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Volume 5, 2004 - Issue 2

2,762 | 18 | 3
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1 'Heads in the Sand': Football, Politics and Crowd Disasters in Twentieth-Century Britain¹

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Pages 134-151 | Published online: 25 Jan 2007

Cite this article <https://doi.org/10.1080/1466097042000235173>

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Abstract

Over the course of the twentieth century, 276 people lost their lives in disasters at UK football grounds.² Yet it is surprising that such tragedies did not occur more frequently. The rapid speed with which the game's popularity developed in the late nineteenth century meant that football grounds were built quickly and crudely. Any profits that clubs made were usually invested in players rather than spectators' facilities. Eager to see their teams succeed on the pitch, fans were usually happy with such prioritizing. Thus, as the century progressed and the game developed on and off the field, improvements in the condition of grounds were limited. Inside these grounds were often large, compact, swaying and sometimes inflamed crowds. Quite simply, the assembly of large numbers of excited supporters on decrepit terraces was a recipe for disaster. Disasters have powerful emotional, psychological and social impacts. They

bring home the realities of risk in a way that abstract possibilities cannot. This creates expectations and demands for action to ensure there can be no repetition.³ Yet the extent to which expectations are fulfilled, and the force with which they are demanded, depends very much on the political circumstances of the tragedy and those affected. This chapter explores the responses to football disasters in the UK. It aims to show how the responses have been characterized by an apathy towards safety amongst the football authorities, central government and fans. This apathy was rooted in a desire to exclude sport from legislation, in the terrace culture of the game, in the characterization of fans as hooligans and in the exclusion of the safety of football fans from the concerns of central government.

Notes

The early stages of the research were funded by an ESRC grant (R000222677) to look at responses to Aberfan and other disasters.

For the purposes of this paper, disasters are defined as events causing multiple deaths.

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Quoted in Simon Inglis, *The Football Grounds of Great Britain* (London: Collins Willow, 2nd edn, 1987), p.29.

However, the contractor responsible was found not guilty of culpable homicide. See Robert S. Shiels, 'The Ibrox Disaster of 1902', *Juridical Review*, 230 (1997), pp. 230-40.

Geoffrey Green, *History of the Football Association* (London: Naldrett Press, 1953), p.192.

Inglis, pp.28-9.

For a general history of football see Dave Russell, *Football and the English: A Social History of Association Football in England, 1863-1995* (Preston: Carnegie, 1997).

South Wales Daily News, 13 March 1911.

T.E. Keeler and S.E. Foreman, 'Regulation and Deregulation', in P. Newman (ed.), *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics and the Law* (London, Macmillan: 1998), vol.3, pp.213-22, quoted at p.213.

Iain McLean and Martin Johnes, "Regulation run mad": The Board of Trade and the loss of the *Titanic*', *Public Administration*, 78, 4 (2000), 729-49.

See Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).

Quoted in Edward Grayson, *Sport and the Law* (London: Butterworth, 2nd edn., 1994), p.110.

Sydney Woodhouse (witness) in Andrew Ward and Rogan Taylor (eds), *Kicking and Screaming: An Oral History of Football in England* (London: Robson, 1995), p.23.

Rt Hon. Edward Shortt KC (chairman), *Report of the Departmental Committee on Crowds*, Cmd. 2088 (London: HMSO, 1924), hereafter Shortt Report. The evidence heard by the inquiry is held at the National Archives (NA): HO 73/114 and 115.

Shortt Report, paras 46-7.

Liverpool Echo, 7 Jan. 1932.

South Wales Echo, 28 Feb. 1923, quoted in Martin Johnes, *Soccer and Society: South Wales, 1900-39* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), p.121.

A pole, which had been climbed at Swansea, collapsed during a match in 1925, injuring nine people. *South Wales Echo*, 31 Jan. 1925.

South Wales Argus, 15 Feb. 1932.

Capt. Crookshank (Gainsborough, Unionist), Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Home Office, 1934-1935.

The inter-war evidence gathered by the Home Office on safety at football matches can be found at NA: HO 45/24798, HO 45/11627, HO 45/25128. For a more detailed examination of the safety issues, based upon Home Office and Metropolitan Police files, see John Walton, 'Football, faintings and fatalities, 1923-1946', *History Today* (Jan. 2003), 10-17.

Bert Gregory, member of ground staff, in *Guardian*, 9 March 1996.

Harold Riley in *Guardian*, 9 March 1996.

R. Moelwyn Hughes, *Enquiry into the Disaster at Bolton Wanderers' Football Ground on the 9th March, 1946*, Cmd. 6846 (London: HMSO, 1946), p.12. Original syntax.

FA and Football League representatives quoted in Norman Baker, 'Have they forgotten Bolton?', *The Sports Historian*, 18, 1 (May 1998), 143. The analysis presented here of the aftermath of the Bolton disaster is largely derived from this article. The Home Office records of the disaster can be found at NA: HO 45/25125, 45/25126 and 45/25127.

Herbert Morrison (Lord President) quoted in Baker, 144.

Declining attendance figures probably even owed something to a reluctance to watch football in uncomfortable grounds when there were other more 'attractive' entertainments now on offer. Russell, pp.184-6.

Police Review, 4 July 1952. In the early 1950s, following the introduction of floodlit football, there was brief police concern centred on the safety of spectators should the power fail and a ground have to be evacuated in the dark. See NA: HO 42/24798.

