

Police falsified evidence about 1989 Hillsborough football disaster

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An investigation by the *Sunday Telegraph* has revealed important new evidence relating to the role of the police in covering up and falsifying evidence in the weeks following the 1989 Hillsborough football disaster.

On April 15, 1989, 96 Liverpool football supporters died at the Hillsborough stadium in South Yorkshire. They were crushed to death in the Leppings Lane end of the stadium after the South Yorkshire Police directed thousands of fans arriving just before kick-off to enter an overcrowded stand. A further 400 supporters suffered injuries. The new findings are presented on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the disaster.

The February 28 edition of the *Sunday Telegraph* reveals that in the aftermath of the disaster more than 100 statements by police officers on duty at the ground were altered significantly to delete any references criticising the actions of the police, before, during and after the event.

The *Telegraph's* investigation has compared more than 100 original police statements with the ones altered. These documents were among those recently released by Home Secretary Jack Straw relating to the disaster. The *Telegraph's* findings show how potentially crucial evidence was distorted and doctored.

On April 26, 1989 senior South Yorkshire Police (SYP) representatives met with the force's solicitors, Hammond Suddards, to discuss the disaster. Both parties agreed that the police could be served with writs for their role at Hillsborough. They decided it would be necessary for lawyers to study the statements made by police officers attending the match and advise the SYP on what should be left in or removed.

The police agreed to amend and delete a number of statements on the advice of solicitors during a meeting on May 7, 1989. The meeting agreed that some statements by police officers would need to be changed in order to present them to the impending Taylor Inquiry into the deaths at Hillsborough. Resulting from this agreement,

more than 400 statements were submitted to solicitors over the next five weeks. Of these, 60 were changed to alter "minor" errors.

However, this was not the end of the tampering. The *Telegraph* continues, "More than 100 statements were altered more significantly in an attempt to satisfy the desire of the force's solicitors that hearsay, comment and inappropriate language should be removed." The South Yorkshire Police also changed statements itself at a later date, without consulting solicitors.

Significantly, these statements were the ones used a month later at the 1989 inquiry into the disaster and at the subsequent inquest in 1991. These both criticised the role of the South Yorkshire Police, but did not hold them responsible for any of the deaths. Verdicts of accidental death were returned.

Some of the original and changed statements documented in the *Telegraph* report are:

* The original written recollection of Police Constable William Holmes, made on April 27, 1989, ended with the sentence, "However, there seemed to be a total lack of contact with police control or at least a senior officer who could have informed us as to what action was required." The following month this sentence was deleted.

* Another officer, PC Desmond Brophy, had a number of assertions deleted from his original account of the disaster, including the words: "My single most strongest observation that I would make was that for a significant period of time there appeared to be a lack of radio guidance from control."

* PC Kevin Bennett's criticisms of the way the police herded supporters into an already dangerously overcrowded stand were also deleted. His original recollection was, "I felt that officers should have been at the turnstile entrance in more strength and caused the crowd to form queues PRIOR to getting near to the turnstiles. No senior officers at this stage appeared to be

in command of the situation."

As well as deletions, direct falsifications were used to distort dozens of recollections of police officers on duty at Hillsborough.

* Inspector John Beresford had originally written: "The [police] radio was faint and totally incoherent. No instructions were forthcoming." This sentence was changed in his amended statement to read: "The radio was faint amidst the noise in the ground."

* PC Peter Bradley's statement included both deletions and amendments. His view that "no officer, senior or otherwise, came to inform us of what had happened" was removed. His statement, "Radio traffic was non-existent all through this time, as was a lack of direction from supervisory officers" later became, "Radio messages being passed were more difficult to understand all through this time."

The Hillsborough Family Support Group (HFSG) has responded to the new evidence by calling on Home Secretary Jack Straw to open a fresh public inquiry. The chairman of the group, Trevor Hicks, who lost two daughters at Hillsborough, said, "The sheer scale of the altering of the statements is an absolute disgrace. As far as we are concerned, there was an orchestrated campaign to limit the damage to the absolute minimum." He said that the HFSG "are concerned that adverse references to the behaviour of the fans [on the day of the tragedy] were left in, but any derogatory remarks about the police service, particularly senior officers, were sanitised or diminished."

Shortly after the Labour government came to power, Jack Straw commissioned a report into Hillsborough to see if it merited a new inquiry. The 1998 inquiry, headed by Lord Stuart-Smith, was supposedly based on a "scrutiny of evidence". He reported that no new evidence had emerged that negated the outcome of the original inquiry or the 1991 inquests. Stuart-Smith had access to some of the changed police statements, but he failed to address the importance of them, either in the report or the appendix.

Instead, he concluded that the 11 changed statements he had scrutinised did not alter the verdict of the 1989-91 inquiry and inquest. This was despite his report drawing attention to the case of PC David Frost, who told the inquiry that he and other unnamed officers had refused to sign their amended statements. Frost said, "This was an attempt by senior management to sanitise and protect themselves; and any honour that the South Yorkshire Police had, which I thought at the time was considerable, disappeared for me." Stuart-Smith rejected the allegations

of Frost on the basis that statements had to be changed to prevent hearsay and ambiguity.

Defending his report, Stuart-Smith said, "I do not consider that there is any question of misconduct, either by the solicitor who gave the police advice upon the statements or by the police officers who suggested the alterations to the statements without referring the statement to the solicitors."

The catalogue of deleted and amended statements had only one aim: to shift any blame for the disaster away from the police and onto the supporters. All the new evidence that has emerged over the last 10 years about the Hillsborough disaster shows how, at every level, the authorities sought to defend the police version of events. All the inquiries and inquests, from Taylor to Stuart-Smith, have failed to indict the South Yorkshire Police or any single individual officer for their criminal role in the Hillsborough disaster, despite a wealth of evidence and information.

Next month a new book will be released by Professor Phil Scraton of Edge Hill University in Ormskirk, England entitled *Hillsborough-- the truth*. Several years ago Scraton co-authored *No Last Rights*, a report detailing how the judicial system ensured that the police were not held responsible for the deaths at Hillsborough.

Scraton has studied 1,000 police and witness statements and rejects the view of Stuart-Smith on the question of the importance of the police altering statements. Scraton recently said, "There is no question that statements were changed which went far beyond comment and opinion." He said that one chapter in the book was devoted to the issue of the statements and "completely takes the lid off the statement-taking process".



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