



# THOSE WHO NEVER CAME HOME

Twenty years after being pulled from the fatal crush at Hillsborough, Dan Davies recalls the day the worst disaster in British football led to the brutal death of 96 of his fellow fans



EVERYTHING HAD GONE to plan up until that point. We had got to Sheffield on the train, been put on a bus at the station and were now standing outside a paper shop near the Leppings Lane entrance of Hillsborough, home of Sheffield Wednesday FC. Phil lit a cigarette. It was a clear spring day, warm enough for me to question the wisdom of wearing my beige, zip-up bomber jacket.

We shouldn't have been there, really; a pair of 18-year-old middle class boys from London, seeing out their last months of sixth form. We couldn't believe we were.

All we needed to do now was to swap our tickets. The bar manager at the sports club where I worked at weekends had come through, wangling me a pair of seats through a contact, but they were seats in the South Stand, which had been allocated to Nottingham Forest. As Liverpool fans, there was only one place to be, and that was standing behind the goal at the Liverpool end.

"Leppings Lane Standing — Liverpool Area." No row, no seat, £6. Swap made, we were through the turnstile by 2pm, heading into a concrete concourse area and then, without thinking, down the only access point that presented itself: the tunnel, under a big sign on the back of the stand that said "Standing". After a few dozen quick strides, we emerged into the light and the cigarette smoke and smells of men packed together. Levering ourselves into a decent "spec", to the right of the radial fence that divided the steps behind the goal into two small pens, we were far enough back to be able to see over the inverted, mesh fence at the front.

It was busy in our enclosure, but we were in and that was the main thing. The atmosphere was up and there was time to drink in the occasion. Even at the tail end of a decade that had seen English football sink to its lowest ebb, blighted by crowd violence, mismanagement and neglect, an FA Cup semi-final on a neutral ground was an occasion to savour. It is generally a match that only those who have season tickets, attend regular home matches or have friends in the right places can be at.

I had managed one previous semi-final, in 1986, spending my savings to answer a tout's ad in a London evening paper. Phil and I had both been at Wembley in May 1988 though, to watch the best Liverpool team in years lose 1-0 to Wimbledon in the biggest upset in the history of the FA Cup final. It was a team that included John Barnes, Peter Beardsley and Alan Hansen. Even by the standards

of a club that won League titles and European Cups as a matter of course, a club that attracted out-of-towners like us with its quiet, consistent brilliance and large, ebullient following, Kenny Dalglish's side was something special.

The West Stand at the Leppings Lane end was the smaller of the two ends at Hillsborough, with a shallow bank of terracing split into pens located below a single tier of covered seats. To our left was the North Stand, also slowly filling with Liverpool fans. Nottingham Forest had been given the old-fashioned South Stand and vast Spion Kop at the other end, one of the biggest roofed terraces in Britain, despite the fact their average home attendance was far smaller than Liverpool's. The ground had been divided the same way the year before when Liverpool had beaten Forest 2-1 at the corresponding stage of the competition. Maybe it was a lucky omen.

Our pen continued to fill up, but I noticed there was plenty of space on the terracing to each side of us. In the corners, the crash barriers and concrete of the steps were still visible — unusual given that Liverpool's allocation of tickets could have been sold twice over.

By the time the teams came out to warm up it was uncomfortably hot where we were. Phil and I had been standing side by side, but the force of the crowd was making it difficult to stay together. Sweat was starting to seep through my shirt so I motioned to Phil to suggest that

We were so tightly packed that rib cages were denied the space to expand

we try to move nearer the front of the terrace. The view wouldn't be as good — the fences would obscure the pitch and there would be less perspective of the play — but at least we'd be out of a mass that was beginning to move through no choice of its own. There were no obvious openings and, in any case, there was no prospect of ducking down because we had by now lost our independence in the crush.

