

The night football died a slow death at Kenilworth Road

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As Luton prepare to host Millwall, it is impossible not to look back at an outbreak of premeditated mayhem in one of the sport's worst years, but also not to reflect on how much has changed since their 1985 quarter-final



Sean Ingle

Even now, nearly 30 years on, the images haunt the mind's eye. Droogs charging across the Kenilworth Road turf, hurling seats and golf balls at policemen in full retreat. A knife thrown at the home goalkeeper, Les Sealey. The soccer special with its ceilings torn off and innards gutted so completely that a British Rail spokesman said: "It was like a bomb had exploded inside some of the carriages." And the copper trying to revive a colleague who had stopped breathing after being hit with a bottle, while being punched and pummelled himself.

This was England 1985: Luton Town versus Millwall in the sixth round of the

FA Cup. Wednesday 13 March was, said the Guardian, "a night football died a slow death", but a fatality was the only thing missing from the roll call of ultraviolence. Luton's stadium was stripped, houses and cars smashed, and the image of the national game - already bruised by a battery of hooligan incidents - given another going over.

The following day England, who had been favourites to host the 1988 European Championship, lost out to West Germany. The Football Association chairman, Bert Millichip, blamed the violence, adding: "The scenes at Luton were the most disgraceful I have seen - and I have seen a lot."

David Pleat, the Luton manager at the time, concurs. "There were people being carried away on stretchers, fans on the edge of the pitch and players constantly looking up at their families because billiard balls were being thrown at the directors' box," he says. "I can't tell you much about the football, because there was so much else going on. It was completely out of control."

No one is expecting a repeat when the teams meet again at Kenilworth Road in

the fifth round of the FA Cup today. The match is all-ticket, the pubs will have their shutters down and the police are guarding every road and rail route. But even now some Luton fans revisit that night of frenzied violence with trepidation.

Martin Wells, then a 10-year-old who was sat in the Junior Hatters stand with his dad, says he was "utterly terrified" when the fists started flying. "Even at school everyone knew it was going to be hostile that evening. But no one expected such carnage."

Certainly Luton Town and the Bedfordshire police seemed unprepared. The match was not all-ticket, even though Millwall's fans had a reputation established

over generations. But a vital piece of intelligence had been missed: fans from rival London clubs had decided to join forces and travel up to Luton for the day.

Their intentions carried little stealth or subtlety. In the House of Commons, the Wigan MP Roger Stott said he had seen "at least two or three hundred Millwall supporters" at St Pancras nearly four hours before kick-off "behaving in a loutish, hooligan fashion and terrorising most people standing on the platform" - adding: "It was clear that if this lot were deposited on Luton there was bound to be trouble."

They were, and there was. Yvonne Fletcher, who has supported Luton for 41 years, recalls: "By 3pm the local radio was reporting that the Arndale Centre was shut because of trouble in the town centre while before kick-off there were so many fights I said to my dad: 'This game is never going to happen.'"

Meanwhile, according to Pleat, the transport police at St Pancras had alerted the Bedfordshire police that they needed horses at the match. "Unfortunately, to my knowledge, they didn't have horses."

The criminals were creative in the confusion. An hour before kick-off the gates at

the Kenilworth Road end - which was supposed to hold 5,000 Millwall fans - were stormed and the stand was soon holding nearly twice that number. Hundreds climbed out and started throwing bottles, nails and coins at Luton fans in the Oak Road end before violently appropriating the Bobbers stand, ripping up seats and attacking home supporters.

Says Pleat: "Two-thirds of Luton supporters in the Bobbers stand were pushed out by these hooligans and went home in a state of shock. We were told afterwards that a third of season-ticket holders stopped coming to home games. Whether they later returned, I don't know."

Incredibly the game started on time. But after 14 minutes, with Millwall fans rioting and encroaching on to the pitch again, the referee, David Hutchinson, was forced to halt the game for 25 minutes.

Eventually, after Millwall's manager, George Graham, talked to supporters and Hutchinson pleaded with fans "to co-operate, enjoy yourselves and let us entertain you", the game resumed. But the fear and the fighting were never far away.

Brian Swain, who reported on more than 2,000 matches for the Luton News

across four decades, says that no part of the ground was safe. "The violence spilled everywhere," he says. "The police were trying to clear the main stand - getting us innocents to safety - and they asked us to leave the press box. But I was sat there with a bloody good story on my hands so I stayed on."

At half-time, with Luton 1-0 up after a 31st-minute goal from Brian Stein, Pleat spoke to the referee. "He said: 'Look, don't worry, I'll make sure we'll finish it' - and he was magnificent," says Pleat. "Somehow he finished that game. By the end policemen who had survived the earlier fighting were standing on the touchline, so when a ball went out it literally bounced off them and came back into play. The whole evening was nasty, vicious and surreal."

At the final whistle, the players raced to the tunnel, but the fans weren't far behind. And so began the worst violence of the night, with seats being thrown like spears and police fleeing before counter-attacking. Astonishingly, only 47 people went to hospital with injuries, while there just 31 arrests, a figure that included several Chelsea and West Ham fans.

As the Times reported two days later:

"One miscreant was seen by his parents, stunned as they watched television, throwing a seat at the police after the game had ended. Usually he goes to Chelsea. When he returned home, he found that his bedding had been thrown outside and was told that 'if he behaved like an animal, he might as well sleep like one'."

The next day the bring-back-flogging brigade was out in force, with John Carlisle, the Luton North MP, telling the Commons: "My constituents are very angry at the destruction of their homes, their shops, their town and their football club. The only answer is to inflict on those the physical pain that they so readily inflicted on others last night."

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Luton opted for a solution that was brutal in a different way - with the club's chairman, David Evans, a man whose views would have been considered reactionary in the 17th century, introducing identity cards and banning away fans.

"We became pariahs," Pleat admits. "He was a naughty boy, David. He was Mrs Thatcher's plaything. He wanted a safe Tory seat. I didn't agree with it but there was no discussion, no debate. We should have been more open-minded."

Such policies have long since been discarded by Luton. But that night of violence - part of a bleak spring that included the death of a fan in a riot at Birmingham v Leeds on the same day 56 were killed in the Bradford fire, and then the Heysel disaster - still has its knuckles imprinted on modern football. On April Fool's Day 1985, Thatcher and the FA discussed a six-point plan to curb hooliganism. And, a generation on, some of those proposals - CCTV and stronger police powers inside stadiums, more all-ticket matches and a ban on taking alcohol into grounds - are now as natural to the modern-day fan as high ticket prices and the sanitised sheen of the Premier League.

