Hillsborough: A powerful and moving account of Britain's worst sporting disaster

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Hillsborough, aired on UK television for the first time on May 8, examines the deaths of 96 Liverpool fans at Sheffield Wednesday's football stadium, a neutral site, on April 15, 1989.

It details how those responsible, above all the South Yorkshire Police, covered up their role for decades—in collusion with successive Conservative and Labour governments. They concocted a pack of lies, blaming the actions of football supporters for the tragedy they caused.

On April 26, 2016, a full 27 years later, an inquest concluded that the 96 were unlawfully killed. They were crushed to death after Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield, the officer in command, gave the order to open Exit Gate C at 2.52 pm, just before the 3 pm kick-off. Hundreds of fans then entered an unpoliced tunnel leading directly into two already dangerously overcrowded and enclosed pens.

Hillsborough, produced and directed by British documentary film director Daniel Gordon, was originally shown in the United States two years ago. It could not be shown in the UK due to the just concluded two-year inquest into the deaths—the longest jury case in British legal history. The factual consultant on the film, Professor Phil Scraton, told the *Liverpool Echo*, "It was about to go into cinemas when the coroner [Sir John Goldring] placed an embargo on films and books about Hillsborough."

BBC Two aired it on May 8, with public screenings in Sheffield, the city where the disaster took place, and Liverpool.

The documentary reconstructs key events and includes harrowing footage of the crush and its aftermath, interviews with family members, survivors and police officers on duty. Scraton narrates. He played an important role in uncovering the truth about Hillsborough. He was the lead author of the Hillsborough Independent Panel, whose 2012 report exonerated the Liverpool supporters of all blame. This led to the quashing of the original flawed inquest verdicts and the setting up of the new inquest.

The film explains the circumstances in which Chief Superintendent Duckenfield was placed in charge of operations at Hillsborough after a scandal led to the removal of his more experienced predecessor. Duckenfield had never been in charge of such a major policing operation and did not even know the name of the other club involved in the game in a pre-match briefing.

The film documents the poor layout and dilapidated state of the stadium. Prior to entering, thousands of Liverpool fans were herded into a small concourse at the Leppings Lane end. If all the fans had gone through the handful of turnstiles to enter the ground, it would have required the game to be delayed by 40 minutes. But no delay was ever considered by the police and the Football Association (FA).

Duckenfield was in the police control box looking directly over the Leppings Lane end and the seriously overcrowded central pens. Consulting with a police officer on the packed concourse, he made the catastrophic decision to open a main exit gate. The match kicked off at 3pm, with the fans already having been crushed.

The film shows fans trying to escape onto the pitch and police telling them to stop. There are graphic scenes of crushed bodies, with fans desperate to get out of the fenced-off terraces. Some are pulled up onto the elevated rear terrace behind. Others manage to climb the fences onto the pitch. Other fans desperately try to rip the fence open.

Describing people crushed against the main fence, one traumatised police officer states, "It was like looking at fish in a trawler net." One of the police officers opens a gate in the adjoining pen, recalling, "I couldn't understand why these people weren't moving towards me. There's actually six foot high spiked railing fences between the pens."

One of the survivors managed, with the help of fans, to

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get out of the pen. Later, leaving the ground he tells how he saw the body of his father lying dead on the floor on a concourse area with around 10 other bodies.

The police control box is visited by FA Chief Executive Graham Kelly. Scraton states, “Duckenfield tells him there has been an inrush of Liverpool fans forcing entry through an exit gate into the stadium and down the tunnel. At that moment, the person who is ultimately responsible for the hiring of the stadium is told unequivocally that Liverpool fans have caused the disaster by violent access to the ground.”

Likewise, a BBC football commentator tells millions watching on television that a “gate was broken, people without tickets got in and were overcrowding the people with tickets and that’s why the crush occurred.”

“The lie becomes defining,” states Scraton.

No emergency rescue plan is enacted. Ambulances are seen backed up on Penistone Road outside the stadium, unable to go anywhere. The now infamous scene of police officers standing in a cordon across the middle of the pitch, doing nothing to help, is shown. The majority of people involved in the rescue were the fans who managed to get onto the pitch.

A few ambulances manage to get some injured fans to a local hospital, where 12 are pronounced dead. The other deceased were taken into the gymnasium at the stadium.

One of the police officers recalls that when asked what they should put in their police pocket books, a chief inspector replied, “You don’t need to put anything your pocket books. It will be all be covered in the disaster log.”

On the basis of the lie that “drunk” Liverpool fans broke into the ground and caused the deaths, the coroner, Dr Stefan Popper takes the unprecedented decision to take blood alcohol level of all the victims, including the children.

A harrowing reconstruction is shown of relatives, some having driven for hours from Liverpool, waiting in a nearby Boys Club. After identifying the bodies, the families were not allowed to touch the bodies of their loved one. Family members are asked if they had recently drunk alcohol and if those who died drank alcohol.

The following day Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Home Secretary Douglas Hurd, her press secretary Bernard Ingham and local, ultra-right Tory MP Irvine Patnick are taken to the stadium by Peter Wright, the South Yorkshire Police Chief Constable and Duckenfield. Scraton notes that Ingham wrote, “What we learned on the spot is that a tanked up mob had actually caused the disaster.”

The documentary forensically exposes this pack of lies, disseminated by right-wing newspapers, in the words of *The Sun*, as “The Truth.”

The Labour government, which came to office in 1997, refused to call a new public inquiry, despite being presented with new evidence obtained by Scraton, that original statements by police officers had been significantly altered by South Yorkshire Police to delete any criticism of their role.

At the 20th memorial service for the 96 at Liverpool’s Anfield stadium, the film shows a speech by leading Labour politician Andy Burnham being interrupted by fans shouting “Justice for the 96!” Burnham looks sick—like a deer caught in headlights.

Only then did Labour establish the Hillsborough Independent Panel, leading to the release of hundreds of thousands of documents relating to the events. Just a few years earlier, then Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair had ruled out any further inquiry, asking, “What is the point?”

The survivors of the disaster and family members never gave up fighting for justice. Margaret Aspinall, who lost her son James, is filmed speaking after the jury recorded the verdicts of unlawful killings. She notes that up to the very end, South Yorkshire Police were still “prepared to live with the lies and still sell them in the courts.”

Operation Resolve, a police investigation to establish whether any individual or organisation is criminally culpable for their role in the disaster put into place after the publication of the Hillsborough Independent Panel report, has not charged or even arrested a single person after more than three years.

Those with access to the BBC’s iPlayer can view the documentary here for the next 24 days.

The film is also available here.

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