

Accounting for Orgreave

Thirty years have passed since the ‘Battle of Orgreave’, which took place one hot summer day at a huge coking plant near Rotherham, on Monday 18 June 1984. Striking miners had been picketing the plant for several weeks. That day, thousands of their colleagues across Britain had travelled to South Yorkshire to blockade the British Steel plant, which supplied the industry’s furnaces. South Yorkshire Police deployed some 5,000 officers, including many brought in from other parts of the country.

The police repeatedly charged the miners, often on horseback. Many miners were assaulted, and hundreds were arrested, of whom 95 were eventually charged with ‘riotous assembly’, which carried a maximum life sentence. It quickly became apparent to those involved in the subsequent trials that much of the evidence against the miners was falsified and, indeed, some of it was downright laughable.

During the trials, it emerged that evidence had been written up long after the event, often by detectives rather than those officers present at Orgreave. After 10 weeks, the trials finally collapsed. Yet, no action has ever been taken against South Yorkshire Police, notwithstanding serious allegations of improper conduct. It was only following a BBC documentary broadcast in 2012, which gave examples of the force’s misconduct, that South Yorkshire Police referred itself to the Independent Police Complaints Commission. But, as Stephen Cavalier of Thompsons Solicitors recently wrote (*Morning Star*, 18 June 2014):

‘the progress of this investigation appears to be moving at an extremely slow pace, and it is becoming increasingly doubtful that any

police officers will ever be charged with assault, perjury, misconduct of public office and perverting the course of justice arising out of Orgreave. This is precisely the reason why a full and robust public inquiry into South Yorkshire Police is required.'

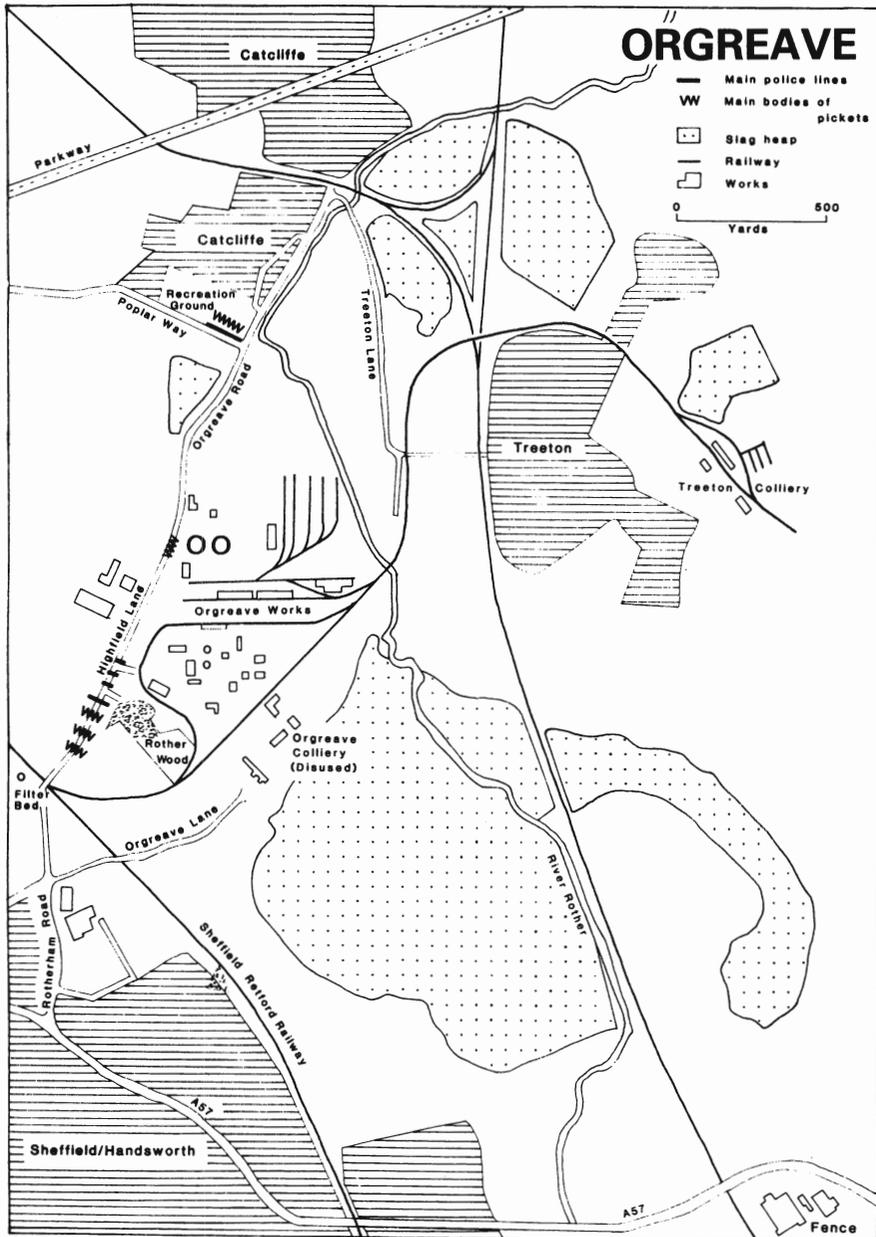
As we now know, in 1989, five years after the Battle of Orgreave, South Yorkshire Police tried to blame the innocent victims of the disaster at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield in which 96 Liverpool fans died at the FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest. It has taken years of sustained effort to begin to obtain justice for the Liverpool 96, and for police misconduct in relation to Hillsborough to be rigorously examined. When will police misconduct arising from Orgreave be similarly scrutinised?

