

THE FATALITIES AT THE IBROX DISASTER OF 1902

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Introduction

On Saturday April 5, 1902 Scotland met England for a football international at Ibrox in Glasgow. That was the 27th such meeting and the first with only professional players.

Ibrox football ground had been put in order by Rangers Football Club in 1899 at a cost of about £20,000. The total crowd at the 1902 international was said to be just in excess of 68,000.

The match had not been in progress for long when, shortly before 4 pm, part of the western terracing gave way. The part that collapsed was near to the top of the terracing. In the ensuing panic, people at the lower edge of the terracing moved out onto the surrounding track and then the playing pitch and this led to a temporary stoppage of the game, lasting about 20 minutes.

There were 25 deaths as a result of the accident. The number of people injured was in excess of 500, although the precise total, as will be explained later, is uncertain.

Later in 1902 the contractor who built the western terracing two years before the accident was prosecuted and acquitted. The trial was in effect the public inquiry into the affair.¹ This Ibrox disaster was neither the first nor the only accident at football grounds. In 1989 Lord Taylor noted that it was "a depressing and chastening fact " that his was the ninth official report covering crowd safety and control at football grounds. His report summarises eight previous reports but there is no mention of the 1902 incident.²

As the official inquiry into the 1902 accident took the form of a criminal trial, there appears to have been no official report, according to modern practice. Such lessons as might have been learnt officially were never really identified and little was set down in writing for posterity.

The memory of the 1902 accident is therefore essentially anecdotal and generally set in the context of the history of the development of the game of football. It is still possible, however, to discern some interesting aspects to the accident and that certainly extends to the medical context.

The scene of the accident

For some in the years before the Great War the large crowds at football matches in the major urban centres reflected the decadent life of the city. Others thought that the competitive stimulus provided by games kept the nation alert and ready to face the even more serious challenge of war.³

Whatever the truth of the various views, the Scots were then bringing a vigour and a violence to their recreation. Football crowds were larger and more prone to disorder than in England.⁴ Of course, "disorder" does not necessarily mean criminal disorder but rather it might mean that the symptoms of control, if any, were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers anxious to attend matches.

Indeed, a contemporary report of the 1902 accident refers to the terracing that gave way as being "packed with a seething crowd of humanity."⁵ That part was the western terracing which had been designed for 35,913 spectators and thus allowed space for standing spectator that amounted to 16 inches long and 14 inches broad. The terracing was constructed like steps with 4 inches difference in height. The steps were about 14 inches broad. In all there were 96 wooden tiers. Notwithstanding the design, there was no provision for determining the number of spectators present. The stewards had boards with the word "full" on them. It would appear that these boards were displayed at the appropriate time. The stewards were provided by the Scottish Football Association and they were friends of the members of the Association who voluntarily undertook the duties. A good number of the stewards had done the same duties frequently before and understood them very well. Generally, there were about four stewards at each of the entrances and in all there would be about 50 stewards.⁶

The part of the terracing which collapsed had never in the past been seen to be so crowded. The crowd about the time of the accident was stamping and swaying. There was a surge in the crowd near to the area of the collapse but the spectators had moved towards the lower part of the terracing near to the edge of the field. This was a separate incident to the early breakthrough before the game when the police had been required to become involved to regulate the crowd. The spectators moved back after this surge and they arranged themselves on the terracing.

The point at which the collapse occurred was subjected to a greater strain than ever before. Later examination showed that 17 joints had given way. Some witnesses had heard a crack before the fall and one, a joiner to trade, saw the foot boards split first. The prosecution arose out of the substitution of wood, said to be of an inferior quality, for that contracted for.⁷

The dead and injured

Contemporary newspapers kept daily running totals of the dead and injured: as the figures increased, care has to be taken with any number given soon after the accident. The test of who was to be included in the total seemed to be whether the death or injury was notified to the police at Govan, where the accident had occurred.

The total of 25 dead seems to be accurate. Football and other historians give that figure or about it.⁸ However, there is no coroner in Scotland and the Procurator Fiscal is required to investigate all sudden, suspicious and unexplained deaths. The investigations into this accident led to a prosecution and the indictment resulting from that inquiry contained the details of the 25 men killed at Ibrox. The names, ages and marital status, with occupations, are set out in the annex to this note.

Assessing the true extent of the injured is more difficult. In a less litigious age not everyone involved would necessarily have any reason to intimate their details to the police.

However, *The Scotsman* a fortnight after the accident intimated the figures as "dangerously injured 24, seriously injured 168, injured 153, slightly injured 171."⁹ This total of 516 just about accords with the Rangers historian who puts it at 517.¹⁰ 587 are said to have received compensation.¹¹

It would seem reasonable to assert then that 25 were killed and in excess of 500 were injured to some extent or other, but that the number of injured is not known conclusively. There seems not to have been any study of the nature and extent of the injuries sustained by spectators.

The nature of the injuries

A discussion of the nature of the injuries is problematic because with the accident and the overcrowding it is difficult to distinguish between those injuries caused by the collapse itself and those injuries caused by the stampede or other reactions from the crowd at or even near to the precise scene of the accident.

