

UK: Hillsborough disaster inquest reveals safety violations by stadium operator

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In April 1989, 96 men women and children died as a result of a stampede at the Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, UK.

The police had given an order to open an exit gate to let hundreds more fans into an already dangerously overfilled pen. It was the venue for a Football Association (FA) cup semi-final match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest.

The tragedy took place at the Leppings Lane end of the ground, where the majority of the Liverpool fans were gathered. It was the greatest loss of life ever recorded at a sporting event in Britain.

Following the disaster, the then Tory government of Margaret Thatcher orchestrated a campaign of lies to cover up the failures of the police, emergency services and others. The Liverpool fans were vilified and blamed for the tragedy. Rupert Murdoch's the *Sun* ran an infamous front page accusing the Liverpool fans of all manner of villainy.

A coroner's inquest, the longest-running on record, continued the cover-up and pronounced a verdict of accidental death on all the 96 victims. The families and supporters of those who died never accepted the verdict and fought a two-decades-long campaign to bring out the truth.

In 2009 the then Labour government announced that secret government papers relating to the tragedy would be made available. Normally such papers are kept secret for 30 years. The victims' families and supporters organised in the Hillsborough Family Support Group were determined that the papers be examined by those they could trust and a Hillsborough Independent Panel was set up. It made its first report in September 2012. In December of that year, the accidental death verdict was overturned and the High Court ordered a new inquest.

The new inquest finally began on March 31. It is being held in a purpose built courtroom, the largest in England, in the Birchwood Park area of Warrington in the North West of England. It is expected to last a year. The jury has now begun hearing the evidence.

In May the jury were taken to visit the Hillsborough ground, but were directed by the coroner not to read the tributes on the memorial there to those who died. The layout of the ground has changed considerably since 1989 and the fences surrounding the pitch are no longer in place. Traffic cones were used to try to indicate the layout of the ground as it was at the time of the disaster in 1989. They also visited the hospitals where the dead and injured were taken.

The jury has heard that prior to the tragedy in 1989 there had been other incidents and concerns expressed about the safety of the ground. In May they were informed of a crushing incident in 1981 at an FA cup semi-final match between Tottenham Hotspur and Wolverhampton Wanderers, in which 38 fans were injured.

They learned that at the time of the disaster the safety certificate was "out of date". Ronald Grimshaw, a retired senior fire officer, had been part of the working party committee in the 1980s overseeing the safety certificate. The certificate covering the ground did not take into account alterations that had been made, including the installation of radial fences dividing the standing terraces into separate pens.

He told the jury that safety depended on the police being able to count the number of fans entering or leaving a particular section and closing or opening gates as necessary.

His testimony was confirmed by a later witness, Richard Chester, who was the secretary of Sheffield Wednesday football club, the owners of the

Hillsborough ground and who therefore had executive responsibility for safety. He held the position from January 1984 to October 1986.

He agreed that the criteria of the safety certificate that was applied to match days did not take into account the alterations that had been made. He told the jury he had been aware that the radial fences added to divide up the terraces at the Leppings Lane end of the ground, installed in 1981 and 1985, had the effect of reducing the maximum capacity. The safety certificate issued in 1979 had put that maximum at 10,100. The safety certificate was never updated in line with the alterations.

Under questioning by Christina Lambert QC (Queen's Counsel), he conceded the football club was breaching the safety certificate because the club had no method of tracking the number of fans entering a particular area, so there was no way of knowing if the safety maximum for a particular area had been exceeded.

Under further questioning from Pete Weatherby, a QC appointed by 22 of the families of the victims, Chester agreed that the possibility of the central area at the Leppings Lane becoming overcrowded was a long-standing problem. Weatherby asked Chester how he had tried to manage the problem while he was in charge at Hillsborough. Chester answered that he and the then Chief Superintendent Brian Mole, the South Yorkshire police officer in command, would do so by "wondering around and having a look" to determine whether or not it was becoming overcrowded. Pressed by Weatherby, he agreed it was a hit and miss system.

Chester went on to tell the inquest that the Leppings Lane entrance was a "serious pinch point, a bottleneck," but was used by large numbers of fans with tickets for different parts of that end of the ground. Chester himself had carried out a survey that showed that at a game due to start at 3 p.m. and attracting a crowd of 30,000, nearly three quarters of fans arrived to attempt to enter after 2:40 p.m.

Entrance to the Leppings Lane end was through 23 turnstiles. Chester agreed this was not enough to handle very large crowds and that the turnstiles were not dedicated to particular areas of the ground.

The inquest was told about a proposed plan in 1985 to increase the number of turnstiles to 34, which would be dedicated to a particular area of the Leppings Lane end,

thus facilitating accurate counting of the number of fans in each area. The cost of the plan would have been £127,000 (\$216,000), but as Chester admitted after repeated questioning, the board rejected the plan deeming the cost too high.

This was at a time when the club had spent around £800,000 (\$1,358,000) buying players and earning a similar amount selling players and had a credit balance of nearly £700,000 (\$1,188,000). Chester had to agree with Weatherby that "It puts into perspective the £120,000 (\$204,000)-£130,000 (\$221,000) for this [rejected Leppings Lane improvement] scheme, doesn't it."

The inquest continues.



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