We reprint some eyewitness accounts from Orgreave, as given by miners from a nearby pit village and recorded in the acclaimed oral history, *Thurcroft: A Village and the Miners' Strike*, edited by Peter Gibbon and David Steyne, which has long been out of print and Spokesman are now republishing (price £9.99). These are followed by an excerpt from *Thatcher's Children*, a play by Trevor Griffiths, in which Constable Wayne Richards prepares to give 'evidence' at one of the Orgreave trials.



P. Alberto

Front Gate pickets, Pit Lane, Thurcroft



Orgreave, 18 June 1984

Since June 6 the Thurcrofters had been assigned to smaller pickets in Notts and South Derbyshire.

Then [on June 18] we got to the Welfare at 5.30 a.m. I said 'I hope we're going somewhere different today'. They opened the envelope and it was Orgreave. We went down through Swallownest and were going through Fence when we saw some lads at the side of the road. They asked us where we were from and we said Thurcroft. They 'd stuck their heads together and decided to occupy the plant. Somebody had their car radio on and heard that there were already about 3,000 pickets [at the Handsworth end]. Well, we waited around at Fence until there was a big crowd of us, then we started marching round the back of the big old Orgreave tip. There were stacks from all over Yorkshire. Going over the top of the pit tip it was like that film where Candice Bergen marches the kids over the hill. We dropped straight down into the plant. There were a few bobbies and security men but they just vanished. ()

About 50 of us got onto the coking pile itself. There was one big lad at the front. A copper was there with this big woolly dog. He said 'Get off of here or I'll let the dog go'. The miner said 'Let it come, thee and all'. He wouldn't though, he backed off. ()

[The trouble was] that there was nobody to say 'do this' or 'do that'. We'd have been alright if there was, but we were all just stood about not knowing what to do. Then a few more coppers came with riot gear and dogs. I'll never forget it, there was one big bobby with a moustache. The lads were picking the coke dust up and throwing it in his face. All his face was black. ()

I was at the back of the crowd. We saw the dust going up and then everything was let loose. They started chasing us and we finished back up on the tip again. Then we started moving back again. There was some throwing, [the police retreated] and we got back into the compound. To get in you had to walk across some pipping going across a river. We nearly slipped in but we got across, back into the compound. There was no way we would get down to where we were before though. [They eventually pushed us out again].()

Having got on the plant between 6.00 a.m. and 6.30, most of the occupying group were forced out by 7.30. Some went back over the tip to the Handsworth end, some stayed at the Treeton gate 'just keeping the police there, keeping them from the main gate'. Most made their way along Treeton Lane, north into Catcliffe and turned left onto Orgreave Road. It was now about 8.15 a.m. The first convoy of coke lorries had just driven off the Parkway, along Poplar Way and into Orgreave road in front of them.