Chief Constable of Burnley to E. Anstey (Home Office), 11 March 1953. NA: HO 42/24798.

G. Dickens (ed.), *Soccer Hooliganism: A Preliminary Report* (Bristol: Wright, 1968), p.9.

John Lang (chairman), *Report of the Working Party on Crowd Behaviour at Football Matches* (London: HMSO, 1969), para. 12.

The Times, 4 Jan. 1971.

Rt Hon. Lord Wheatley, *Report of the Inquiry into Crowd Safety at Sports Grounds*, Cmnd. 4952 (London: HMSO, 1972).

Memo to Edward Heath, 19 Aug. 1971, NA: PREM 15/796.

Note by Heath, 23 Aug. 1971. NA: PREM 15/796.

Inglis, p.35. Denis Howell, *Made in Birmingham: The Memoirs of Denis Howell* (London: Queen Anne Press, 1990), pp.260-1.

Yet, even then, he was of higher rank than the third-tier ministers who looked after sport under Mrs Thatcher.

See Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy and John Williams, *The Roots of Football Hooliganism: An Historical and Sociological Study* (London: Routledge, 1988).

Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Short Report, para. 40.

In response to the hooligan concerns of the inquiry, the government also passed the Sporting Events (Control of Alcohol etc.) Act 1986 and the Public Order Act 1986.

Thirty-nine Juventus fans were killed when a wall collapsed following a charge by Liverpool fans at the European Cup final held in Heysel, Belgium.

Hansard, 3 June 1985, vol.79, cols.23, 36.

Fletcher & Fletcher v Bradford City AFC, HSE and West Yorkshire Metropolitan Council. The Times, 24 Feb. 1987. The exclusion of the ground from the direct provisions of the 1975 Safety Act did not of course free the club from a legal responsibility to ensure the safety of its customers, most notably under the Health and Safety at Work Etc. Act 1974 which created an obligation for companies to protect the safety of non-employees on their premises.

Personal communication with editor of *The City Gent* (Bradford City FC fanzine), 3, 26 Aug. 1999.

Phil Scraton, *Hillsborough: The Truth* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999) is a comprehensive and powerful history of the disaster and its aftermath.

See Iain McLean and Martin Johnes, *Aberfan: Government and Disasters* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2000). Between 1966 and 1979 there had been just five disasters in the UK with a death toll greater than 30. Between 1985 and 1989 there were ten.

Dominic Elliott and Denis Smith, 'Waiting for the Next One: Management Attitudes to Safety in the UK Football Industry', unpublished paper. Cf. Dominic Elliott, *Organisational Learning from Crisis: An Examination of the Football Industry, 1946-97* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Durham, 1998) and Anthony King, *The End of the Terraces:*

The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1998), p.102.

Graham Kelly, Sweet FA (London: Collins Willow, 1999), pp.170, 179.

Football Trust, Annual Report, 1997, p.1.

Tom Horlick-Jones, 'Modern Disasters as Outrage and Betrayal', *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 13, 3 (1995), 306.

Ken Foster, 'Developments in Sporting Law', in Lincoln Allison (ed.), *The Changing Politics of Sport* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

Hansard, 19 June 1975, vol.893, col.1751.

Hurd diary, 19 April 1989, quoted in Mark Stuart, *Douglas Hurd: The Public Servant, An Authorised Biography* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1998), p.218.

Hansard (Lords), 16 June 1989, vol.508, col.1647.

Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993).

James Bulpitt, *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom: An Interpretation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983) and idem, 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft', *Political Studies*, 34 (1986), 19-39.

Quoted in Mark Hayhurst, 'Why Labour Loves Muddied Oafs', *New Statesman*, 21 Feb. 2000.

This is not to suggest that the Labour Party at its grassroots was not interested in the game, but even there it was far down its list of priorities. See Stephen G. Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class: Organised Labour and Sport in Inter-War Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). For a wider view of the left's marginal interest in leisure see Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

Tony Benn, *The End of an Era, Diaries 1980-90* (London: Arrow, 1994), p.561.

Harold Wilson, *Memoirs, 1916-64: The Making of a Prime Minister* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p.9.

Hayhurst, 'Why Labour Loves Muddied Oafs'.

David Bull and Alistair Campbell (eds), *Football and the Commons People* (Sheffield: Juma, 1994).

McLean and Johnes, 'Regulation run mad'.

For the response to Aberfan and disasters since see McLean and Johnes, *Aberfan*.

Jack Williams, "A Wild Orgy of Speed": Responses to Speedway in Britain before the Second World War', *The Sports Historian*, 19, 1 (May, 1999), 11.

Peter Taylor, *The Hillsborough Stadium Disaster, 15 April 1989: Inquiry by the Rt Hon. Lord Justice Taylor: Final Report*, Cmnd. 962 (London: HMSO, 1990), paras 19, 23, p.4.

Ward and Taylor, p.359.

Ibid., p.358.

FLA website, www.flaweb.org.uk/fla.intro.html.

For an example of how safety regulations can be buried beneath daily concerns see T. Hynes and P. Prasad, 'Patterns of "Mock Bureaucracy" in Mining Disasters: An Analysis of the Westray Coal Mine Explosion', *Journal of Management Studies*, 34, 4 (1997), 601-23.

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