Twenty increasingly tense minutes later, the uplift in noise when the teams

ran out for the match did not seem to be coming from our section behind the goal. At 10 to three, it was hot enough to feel lightheaded, and my view of the pitch had narrowed to a slit between the hair, the skin and the hats in front of me. The sounds now concerning me were not those coming from the other three sides of the ground, but the breathing and groaning and rising voices in my immediate vicinity — and the banging of my heartbeat in my ears.

We were bending forwards, legs, arms and necks at strange angles. As the pressure kept coming from behind us, I was finding it hard to maintain a firm footing. My coat was being taken off me by the crowd and I can remember keeping a tight grip on one cuff. There was nowhere to go; we were hemmed in by fences on three sides and the concrete wall behind us. People were shouting, trying to hold each other up. A man to our right had fainted and was being supported by two lads who, like the rest of us, had no means to support themselves.

Someone near the front managed to climb up above the crowd, and was shouting at the police on the other side of the perimeter fence. The game was now underway, but something was clearly and seriously wrong. We were being squeezed tighter and tighter, and people were by now going over the fence at the front. There seemed to be dozens, and then hundreds of fans in the narrow space between the front of the terrace and the touchline at Bruce Grobbelaar's goal. People were passing out, but the police officers at the fence still did nothing.

At the other end of the pitch, Peter Beardsley's effort came back off the bar. A second later, as the noise in the stand above us rose, the heaving mass seemed to spasm. We were being bent forwards further, so tightly packed that rib cages were denied the space to expand as well as contract. With our arms either linked, or grabbing on to clothes or hands, it was as if we were being crucified. More and more people were climbing on the fence. Those who had got out were trying to kick it down. After a few minutes, a fan ran on the pitch, then a policeman, and the referee decided to take the players off. "Open the fucking gate!" "Fucking do something, will yer?" "Can't you see? There are people dying in here!"

I MET PHIL in my first week at secondary school. We bonded over a shared love of Liverpool FC; a pair of 11-year-old boys in ridiculous red blazers reciting games →



and line-ups and scorers while we figured each other out. Phil supported Liverpool because his big brother did. I didn't have a big brother. I had Huw, the Welsh kid who lived next door when I was five. He supported Liverpool, and that was good enough for me.

At primary school I had wanted to be Terry McDermott. I loved his goals. I loved the way he fixed his shin pads in place with white tape. I loved his bouncing perm and his magnificent moustache. My first match at Anfield was in February 1980. I was nine years old and mesmerised by the Kop terrace that sprawled and surged away to my right — the noise, the deep growl of “Dalglish” and the bank of clapping hands that greeted the team's legendary number seven. Terry McDermott missed a penalty in front of the Kop that day, and I remember feeling that my world would never be the same again. A year later, in my first match at Wembley, he conceded the penalty that gave West Ham their equaliser in the dying moments of the 1981 League Cup final, punching a goal-bound header over the bar with his fist.

In September 1982, McDermott was on his way out of the Liverpool starting XI and Phil was one of only two boys in our year capable of growing a moustache like the Scouse midfielder's. In physical terms, Phil was practically a man. His best friend, John, had also joined the school. He was a Liverpool fan too. They had grown up on the same street on a housing estate in East Molesey. John didn't seem to have the same train-spotter streak when it came to football. He said he also supported Aberdeen.

Towards the end of our first year at school together, my dad took the three of us to Vicarage Road, the home of Watford, then managed by Graham Taylor and looking to finish second in the table.

## Men were bent over the balcony, furiously dragging fans up from the terrace below

Liverpool arrived for the last game of the season already crowned as champions, accompanied by thousands of supporters who had travelled to sing their goodbyes to manager Bob Paisley. After nearly 50 years of service to the club, this was to be Paisley's last match in charge. Liverpool played in an unfamiliar kit and lost 2-1.

A few months later, we went to Brentford away in the Milk Cup, memorable still for a sublime back pass from Mark Lawrenson, hit with the outside of his boot to arc along wet, evening grass. Then we went to both games under floodlights at Fulham, a tie that went to a second replay before Graeme Souness settled it in extra time.

