

After HILLSBOROUGH

In 1989, **Gareth O'Leary** found himself at the scene of a football tragedy. Here he explains why the event and aftermath were so formative.



15 April 1989: the FA Cup semi-final, Hillsborough Football Stadium, Sheffield. I attended this game as a 19-year-old Liverpoolian; I was also an LSE undergraduate. In 1989, such roles existed in very different worlds.

I had entered the stadium via an exit gate, bidden through with my sister by a police officer. We had shuffled down a sloping tunnel leading to two “pens” with a safe capacity of 1,500 people. 3,000 had, however, entered unwittingly into a death trap. We were separated in the crush, our bodies lifted from the ground in what was less a crowd, more a viscous fluid. Young and old fell under our feet as our pleas for pen gates to be opened went unheeded. A crush barrier within Pen 3 burst apart and the release of a vice-like pressure allowed me to breathe and, ultimately, to fashion my exit. For others, it proved ultimately fatal. One ambulance made it to the foot of the terrace. Some police officers joined the rescue effort; others formed cordons.

I searched for my sister among the injured, shocked and weeping on the pitch; among the motionless, crushed and living behind the terrace’s iron fence and among the dead and dying of a temporary mortuary. With other escapees, I carried the dying to their places of avoidable death. One hour passed and the destruction, the futility and the collapse of authority broke me. I provided a description of my sister to the police manning the mortuary. Only then, as I returned to the pitch, did I see her, alive and walking towards me. She had been pulled to safety, as had many others, by supporters in the tier above.

That evening you may, unwittingly, have believed a very different account, and formed part of the target audience for “the biggest cover-up in British history”. Senior South Yorkshire police officers constructed a lie, as supporters – now witnesses – made their way home. They informed the media that drunk and ticketless supporters had forced the exit gate open. Some days later they added dimensions of depravity

to their lie that even now I find difficult to conceive. They stated that “we” had stolen from the dead, urinated on police officers and attacked and hindered the emergency response. I say “we” because, as with many gross deceptions, it was as unattributable to the accused as, at that time, to the accusers.

Lest we forget, 96 supporters died that day. Another remains minimally conscious. Many others have subsequently taken their own lives.

October 2012, Liverpool: oft scorned, a community of people – no more so than the Hillsborough victims’ families – were now revered, for their “humbling tenacity” throughout the intervening 23 years. The biggest investigation into police conduct in British history was announced by the IPCC, following the September publication of the Hillsborough Independent Panel’s report. CPS action and renewed inquests must follow. “A generation of anger and distress” that “Hillsborough” created will then have had its remedy instituted.

Albeit in adversity, that generation achieved so much. It’s one whose community re-discovered the value of solidarity. For those once deemed “ordinary folk”, or worse, notions of hope, truth and justice populated plain conversation. The role of intelligent non-conformity and irreverence for authority was always well understood on Merseyside, but now it is lore. In time, with justice, there may also come forgiveness.

In May 1989, I returned to my studies broken in spirit. The School, and the guidance of my second year tutor, helped restore it and so too my endeavour. LSE has brought many a teacher to the grandest of stages and, on one much smaller but no less significant, I followed that tradition. I teach with a passion for the young, and in particular, those whom the world too often and too readily deems broken. I established an online arena that helps Hillsborough “survivors” to recount their horrific memories so that they too can heal. The LSE motto, *rerum cognoscere causas*, is no idle concept. The LSE environment helped me to develop my ability to reason with mind and heart in a manner that has lent itself well to a quarter-century of the pursuit of truth. I stand as an LSE Liverpoolian, as one of that generation that pursued and re-established a truth, owed perpetually to the dead, that was almost lost. ■

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