

BBC “Panorama” exposes UK police cover-up in 1989 Hillsborough football disaster

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15 June 2013

A recent *BBC Panorama* television documentary exposed the more than 23-year-old government and police cover-up following the deaths of 96 Liverpool football fans at the Hillsborough football stadium, in South Yorkshire, England on April 15, 1989.

The tragedy at the stadium’s Leppings Lane end resulted in the greatest loss of life ever recorded at a sporting event in Britain. Men, women and children were crushed to death after police dangerously gave the order to open an exit gate just before kick-off.

The documentary, *Hillsborough: How they buried the truth*, movingly details the determined fight by relatives of the victims to bring out the truth. It was present by veteran BBC reporter Peter Marshall. A life-long Liverpool fan, he was at Hillsborough on the fateful day.

Marshall explained that an abundance of film footage existed revealing what actually happened. The BBC had eight cameras and the police had CCTV footage, plus a mobile camera unit. The BBC footage was made immediately available to the police and lawyers of the victim’s families, but was then locked away, deemed too distressing for broadcast. *Panorama* managed to get access to the television footage and analyse it in detail. The programme showed shots of Liverpool fans milling around the stadium, waiting to gain access ahead of the scheduled 3 pm kick-off.

At 2:52 pm, South Yorkshire Police match commander Superintendent David Duckenfield, with no justification, ordered an exit gate, Gate C, to be opened. Fans then headed through the gate for the tunnel leading to the central pens directly behind the goal. The police knew, via CCTV footage, that these central pens were already dangerously full. Normally, police would close off the tunnel and divert fans into emptier side pens, but that did not happen on this

occasion.

At this point, the crowding behind the goal was dangerous and some fans were already, in fact, being crushed to death. At 3 pm the game started, but fans, desperate to escape, were attempting to climb over the steel fence at the front. The only way out was through gates onto the pitch, but these were kept locked by the authorities to prevent a “pitch invasion.”

The police called in reinforcements, but were still treating it as an attempted pitch invasion. After six minutes, the match was abandoned as more fans, many in a distressed state, poured onto the pitch.

Following the disaster, the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher was forced to call an inquiry led by Lord Justice Peter Taylor, assisted by West Midlands Police Chief Constable Geoffrey Dear. Taylor handed South Yorkshire Police a trump card—allowing the latter to take their own officers’ statements. In a departure from normal practice, the officers were asked to write statements on plain sheets of paper, which were taken, scrutinised and edited, removing any criticism of the police tactics on the day.

Nevertheless, Taylor found the main cause of the disaster to be a failure of police control, noting failure to block off the tunnel after opening Gate C “had been a blunder of the first magnitude.”

Three days after the disaster, Taylor and Dear were taken to Hillsborough to inspect the scene. Their police driver Mark Lewis told colleagues he had heard them agreeing that the South Yorkshire Police would have to take the blame. Lewis reported Taylor as saying: “I suppose you realise that to give the inquiry any credibility we have to apportion the majority of the blame on the police.” To which Dear is supposed to have replied, “I suppose we do.”

Lewis was advised to speak to his then boss

Superintendent Norman Bettison, who spoke to the newly appointed South Yorkshire Chief Constable, Richard Wells. Wells passed on the allegation to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), who were then in the process of deciding whether to bring criminal charges against the police.

Dear told *Panorama* he and Taylor denied the alleged conversation. Taylor died in 1997. Lewis declined to be interviewed, but said he stood by his statement.

In August 1990 the DPP decided not to bring criminal prosecutions against the police or any officials at Hillsborough.

The Coroner's Inquest led by Stefan Popper became the longest-running on record. His verdict left the criminal failure of the emergency services' response to the disaster unquestioned and insisted that all those who had died were beyond medical help before 3:15 pm. He returned a verdict of accidental death on them all.

Through the use of film footage, *Panorama* showed this was not the case.

Fifteen-year-old Kevin Williams had been carried onto the pitch and given first aid treatment by an off-duty Merseyside police officer, Derek Bruder. Bruder could not recall the exact time he treated Kevin, but did recall an ambulance driving onto the pitch as he attempted to revive him. Bruder was not called to give evidence. Instead his evidence was reported by a West Midlands Police officer who spoke of only two ambulances being present at the time.

The ambulances were on the pitch before Kevin was carried on, i.e., before the arbitrary 3:15 pm cut-off point. *Panorama* pointed out that West Midlands Police were well aware that there were three ambulances on the pitch, having shown the driver of the third ambulance video of his driving on.

Careful examination of the footage showed Kevin being carried onto the pitch and treated by Bruder; the time stamp being after 3:30 pm.

In 1997, 40 of family members travelled to London to meet the new Labour government's home secretary, Jack Straw, hoping for a new inquiry. Privately, Straw said he saw no reason for one and instead appointed Lord Justice Stuart Smith to review any new evidence. In February 1998, Stuart Smith published his report stating the alteration of police statements did not amount to irregularity or malpractice. Straw announced

there was no basis for a further inquiry.

In 2009, on the 20th anniversary of the tragedy, the Labour government's Culture Secretary Andy Burnham announced that government documents relating to Hillsborough would be made public. Normally, such papers are kept secret for 30 years.

The Hillsborough families insisted that any investigation had to be carried out by people they could trust. Based on access to all the records, the Hillsborough Independent Panel made its first report in September 2012. It showed the deaths were entirely the result of corporate, police and emergency services' negligence. In December, the accidental death verdict was overturned and the High Court ordered a new inquest.

The families' determination to expose the truth was personified by Anne Williams, whose son Kevin died at Hillsborough. Never accepting the accidental deaths verdict, she refused to collect Kevin's death certificate.

Speaking to Marshall, she said, "They used to say, you are right Anne, but you will not beat the system ... they are wearing you down ... I replied I will wear them down before they wear me down."

Sadly, Anne died from cancer in April of this year. After the overturning of the accidental death verdict was announced, and aware she did not have long to live, she told Marshall, "My son did not die in an accident. Neither did the 95 with him, so at least we have got rid of that. The accidental death verdict used to really, really upset me, because it let them off the hook."



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