In time, I met other another Liverpool fan at school. His name was Jake and his dad was from Merseyside. Jake was tall and goofy and had floppy copper-brown hair. Phil and John had become “casuals” by this time, and while they were taking an adolescent time-out from football to explore pot and Pink Floyd, Jake became my regular match-going companion. We watched Liverpool whenever they were near enough or we could get tickets.

In 1986, we were among 10,000 on the crumbling open terrace at one end of Stamford Bridge to see Kenny Dalglish score the goal that delivered the first half of what would be a League and FA Cup double. Jake, who was a good foot taller

than me, seemed to be fine in the crush; I spent most of the game facing the electronic scoreboard behind us, having been turned by the force of the crowd. Not that I minded — being packed in together behind the goal, being part of something bigger, was what it had become for us. Classic glory-hunters, I suppose.

I CANNOT CLEARLY recall how I managed to get up into the seats above, though I do have a clear sense of the vice of the crowd easing and there being a bit of space to move at last. I remember being slapped and looked at in the eyes by a couple of older fans. They gave me a leg up and I grabbed hold of the hands of a big man with light-coloured hair who was leaning over from the seats above. He and others were bent over the balcony and the advertising hoardings, furiously dragging fans up, out and away from the terrace below. I was OK, so they sent me to the back of the stand.

Phil wasn't with me and the minutes we remained apart were some of the worst of my life. The gravity of the situation hit home in small scenes unfolding in the crowd now swamping the pitch. Near the goal line, a man was lying awkwardly, his trousers half down. People were bent over him and his chest was being pounded. The urgency of actions and the expressions on the faces near the fence at the front of the terrace spoke of something truly terrible. Young men were wandering, running, hugging, pleading with strangers or pointing angrily at the police, many of whom did not seem to know what to do. Others slumped on the turf, heads between knees and hair matted with sweat.

Lifeless bodies with coats or shirts pulled over their heads began to appear, still figures amid the bedlam. Make-do stretcher parties formed, ferrying prone figures diagonally across the pitch on

Yet, precedents existed for the tragedy at Hillsborough. In 1946, 33 fans were crushed to death at Burnden Park, home of Bolton Wanderers; and in 1971, 66 Rangers fans lost their lives when barriers collapsed on a stairway at Ibrox Stadium. Hillsborough came close in 1981, when a near-fatal crush developed on the terracing at the Leppings Lane end before an FA Cup semi-final. Then, gates in the perimeter fencing were opened to avert loss of life.

In 1986, a police inspector with

advertising hoardings that had been ripped from the stands; six, sometimes eight men to a hoarding, running through the chaos to the corner between the North Stand and the Spion Kop. Applause rang out above the stricken din.

People had died. The whispers confirmed what we were seeing and spread through the seats. Panic seemed to be rippling around Hillsborough. The emergency gate in the fence was now open and an anguished collective inhalation of breath met the sight of the lifeless body of a child being handed over heads and on to the pitch. People were still trying to pull the fence down while others were extricating themselves — over the fence, into the pens to the side, up into the stand. Thousands of people were now on the pitch. Limp limbs, tear-streaked faces, pale incomprehension.

An ambulance finally made it onto the grass, then another. A voice came on the public address system, asking us to stay where we were so more ambulances could gain access to the ground. I scanned the chaos for Phil, trying to remember what he had been wearing, trying not to think about what I was going to have to tell his dad and his brother. Phil's mum had died a few years earlier.

As the central pens emptied below us, we could make out a pile of bodies. The pile was four or five deep, and at the front of a patch of concrete that we had been standing on just minutes before. Then came a tap on the shoulder and an embrace like none before or since.

We hardly spoke for the rest of the day. When we were finally let out of the ground nearly an hour later we had seen enough to be numbed into silence. The traffic on the streets leading away from Hillsborough was at a standstill, windows were wound down and the only sound seemed to be news reports coming from car radios,



FROM TOP THE TUNNEL BENEATH THE WEST STAND LEADING TO THE FATAL CRUSH. FANS IN THE SEATS ABOVE STRUGGLE TO SAVE SUPPORTERS BELOW. A YOUNG FAN IS OVERCOME BY THE HORROR OF WHAT HE HAS SEEN

confirming a death toll that was now in its teens and rising. Long queues formed at phone boxes. People were quick to tell their friends and loved ones they were alive before passing on to the next in line. Local residents opened their doors to strangers with fear on their faces, offering them cups of tea and the chance to call home.

