why would you believe I did it?!"

Families of the victims were shocked by the allegations. 25 year old Richard Jones was killed in the crush with his 23 year old girlfriend Tracey Cox. His 18 year old sister, Stephanie, had survived. Their mother Doreen said that the idea that they were "drunken hooligans that came through the gate and killed their own" was like a red rag to a bull to her because her son "loved life, he didn't drink a lot, he was well educated, he was no drunken hooligan."

The Sun's claims angered the people of Liverpool so much that a boycott of the tabloid was organised. Shops across Merseyside stopped stocking it; reading it in a Liverpool pub became something that was simply not done. Even today, many in the area refuse to even say its name, referring to it as The Scum instead, and its circulation numbers in the area have never recovered. In 2017, Liverpool football club banned The Sun's journalists from their Anfield stadium. Local rivals Everton enacted a similar ban in a show of solidarity. The North, as they say, remembers.

The formal investigation into the Hillsborough tragedy had begun with an interim report by Lord Justice Taylor. Initially, it gave the fans some hope that they would see the truth; the fans were exonerated, the police were criticised for having no effective leadership and David Duckenfield was suspended on full pay.

The coroner's inquest, however, took a different approach. Dr Stefan Popper began with a series of mini-inquests, which were intended to establish the basic circumstances in which each victim had died. The inquest would then be adjourned for the Department of Public Prosecutions to decide whether to take criminal action.

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The results of the blood alcohol tests which had been conducted were meticulously announced, even when they were negative, subtly adding to the narrative that alcohol was a contributory factor. The families were not allowed to challenge any of the evidence presented.

The Department of Public Prosecutions decided that there would be no criminal proceedings. The coroner's inquest resumed, and Dr Popper ruled that a cut-off point of 3:15pm would be introduced for all evidence; he said that all the victims were dead by that time, or had sustained their fatal injuries already, and thus any evidence relating to the emergency response thereafter was inadmissible.

This would be hugely contentious. Kevin Williams, the teenage boy who had been stretchered away by Tony O'Keefe and Steve Hart at 3:37pm had, according to them, still been breathing at that time. A Special Constable named Debra Martin had given an account of carrying him to the gymnasium close to four pm; she said that he had opened his eyes and said, "Mum."

In 1991, the coroner's inquest returned the same verdict for all of the victims: accidental death.

The families refused to accept this. Anne Williams, Kevin's mother, personally tracked down witnesses to gather evidence that her son had still been alive after 3:15. She would be one of the leaders of a long campaign for justice, taking her case all the way to the European Court of Human Rights.

The families and their supporters discovered evidence of an organised cover-up. Statements made by the police officers on the scene had been edited; they had first handwritten their reports, then typed up a copy. This typed copy had been subjected to a process of review and alteration - edits were made, often removing any statements that were critical of the police, and then a final clean copy had been typed and this was signed off.

In 1997 a new investigation was ordered, but it had problems from the start. Lord Justice Stuart-Smith was appointed to perform what was termed a "scrutiny" of the evidence. In October 1997, he attended a meeting in Liverpool with relatives of those involved. On camera, he made a crass remark; "Have you got a few of your people or are they like the Liverpool fans, turn up at the last minute?"

This scrutiny didn't offer the families the justice they had hoped for. Much of what they had hoped to introduce, include the evidence that police statements had been altered, was still classed as inadmissible. In February 1998, the ruling came down; there was no basis for a further judicial inquiry, for a renewed application to the Divisional Court, for any further inquiry into the performance of the emergency services.

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In February 2000, the families brought a private prosecution against David Duckenfield and his deputy, Bernard Murray; Murray was acquitted, and the jury was unable to reach a verdict on Duckenfield. The fight went on.

The twentieth anniversary of the disaster arrived, and a memorial service was arranged. Andy Burnham, the Culture secretary at the time, was asked to speak. He barely got a few words out before a shout came from the crowd: "Justice!"

More voices joined in. A chant grew, "Justice for the 96." Burnham stood quietly, nodded, and waited.

When he resumed speaking, he put away his notes and spoke about his own experience. He hadn't been at Hillsborough; he had been at the other semi-final taking place that day. He knew people who were there, though. He knew what it was that they wanted.

The Hillsborough Independent Panel was instituted that year; chaired by James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool, it would oversee full public disclosure of documents related to the disaster and its aftermath, and produce a new report.

On the 12th of September, 2012, the report was released; it had 153 key findings.

Just a few of those:

"It was apparent that the stadium failed to meet minimum standards."

"It is apparent that the collective policing mindset prioritised crowd control over crowd safety."

"It is clear that the crush at the Leppings Lane turnstiles outside the stadium was not caused by fans arriving 'late' for the kick-off. The turnstiles were inadequate to process the crowd safely, and the rate of entry insufficient to prevent a dangerous build-up outside the ground."

"A swifter, more appropriate, better focused and properly equipped response had the potential to save more lives."

"The weight placed on alcohol levels, particularly in the Coroner's summing up at the inquests, was inappropriate and misleading. The pattern of alcohol consumption among those who died was unremarkable and not exceptional for a social or leisure occasion."

"The Panel found no evidence among the vast number of disclosed documents and many hours of video material to verify the serious allegations of exceptional levels of drunkenness, ticketlessness or violence among Liverpool fans. There was no evidence that fans had conspired to arrive late at the stadium and force entry and no evidence that they stole from the dead and dying. Documents show that fans became frustrated by the inadequate response to the unfolding tragedy. The vast majority of fans on the pitch assisted in rescuing and evacuating the injured and the dead."

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Following this report, the original inquest verdicts were quashed and new inquests ordered. In March 2014, new inquests began. It took a little over two years, but finally the nine jurors returned a verdict of unlawful killing in respect of all 96 victims.

In 2017, six people, including David Duckenfield, were charged with offences in connection to the Hillsborough disaster. Those cases are yet to be resolved.

Anne Williams passed away in April 2013.

It's hard to say that there could ever really be justice for the 96. In a fair and just world, they would all have gone home from that match safe and sound. But at least now, the real truth has been told, and the record set straight.

Great Disasters is written, researched and produced by me, Kari Fay. For more information, sources and further reading, check out the Great Disasters website at [greatdisasters.co.uk](http://greatdisasters.co.uk), or if you'd like to start a conversation, you can find the Great Disasters Podcast on Facebook and on Twitter @great\_disasters. If you'd like to support the Great Disasters Podcast, you can become a patreon and earn unique rewards at [patreon.com/greatdisasters](https://patreon.com/greatdisasters), and if you're listening on iTunes, I'd greatly appreciate it if you took the time to leave a rating or a review.

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