



Left Fans queue up outside Burnden Park
Right Women and children are hoisted to safety
Below Supporters spill onto the pitch



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the first aid room. Controversially, about 30 minutes later, with many inside the ground still unaware of the scale of the disaster, the referee restarted the match on police advice. The following day the *Sunday Pictorial* characterised it as the "most horrible match ever played", the teams having seen out a meaningless 0-0 draw. The final death toll was 33, with around 300 treated for injuries.

The police provided an initial briefing on the disaster, its chronology and probable causes, and this fed newspaper reports over the following days. The *Sunday Times* reported the disaster was caused by "a break in after gates were closed", and other accounts were littered with references to "stampedes", the actions of "gate crashers" and "fans [who] surged against gates which collapsed". The story was out, the fans were to blame. Questions were asked in parliament about whether the "ring-leaders" were being sought and if "prosecutions for manslaughter were being considered". Within a few days some of the national papers were reporting that bodies had been robbed – "pocket-books and wallets had disappeared" – before the police and ambulance service arrived. The reports were condemned as wrong by the *Bolton Evening News*.

The tone of the reporting played to a more widespread concern that was prevalent at the time. The *Manchester Evening News* said that "perhaps the war has left people with less respect for the law" and the *Bolton Evening News* noted "the increasing violence that great crowds of people are ready to use nowadays". It was a theme echoed in later years by Conservative Party chairman Norman Tebbit who, in 1985, blamed football violence, among other things, on the era and attitudes of post-war permissiveness.

The public inquiry into the disaster, conducted by Muelwyn Hughes, told a different story. Although the spectators entering illegally from the top of Embankment were "irrelevant" to the disaster, the report acknowledged that the 200 to 300 who entered through the opened gate did "contribute materially to additional pressure" but were not a "major factor" in causing the loss of life. In the body of his report Hughes is unequivocal: "Had they closed [the turnstiles] at 2.35... I do not think the disaster would have happened." He was critical of "slow and unorganised" action to close the turnstiles and the poor co-ordination between police.

The inquiry concluded that six factors had contributed to the disaster, including unauthorised entry. But the newspaper reports had already fixed the blame in the public imagination on crowd stampedes, and that simple story, that first explanation, stuck. In 1996 the *Guardian*, while marking the 50th anniversary, noted that "33 people died... in the stampede after a side gate was opened" and went on to say that the inquiry had concluded "the blame lay with the spectators". The influence of first accounts became all too familiar after the Hillsborough disaster when descriptions of "tanked-up" and "ticketless" supporters persisted long after the production of contrary evidence.

Hughes made a range of recommendations, in particular he believed the government should legislate for a statutory ground licensing scheme. He felt previous reviews had relied "anaemically" on voluntary action by sports governing bodies. However, the government's initial enthusiasm for legislation waned and with prevailing suspicion among football authorities the voluntary arrangements continued. It would take another 66 deaths at Ibrox in 1971 before legislation was introduced, in 1975, to provide for statutory inspections by local authorities.

In the end, Burden Park was a tragedy that developed out of people simply being excited that football and life were returning to some normality. One of those heroes they queued up to see, Stanley Matthews, commented on the irony of the disaster: "To survive a war, only to die at a football match sent a shiver down the spine of every one of us."



Familiar response

It is 70 years since a crush at Burnden Park killed 33 people, and the reaction in the aftermath was eerily similar to more recent disasters

By BRIAN SIMPSON

It is a sorry fact that the final stages of the Hillsborough second inquest should overlap the 70th anniversary of the disaster at Bolton Wanderers' former ground Burnden Park, but the similarities extend beyond this simple coincidence of timing. Factors present at Burnden Park and in the official and press response to the disaster echoed through the decades which followed.

On March 9, 1946 fans filled the streets around the ground. Bolton held a 2-0 lead over Stoke City from the first leg of the sixth round tie. As Nat Lofthouse, playing in his first FA Cup, commented: "The build up to the game was massive, everyone came to see Stan [Matthews], he put 10,000 on the gate." Conditions outside the ground were already difficult when the turnstiles opened at 1pm, especially as not all of them were in use, increasing congestion.

The disaster occurred on the Railway Embankment and an hour before kick-off fans

suggest 80,000 were trying to get in to the match, far exceeding the club's expectations of 50,000. The final turnstile count was a little over 65,000.

As the players came out and the match kicked off the crowd swayed forward, breaking two barriers. Fans were forced by the pressure from behind into spaces from which there was no escape, people were piled "three or even four deep". The embankment was, as fan Bert Gregory put it, "mucky, it was messy, just any old flags they could get like kerbs for steps, but in between the kerbs it were just dirt, where people stood". After 12 minutes the referee suspended play when a policeman came on to the pitch to tell him there had been a fatality. The police pulled down sections of a low wooden fence at the front of the stand and fans spilled onto the track surrounding the playing area. Harold Riley, a fan, said that "the dead were just left like bags on the ground" before being carried away – some, as Lofthouse remembered, through the dressing room area on the way to

at the opposite end could sense that something was wrong. As one said: "To the left there was a mass of faces, no spaces, while further over it was evident there was room." The turnstiles were, belatedly, closed at about 2.45pm, although some climbed over them. Around the same time a father concerned about the welfare of his young son in the crush inside the ground opened an exit gate with an Allen key he had in his pocket so that they could both escape. Perhaps 200 to 300 fans entered the ground through the opened gate and reports

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