My mother wept when she answered the phone. She had watched the whole thing on Grandstand, having been told by one of our friends that we were planning to swap our tickets for the Liverpool end. She cried again when she met us from St Pancras station later that night, two traumatised 18-year-old Londoners who shouldn't have been there. I didn't know what to feel until I saw the news that night. The middle two pens behind the goal looked like nothing I had ever seen at a football match. It was the colour that hit me — no clothes, no scarves, just an ochre smudge of humanity being crushed to death while the police looked on. When I saw what I thought was me, a thin teenager trailing a beige jacket being pulled up into the stand, the shock flushed through me and I sobbed and sobbed.

The death toll continued to rise in the days afterwards, finally stopping at 95. Thirty-eight were in their twenties; 37 were in their teens. The youngest victim was just 10 years old. Liverpool folded in on itself in grief. One evening, two fans asked to be let in to Anfield to pay their respects. They did so by tying a pair of scarves to the goal at the Kop end; one Liverpool, one Everton. This simple act sparked an outpouring and the stadium became the focal point for a community's mourning. The pitch and terrace were concealed under a spreading carpet of flowers, scarves, shirts and cards. This was Liverpool's tragedy, but the trinkets of condolence and respect came from all

## TIMELINE HOW IT HAPPENED

*The reasons why 96 football fans never made it home alive from Hillsborough*

The Hillsborough disaster came at the end of a decade in which football fans had become pariahs. Hooliganism, labelled “the English disease”, reached a nadir in 1985 when Liverpool supporters went on the rampage before the European Cup final at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels, causing the deaths of 39 Juventus fans. Even though hooligans were in the minority of fans, policing major football matches in England prioritised containment and security ahead of the care and safety of spectators.

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corners of the country. The 95 people who died at Hillsborough were predominantly from the city and its surrounding areas, but there were plenty of others from beyond. They came from Wiltshire, Wrexham, Stoke and Derbyshire, and some, like me and Phil, came from the South. Eighteen of them never made it home.

I wanted to go to Anfield to pay my respects, but as the funerals began and allegations raged in the media, I felt divorced from what was happening. I was an outsider, and though I loved the club and had been deeply affected by what we had experienced, I didn't want to intrude. I was not from Liverpool, I did not know any of those who had died and could only wonder at what happened to the people who were standing near me as the clock ticked past three on that fateful afternoon.

Instead, I wrote angry letters to the editors of papers who had printed pictures of fans turning blue as they were squashed into the perimeter fencing. I wrote more letters to correct the lie that this was a tragedy caused by drunken, ill-behaved Liverpool fans — the same kind of lunacy that had informed the carnage at Heysel just four years before. There had been no violence and no drunkenness from what I'd seen at Hillsborough. The media seemed to be missing the point, which was that the police had just stood and watched.

The football season was suspended while Kenny Dalglish, the team's manager, stood like a totem, becoming the embodiment of the club that bound us together. He attended funerals, comforted relatives, and then, when it was decided that the football season should restart, inspired his team to play for the memories of those who had died. Liverpool won the replayed semi-final against Nottingham Forest at Old Trafford — it was a match they could hardly lose — and somebody got me a ticket for the FA Cup final.

There was no need for segregation at Wembley on 20 May. The opponents were Everton and, before kick off, the massed chorus of "You'll Never Walk Alone", Liverpool's anthem, will live forever with those who were there. They had removed the fences for the match, and Everton's late equaliser sparked a pitch invasion, as did each subsequent goal in extra time. There was no malice. This was not hooliganism, more an expression by the people of Merseyside that football involved more than those on the pitch. Liverpool won 3-2.

