

## Sport Special report

# 'It's a crime to keep on playing,' fans shouted as bodies lay on the pitch

As Bolton prepare to face Stoke at Wembley, **Mark Hodgkinson** looks back on a meeting between the clubs in 1946 that was to cast a long shadow over postwar football

**K**aren on checkout 15 is scanning a woman's groceries. A packet of ten flapjacks is £1.58, a jar of Heinz salad cream £2. It is all agreeably routine, especially compared with what happened on precisely this spot 65 years ago. The Asda store is on the site of Burnden Park, which was the home of Bolton Wanderers until 1997. A plaque on the wall behind the checkout reveals that 33 people died and 500 were injured here on March 9, 1946, in one of Britain's worst football disasters.

Many shoppers have paused this week to read the plaque because tomorrow Bolton play Stoke City in an FA Cup semi-final at Wembley. Their opponents on the day of the tragedy were also Stoke, in an FA Cup quarter-final.

"There has been a lot of talk in Bolton about the disaster since the Cup draw was made," said Simon Marland, the club secretary, whose grandfather, Frank Conquest, was injured on the day. "I suppose it was inevitable with it being Stoke."

The main attraction that day in 1946 was the arrival in town of Stanley Matthews, the Stoke and England winger. His flamboyant style of play had made him one of football's first international stars.

The Second World War had ended seven months earlier and there was a clamour to "return to normal", which resulted in an upsurge in football's popularity. Attendance records were set throughout England, especially at FA Cup matches, because the Football League had not yet been reinstated.

In the previous round, 40,000 had seen Bolton beat Liverpool at Burnden Park. Club officials expected an increase on this figure against Stoke but were overwhelmed when more than double turned up. The ground filled and as kick-off approached it was estimated that as many as 15,000 were still outside and desperate to get in. PC Frank Rushton, one of 103 officers on duty, said that there was suddenly a "mad rush".

The main illegal point of entry was into the Railway Enclosure adjacent to where a train line ran behind the ground. Many jumped over turnstiles or squeezed through gaps in a fence formed from railway sleepers. "The attitude of most of the people I came into contact with was that their keenness to see the match made them indifferent to any danger," Robert Breary, of the Railway Police, reported.

The crush was so great that people began fainting but remained upright. Others said that they could not move

their hands to their pockets. In a bid to alleviate the pressure a police officer tried to open an exit gate. He was helped by a supporter named Fred Ashworth, who had with him a set of keys because he was a church caretaker. He picked the lock and a few were able to leave, but many more rushed in.

Shortly before kick-off two crush barriers collapsed and spectators fell upon each other. Another barrier bent forward to "an appreciable extent".

Alf Ashworth, who was 22 at the time, was in the Great Lever End at the opposite side of the ground, with his older brother, Bill. "We'd gone there because it was covered, so you kept dry if it rained," Alf, now 87, said. "I looked across and I could see how packed it was — you couldn't get a pinprick between people's faces."

The match began and Alf said that he saw the crowd surge. "They were spilling on to the pitch and then people were being carried away. Their arms were flopping by their side and I said to Bill, 'They look like they're dead.'"

Although fans had encroached on the pitch, George Dutton, the referee, did not know at first what had happened. He said afterwards: "A local police officer — I fancy he was an inspector — came over to me and said, 'You can't carry on the match, sir.' I immediately asked why, to which he replied, 'There are about half a dozen people lying dead on the field.'"

He took the players off for 26 minutes while the dead and injured were moved. Groundstaff put down new sawdust to mark out the pitch. Fans who had witnessed the deaths shouted to the players that it was "a crime to carry on". Matthews wrote in his autobiography: "We

were professionals, doing as we were told." He later donated two weeks' wages to the disaster fund.

The police had wanted the match to continue because they feared civil disorder if it was abandoned. The boisterous behaviour of some fans, especially former servicemen, was later condemned. "Possibly the war has left some people with less

respect for the law than they used to have," the leader writer of the *Manchester Evening News* wrote.

At half-time the players swapped ends rather than taking the customary break. The match ended goalless and Bolton went through to the semi-final because they had won the first leg of the tie 2-0. "As we left the ground no one knew what had happened," Alf Ashworth said. "Me and our Bill had a three-mile walk home and people were at their doors asking what had gone on. We said we'd heard a rumour that 17 had died."

The first casualties had arrived at Bolton Royal Infirmary at 3.15pm. Freda Scholes, now 95, was a Red Cross nurse working at the hospital voluntarily. "We had two wards at the hospital for the soldiers who had come back injured from the war," she said. "Some of them had gone to the match. The casualty department became very busy. Most came in under effect of asphyxiation. It was dreadful."

Twelve people were admitted dead to the infirmary, including the only woman to die, Emily Hodgkinson, 40, from Bolton. The cause of all the deaths was asphyxiation by suffocation. Everyone who died or was injured had been standing on the same 25 square feet of terracing where the barriers collapsed.



An Asda store now occupies part of the site at Bolton's former home of Burnden Park

The next day George McKenzie, a police surgeon, was summoned to the ambulance depot at Blackhorse Street, in Bolton. He examined the other 21 bodies pulled from the crowd. The oldest was David Pearson, 67, from Rochdale, and the youngest was Harry Bertwistle, 14, from Blackburn. He was the only child to die. He was described in the surgeon's report as a "well-developed boy", which probably meant that, unlike other children, he was considered too heavy to be passed over the heads of the crowd to safety.

The dead each had superficial bruises and abrasions, but their fingers, ears and lips were "bluish in colour" and their eyes protruded, evidence of asphyxiation by suffocation.

June Moyers (née Roby) was one of a handful who lost two family members in the disaster: her father Richard, 37, and grandfather Thomas, 62. June was 8 at the time. "I remember it as if it was yesterday," she said. "It was a beautiful spring day. I'd gone collecting sticks for the fire with my mother in a wood near our house. We heard