A contemporary report referred to the "surging of the human waves on the fated terracing, the sudden gap in that portion which gave way beneath the over-pressure of the crowd tossed to and fro, the wild waving of handkerchiefs for assistance by those in front, and the lamentable procession of injured and dying being carried away."¹²

The physical point of that gap has important consequences for the injuries. The terracing had a concrete base into which vertical steel girders were set. The terracing was supported by horizontal steel girders. The horizontal girders were supported by the vertical girders and by a complex lattice work of supporting struts.¹³

As a result of the collapse of the terracing, hundreds were precipitated to the ground, and the scene which followed was appalling.¹⁴ It was said that between 200 and 300 of the spectators fell to the ground from a height of 40 or 50 feet.¹⁵ Presumably, given the layout of the terracing, all of that number fell through one large hole.

Twenty-one of the deceased were taken to the western infirmary, Glasgow. The historians of that institution observed that "many of the fatal injuries were caused by direct impact on the wood and steel beams and trestles. Those who first reached the ground alive must then have been at hazard from suffocation."¹⁶

Moreover, contemporary reports refer to "what was especially distressing to those engaged with the injured" namely the "fearful cuts and gashes on the heads and faces of the victims."¹⁷ Even the doctors were "quite

surprised by the large number of wounds on the head."¹⁸ One may well speculate at the extent to which these were caused by the jagged edge of the wooden terracing as the latter group of individuals fell through the hole.

The causes of death

An eyewitness wrote that "a sad spectacle was presented immediately after the accident. Men and boys were heaped together in a great mess on the ground."¹⁹ In fact, a woman aged 26 and a girl aged 14 were listed as injured, having been taken to the Western Infirmary. The former had a fracture of the left leg and "spinal concussion" and the latter a fracture of the thigh and fracture of the leg.²⁰ The deceased, however, were men of widely varying ages.

The composition of football crowds in this era has been of intense interest to sports historians and some work has already been done on the 1902 crowd.²¹ A number of specific observations can be made about the deceased and their occupations.

First, the precise occupation may not necessarily be reflected by that trade given on the death certificate. There are three clerks: however, it has been said that to be "a clerk" then was to be a professional worker in a position of administrative authority, involving the use of actuarial and other skills.²² Secondly, seven of the deceased were journeymen and thus subjected to irregular work in industries of a volatile nature.²³ Thirdly, shipbuilding and the engineering industry predominate. The last aspect is to be expected given the distribution of the addresses of the deceased.

The nationalist aspect of this particular football match is reflected in that one deceased came from each of Paisley, Wishaw, Greenock, Crieff and Aberdeen. However, Glasgow dominated with 23 home addresses, all a short distance from Ibrox and the industrial areas of Glasgow. It is unwise to be guided too much by information provided at times such as this accident for Michael Peter Donnelly had an address in the Saltmarket area in Glasgow but his death was intimated to the Registrar by a brother with a Dublin address.²⁴ All the deceased, with the one exception, seem to have been Scots. Sports and politics have always been linked but the complexity of the facts and circumstance all urge caution when it comes to drawing

conclusions.²⁵

The causes of death seem to be in three broad groups.²⁶ The largest group of 14 deaths have the cause of fracture of the base of the skull, either by itself or with another injury. Alexander Murray and Bruce Crawford have the word "instantaneous" after fracture of the base of the skull. Their place of death is given as Ibrox itself, rather than a hospital, as with the others in this group. Murray's death certificate has 3.45 pm noted on it and Crawford's has 3.50 pm similarly. Both their deaths are certified by the same doctor who saw the bodies of the deceased.

The second group of eight deaths have varying causes of death which, it may be inferred, suggest at least crushing injuries. Thus, for example, William McNair had fractured ribs with a fractured jaw and severe internal injuries to the chest.

The third group of three deaths, being either shock or cardiac failure (in a 50 year old man) are probably indicative of severe injury leading to physiological shock. That cause does not in itself give any indication of the nature and extent of the injuries.

Those present on the wooden terracing and able later to give an account made it clear that there was little time between the ominous cracking sound and the fall of the floorboards. Accordingly, by inference those at or immediately adjacent to the break would have little chance to move. All the deceased were probably in that immediate vicinity.

The first group of deceased are likely to have fallen forward or back, depending on where the break was, but they would then have a clean fall onto the steel beams or ultimately the concrete. With 40 or so feet to the ground it is distinctly possible that many fell onto the ground head first. The second and third groups would necessarily have different injuries because of the first group below them and because of the large number of others, not killed, following them. The oddity is that none was certified as having died of asphyxiation given ultimately the vast pile of bodies.

Concluding remarks

Historians and sociologists have sought to find the hidden and impersonal causes behind events and human actions. Moreover, a crowd such as that at Ibrox in 1902 may be described as "a transitory collection of equal,

anonymous and similar individuals within which the ideas and emotions of each individual tends to express themselves spontaneously."²⁷

It would appear that many of the various aspects of the disaster have been neglected. The criminal trial of the contractor took the place of an inquiry such as was held after the Ibrox disaster of 1971. There seems to have been no civil litigation after 1902. Further, if there was a major medical review of the consequences of the 1902 disaster it has not been made public nor has it been found. The events of 1902 are recalled most frequently in the narration of the history of football.²⁸

The concern here has been the fatalities at Ibrox in 1902, the social conditions and football in Edwardian Scotland, the nature and extent of the injuries among the 550 casualties, and the administrative reactions and consequences for football as a result of these events remain for later consideration.

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