Six days later, a tired, emotionally spent Liverpool team ran out at Anfield for the final game of an extraordinary season against Arsenal. Having made up a seemingly impossible points deficit, Liverpool were just 90 minutes from securing a memorial double, a feat they were denied with the last kick of the game, and the season. Little did we know then that Michael Thomas's dramatic injury-time goal would mark the end of an era.

HILLSBOROUGH WAS THE last time Phil and I went to a match together. I can't remember what the last one was with Jake, though it could have been Wimbledon at Plough Lane in October 1989. I had gone to that game hoping to meet the man who pulled me into the stand at Hillsborough. My dad had contacted the Liverpool Echo because he wanted to thank him, and the paper had written a "Find The Hero" story that ran on the front page. Someone had come forward, though I couldn't be sure from the picture whether it was the right man. It didn't matter, in all honesty. There were many heroes at Hillsborough. I waited outside the exit gates to the away end, but he didn't show.

In the first days of 1990, Phil and Jake set off to Central America with Chris, another friend from school. Chris was an Arsenal fan, and our tight little circle also

included followers of Leeds United, Chelsea, Wimbledon and Crystal Palace. Phil had secured a place to read history at Cambridge. Jake and Chris were going to Oxford. They were bright lads with big ideas. From their sporadic correspondence it transpired the three of them had gone to Guatemala and then Nicaragua to do voluntary work for the revolutionary Sandinista government.

At home, our minds were occupied by Crystal Palace's unlikely run to the FA Cup final, achieved at the expense of Liverpool, who they beat 4-3 in a semi-final at Villa Park. It was an upset celebrated by all non-Liverpool fans in the group. The gloating didn't stop, even when Liverpool reclaimed the League title later the same month. But then news came through that Chris was ill in hospital in central Mexico. Phil and Jake were missing.

We were worried, of course, but we felt sure that they would turn up at any time, most probably with an amusing story to explain away where they'd been. Those hopes dwindled when we then heard they were last seen setting off for a beauty spot, a series of waterfalls called Aqua Azul. Very quickly afterwards it was confirmed that their bodies had been found. They had drowned some days earlier, pulled under by currents too powerful to escape.

Phil and Jake never came home. There were no funerals for us to attend, which, in some ways, has helped to keep them alive. I often think about what would happen if they walked into a pub today. There would be jumping around and hugging, of course, but I am confident we'd eventually return to where we left off, bringing nearly 20 years into focus through the universal lens of football. I imagine this is a scenario played out in the heads of many people who lost friends, relatives and loved ones at Hillsborough.

So, what would I tell Phil and Jake?

relieve the pressure. Duckenfield refused, fearing that to admit fans without tickets could be a public-order risk.

At this point, Exit Gate C was opened to eject a man and a few fans spilled through. The gate was successfully closed, but Marshall radioed through his request again. This time, after a considerable pause, Duckenfield gave the order to open the gate.

Without signs directing fans towards the emptier sections of terrace either side, or police officers closing off access to the

I'd tell them that the death toll from Hillsborough rose to 96; Tony Bland, who suffered brain damage during the crush at the Leppings Lane end, and was kept alive on a life-support machine, was allowed to "die with dignity" in March 1993.

In 2000, the trial — a private prosecution brought by relatives of the victims — took place against former Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield, the man with overall responsibility for the police operation at Hillsborough, and Deputy Superintendent Bernard Murray, his second in charge and the ground commander. It is unlikely the trial would have come about without the Hillsborough Justice Campaign (HJC), which was formed in 1998. The two South Yorkshire police officers faced two specimen charges of manslaughter. Murray was found not guilty, but the jury could not reach a verdict on Duckenfield, who was allowed to retire on a full police pension.

