

Hiding in the Shadow of Hillsborough

Since our inception in July 2004, Stand Up Sit Down have always concentrated on current arguments in our case for a return to safe standing and have sought not to invoke terrible memories of the Hillsborough Disaster. This is not a stance that those so against the return of standing adopt; within 5 minutes of sitting down in the offices of the Football Licensing Authority we were told “well, we can’t have another Hillsborough, can we?” More recently, Sports Minister Richard Caborn, adopting crass and emotive language used the disaster, during a debate in the Guardian newspaper with Stand Up Sit Down as virtually a carte blanche reason not to even have a debate on the issue. It seems that by using the words safety and Hillsborough the authorities give the impression that the case for the return to standing is an open and shut one.

We now wish to dispel the all too convenient myth that Hillsborough was caused because of terracing; we would prefer the authorities stop insulting our intelligence and using the tragic deaths of the Liverpool supporters as a debate stopper. We do not seek to cause offence but in light of the continuing refusal of the authorities to pay us little more than lip service, feel that it is timely to counter a stronger argument and hope now that the authorities will comprehensively address the fact that a large minority of supporters wish to stand at football matches and that rather hiding in the shadow of Hillsborough, an honest and open debate should ensue.

When responding to supporters who and supporter organisations who are campaigning for a return to standing, we would like to know why the following are never mentioned by the Government, the Football Licensing Authority and others.

That:

- Sheffield Wednesday had no current safety certificate for the ground

- The one they did hold had not, despite various changes to the ground, been updated since it was issued *in December 1979!*
- For the police officer in charge that day, it was his first football match
- In 1981 the police had advised that the overall figure of 10,100 for the Leppings Lane terrace was too high and yet the capacity was not reduced.
- The police did not divert supporters from the packed pens into ones either side of the central one where supporters were congregating
- A front barrier was corroded and under the pressure of the excessive and uncounted number of fans allowed in, it collapsed directly causing a number of deaths.
- A crush barrier had been removed from pen 3 in 1986 leaving a clear fall through to the front
- A second barrier had had a gap inserted in it in 1985
- Lord Taylor rejected the idea drunk fans caused the disaster but instead was certain that the chief reason was police failure to handle the mass of supporters.
- That seats should replace terracing was one of 76 *recommendations* that Taylor made and was not included in his interim report.
- This *recommendation* was amended by the then Home Office Minister, David Mellor, in July 1992 when he agreed that some standing accommodation could be retained by clubs in the lowest two divisions of the Football League

Could it be all too convenient for the above not to be used in the short sighted and narrow minded arguments against standing as it detracts from their mantra that “we can’t have another Hillsborough”. Nobody wants another Hillsborough but this is simply not a good enough reason not to discuss with an open mind, the introduction of modern, safe standing.

It is clear that a disaster was waiting to happen at Hillsborough, but not simply or just because the club had terraces. Indeed, in a disaster in a modern, all seater stadium in South Africa in April 2001 that took the lives of 43 and

injured over 100 football supporters, bore frightening similarities to the Hillsborough disaster in that the Inquiry found that “how a litany of mistakes and errors of judgement could have contributed to the deaths of 43”.

Stand Up Sit Down need to be very clear indeed that we fully support the vast number of improvements made to football stadia in this country post Hillsborough; it is obvious that they were long over due, but question why it took the deaths of many and the 9th report (that was Taylor) into spectator safety to produce the benefits of modern stadia that we all enjoy today.

Notwithstanding the above we need to be equally clear that we think these benefits are yet another all too easy get out clause not to bring back managed standing. Richard Caborn recently “spun” a Premier League fan survey by stating that “fans see their safety as a hugely important part of going to a game – and that they are happy with the current all seater arrangements” . Supporters who took part on this survey *were not asked about whether or not they wished to sit or stand!!* They were asked about how important they rated safety and of course the overwhelming majority of responders said that they rated safety as “extremely important” as any right minded individual would.

In our experience surveys on the subject of standing (mostly found on unofficial club websites) indicate that a high proportion of respondents wish to see safe standing areas reintroduced – even if they don’t want to use them personally and rarely do supporters ask for return of the terracing as it was pre Taylor!

Looking at our European cousins, especially those in Germany (where incidentally all stadiums bar one hosting preliminary rounds of the forthcoming World Cup, have designated safe standing areas for domestic games) English supporters recognise and understand that standing and/or terraces do not have to be unsafe and for them to be reintroduced would not necessarily make attending football matches any more or less safe than it is currently.

While the main aim of this article was to dispel the myth that to stand in a football ground automatically means danger or disaster we must also touch on the view that is held by many, that a introduction to modern, safe standing areas would automatically herald a return of hooliganism. Do the people who so disparagingly seem to think that those who wish to stand are would be criminals not take into account that tens of thousands of supporters have persistently stood in front of their seats without such behaviour occurring since the inception of all seater stadiums? We struggle to think of any other minority group in society who would be so easily and conveniently stereotyped and are saddened that law abiding, genuine football supporters of both sexes, all ages and backgrounds who want to stand are thus thought of and portrayed as would be hooligans merely because they prefer to stand.

We're sure that this is a hugely contributory factor as to why the authorities will not entertain the return of standing in any form. We are routinely policed and 'stewarded' before, during and after games as if we are on perpetual brink of a riot and incapable of controlling ourselves unless the boys in blue or orange are there to contain, moderate and censor our behaviour.

Indeed, in a paper by the Norman Chester Centre for Football Research entitled "Football and Football Hooliganism" no mention was made that being allowed to stand encourages deviant behaviour. It is a pity that those in authority choose to rely on patronising assumptions and ill informed opinions rather than proper academic research.

The Government and FLA have so manipulated Hillsborough and pandered to the idea that standing automatically equates to football violence that they refuse to listen to reason and continually use feeble arguments against us that do little more than suit their own agenda.

We are not sure what is worse: this twisting of the truth or the shameful hiding behind the deaths of ordinary, decent football supporters.