

UK: Police commander at 1989 Hillsborough disaster admits causing 96 deaths

By Barry Mason
23 March 2015

The police match commander in charge during the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster admitted that his failure to close a tunnel leading to the terraces “was the direct cause of the deaths of 96 people.” This is the first time that former Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield has accepted responsibility for causing the deaths.

On April 15, 1989, in Britain’s biggest sporting disaster, 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters died as a result of a crush at the Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. The occasion was a Football Association (FA) Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest.

With the match due to start at 3 p.m., and many of the Liverpool fans still outside the ground at the Leppings Lane end of the stadium, an order was given at 2:52 p.m. to open exit Gate C. This allowed 2,000 fans to flood in. Following the contours of the ground layout, they were funnelled into the tunnel leading to the central pens behind the goal.

These pens were already filled to capacity, as was evident to the police from their live CCTV footage. The game was abandoned shortly after it had kicked off, as fans suffering crush injuries began to spill out onto the pitch in spite of the high fencing all around.

As a result of the crush, 94 fans died at the ground with two others dying subsequently. Immediately, the police, emergency services, the Conservative Party government of Margaret Thatcher and the media, led by Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* tabloid, began a cover-up by putting the blame on the fans.

The family and friends of those who died fought for more than two decades to bring out the truth of what happened that day.

In September 2012, a report issued by the Hillsborough Independent Panel showed the deaths

were the result of corporate, police and emergency services’ negligence. Later that year, the High Court overturned the original accidental death verdict by coroner Stefan Popper and ordered a new inquest.

The new inquest began its hearings in a specially constructed court in the town of Warrington on March 31 last year.

Beginning March 10, the Hillsborough Inquiry began hearing evidence from the policeman in charge of events on the day of the match. Duckenfield’s evidence was heard over a total of seven days.

The inquest heard how the lies and cover-up began within minutes of the incident’s occurrence. The inquest was told that the FA chief executive came into the Hillsborough ground police control box at 3:15 p.m. that day to find out what had caused the crush. Duckenfield told him it was the result of fans getting unauthorised access to the ground, that they had forced open Gate C. He told the inquest, “What I didn’t say to Mr. Kelly, I didn’t say, ‘I have authorised the opening of the gates’, I didn’t tell him that.”

Duckenfield had been promoted to the rank of chief superintendent of F Division only two weeks prior to the day of the fateful match. One of the roles of the post was to act as match commander at Hillsborough football club. Asked at the inquest if his promotion was a result of his freemasonry links, he replied: “I wouldn’t know, sir, but I would hope not.”

Asked if he was up to the task of being a match commander at such a prestigious event as an FA Cup semi-final match, Duckenfield replied, “With hindsight, I should have thought about my limited knowledge of the role of commander in a major event that was an all-ticket sell-out, when I had not been responsible, or in that responsible position, previously. ... Probably I wasn’t the best man for the job on that

day.”

He would have had access to the police CCTV system showing the fans that had entered, after he had authorised the opening of the gate, heading for the tunnel leading to the already overcrowded pens behind the goal, but took no action. Faced with the consequences of his action, Duckenfield said he “froze”.

Questioning Duckenfield on behalf of the Police Federation of England and Wales, Paul Greaney QC said a child of “average intelligence” could have realised what would happen when Gate C was opened and 2,000 football supporters headed towards the terraces.

He asked, “during the critical period, you froze?” After initially prevaricating, Duckenfield replied, “Yes, sir.”

Duckenfield claimed that he could “not think of it [the consequences of his actions] on the day” because he was under pressure and had “no idea” Liverpool fans would head through the gate for a tunnel leading to the already packed terraces.

Greaney put it to him: “That failure was the direct cause of the deaths of the 96 persons in the Hillsborough tragedy?” To which he replied: “Yes, sir.”

Duckenfield told the inquest that he apologised unreservedly for lying. BBC News reported that “some relatives left their seats and walked out of the courtroom in tears.”

While accepting that his instruction to open the gate led to the deaths of the football fans, Duckenfield maintained that he was not negligent. Rajiv Menon QC, representing the families of 75 Hillsborough victims, asked, “It was gross negligence and ultimately it caused the disaster and the deaths of 96 Liverpool fans, didn’t it?”

Duckenfield replied, “No, sir. My view is it was an oversight, a mistake.”

Despite admitting to a “terrible lie” about the cause of the crush, Duckenfield claimed that he played no part in a cover-up. Menon suggested to Duckenfield a “false narrative” had been spread by the authorities to blame Liverpool supporters for the disaster, to which Duckenfield replied, “I disagree. There was no conspiracy as far as I am concerned.”

The inquest was shown transcripts from the police

control box where Duckenfield was directing the response to events. At 3:04 p.m., he made a call to police headquarters for dog handlers to be sent to the ground. It was only after another two and a half minutes that a request for ambulances was sent out and, at 3:13 p.m., a request for the fire brigade to attend.

Two and a half years following the tragedy, Duckenfield retired on the grounds of ill health on a full pension. He was then in his late 40s. On the stand at the inquest, he accepted his early retirement enabled him to escape disciplinary proceedings. Terry Munyard, representing some of the families, put it to him, “You retired at a time when the police complaints commission indicated that they intended to bring disciplinary proceedings against you, and by retiring you avoided those proceedings, didn’t you?” Duckenfield agreed that was the case.

As late as March last year, when he was interviewed for Operation Resolve, the criminal investigation into the Hillsborough disaster, Duckenfield said he could not add to the evidence he had already given. On the stand at the inquest he was asked by Pete Weatherby QC, representing 22 of the families, “The truth is that you followed these inquests, and you have seen the evidence that’s emerged over the months, and you have seen that the writing is on the wall and you are now driven to accepting responsibility.”

Duckenfield agreed with Weatherby’s statement.

The inquest hearings are scheduled to conclude in early 2016.

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