The Home Office inquiry into the disaster was conducted by Lord Justice Taylor. In August 1989, it published an interim report which cited the failure of the South Yorkshire Police as the main cause of the tragedy (see the panel below). They had, after all, refused to delay the kick-off, they had allowed the overcrowding to develop outside the ground, they had taken the decision to open the exit gates, they had failed to direct fans to the emptier sections of the terrace. And what later emerged was the callous disregard they showed to the bereaved in the immediate aftermath, and the extent of their attempted cover-up, which began before the stadium had even been emptied. For the families, justice has never been done.

Phil and Jake would be happier to learn that my love affair with Liverpool continued. I went to study in the city, ostensibly to be able to go to Anfield every

tunnel, most of the 2,000 fans that had been trapped outside now headed for the tunnel under the west stand, and the most densely packed area of the terrace.

As a result, by 3pm well over 3,000 fans were struggling to breathe in the two central pens, areas with a combined capacity of 2,000. Those who could began climbing over the perimeter fence or escaping through a gate at the front of Pen 3 that had sprung open under the force of the crowd. At first, police officers



FROM TOP ANFIELD'S PITCH IS CARPETED WITH FLOWERS AS LIVERPOOL MOURNS. THE MEMORIAL TO THE VICTIMS AT LIVERPOOL'S GROUND

other week. It was a period when the club began to exhibit the aftereffects of a second tragedy in six years. Kenny Dalglish resigned, emotionally exhausted after Heysel and Hillsborough, the team was gradually dismantled and Liverpool FC slid into decline.

The game changed after Hillsborough, and is now almost unrecognisable to the one they left behind. The fences were taken down, terraces were replaced with all-seater stands and after the World Cup of 1990 football became trendy. At Anfield, managers came and went, as did legions of sub-standard players. Liverpool became a cup side, swapping places with Manchester United, whose dominance in

the league now means they stand on the brink of matching the club's once impregnable record of 18 top-flight title wins. That league title win in 1990, one I hoped Phil and Jake had read about in an English paper before they died, was the last that Liverpool won.

Of course, there have been cup wins to sweeten the pill, as well as many memorable European away trips. I like to think Phil and Jake would have made it along to a few. They would have enjoyed the victory in Rome on the run to the Uefa Cup final in Dortmund. They would have loved the piss-up in Leverkusen that ended in photos taken with Rafa Benitez.

I would tell Phil that I had been best man at John's wedding, a job that he would obviously have done had he been around. On the day after his wedding, his new wife got us tickets to watch Liverpool at St James's Park in Newcastle. In 2005, the two of us travelled from Bulgaria to Istanbul for the Champions League final, on a dilapidated coach with 50 random Reds from Liverpool, its surrounding areas and beyond. John and I made a huge banner, which we trailed across barren ground to the Atatürk Stadium, itself surrounded by a sea of red. They would hear of Kaká's first-half brilliance and how Steven Gerrard, our captain, a Scouse lad who lost his cousin at Hillsborough as a kid, inspired the comeback. But what I hope I wouldn't need to say is that during extra time and penalties on that greatest of all nights, John and I were looking up at the stars. And we were not the only ones. **3** For further reading, see *Hillsborough: The Truth* by Phil Scraton and *The Day Of The Hillsborough Disaster* edited by Rogan Taylor, Andrew Ward and Tim Newburn. For information on the Hillsborough Families Support Group (HFSG) and the Hillsborough Justice Campaign (HJC), visit [www.contrast.org/hillsborough](http://www.contrast.org/hillsborough)

would not be delayed, even though this had happened at an FA Cup semi-final two years earlier and would have eased the pressure.

The deteriorating situation outside was exasperated by a radio fault that hindered communication between officers near the turnstile and those in the police control box. At 2.47pm, the crush outside the ground had become so serious — a situation that Marshall later described as "unprecedented" — that Marshall requested that Exit Gate C be opened to

relieve the pressure. Duckenfield refused, fearing that to admit fans without tickets could be a public-order risk. At this point, Exit Gate C was opened to eject a man and a few fans spilled through. The gate was successfully closed, but Marshall radioed through his request again. This time, after a considerable pause, Duckenfield gave the order to open the gate. Without signs directing fans towards the emptier sections of terrace either side, or police officers closing off access to the