The overall situation at Orgreave was now that there was one major concentration of pickets at the Handsworth end of the plant, mostly from Scotland and Kent (the police claimed between 5,000 and 6,000, rising to 8,000 by 9.25 a.m.) They had completely blocked Highfield Lane above the railway bridge, and were occupying the field to the east of it. When the convoy turned into the plant in front of them there was a major shove. The police responded (according to their own account) by three mounted police charges towards Handsworth in twenty minutes, the last of which was followed by foot police with short shields and truncheons drawn. These failed to disperse the crowd.

North of this concentration were two smaller groups of pickets. Most of those who had arrived at the Catcliffe end between 5.00 a.m. and 7.15 a.m. were instructed by the police to walk south the length of Orgreave Road and Highfield Lane to join the main body at the Handsworth end. As it happened, the majority (about 1,000) decided to stop half-way and were milling around in the road near Highfield Farm.

To the north of this mobile group was now a third (static) group of pickets numbering 500 (from Wales, Durham and Yorkshire). Around 7.15 a.m. the police had put a cordon across Orgreave Road some way above Poplar Way, preventing pickets arriving in Catcliffe from continuing to join either of the two groups to the south of them and obliging them to concentrate on the Orgreave Road Recreation Ground. The arrival of the main group retreating from the plant brought their numbers to about 1,000, considerably out-numbering the police.

[By 8.30] there was a fair number of us stood [near Poplar Way]. Somebody said 'Come on, let's go and meet the lads at the top [Handsworth] end'. So we went up the road en masse. The police linked arms and we walked straight through them. [Coming up to their second cordon] the one who was gaffering them said 'Let them go, we can't contain these'. Well, we marched straight up to the gates more or less. (E)

Behind them both the police cordon and the number of pickets on the Catcliffe side of them were reinforced. But between 8.30 and when the convoy left at 9.30, the main action was concentrated in the central section, where there were now about 1,500 - 2,000 roving pickets.

First of all they sent some horses down towards us. Everybody scattered. I jumped over the wall into a field. The horses turned round to round us all up but they couldn't because we were all running around and what have you. Then they sent a convoy of transits in [from the Catcliffe end]. Behind them was a police car. It had got one of the big noises in because we could see the pips on his shoulder. (E)

Someone took a coping stone off one of the walls alongside the road and a number of the pickets grabbed the smaller stones underneath.

They started throwing them at the transits. Just 'bang, bang, bang'. [They carried on but] the big noise in the unmarked car stalled it. There was one lad took [the coping stone] and threw it onto the roof. It was just like one of those cartoons where the roof flattens down to the body. Of course all the vans came to a screeching halt, they all piled out and anybody who was in the vicinity got a right pasting so that they could get their gaffer out. (E)

Having temporarily dispersed part of the crowd, the convoy withdrew. The pickets regrouped and with the damaged wall, a couple of lamp-posts and other debris a barricade was built. The convoy loading up inside the plant was now effectively trapped.

The next minute a copper's saying 'Ambulance here, somebody's injured, clear the road off'. Of course, the lads started clearing the barricade. You could see two ambulances with their lights flashing [near the Handsworth cordon]. The road was empty for them and they could go, but they just crawled along at two-three miles an hour. The police had all lined up behind them and were using them as cover. [When they got through the barricade the ambulances drove off down onto Poplar Way and the police charged, horses first then short-shield units.] They used the ambulances to make an opening for them. That's what broke it up. If it hadn't been for that ambulance job we would have eventually got up to the top [Handsworth] end. (LL)

One of the bricks they'd been throwing at the transits missed and hit me right on the knee. The knee just came up like that, I thought I'd broken it, I could hardly move. I limped over to the wall. Then suddenly the police horses charged down and then the police with the batons. I was sat on the wall holding my leg. There was a nine foot drop on the other side and a copper just came up to me and hit me on my back with a truncheon. He said 'Get over there, bastard'. I said 'I can't, I've hurt my leg'. He said 'I don't care, I'll hurt the other one'. He hit me again and pushed me over with the truncheon, in the ribs. I went over but luckily it was marshy ground and I got a soft landing. But then they all jumped over themselves and came after us again. They chased us right down to Catcliffe. (HH)

Eventually, by half past nine, the middle group of pickets were pushed back northwards through the police lines to join the Catcliffe end group behind the cordon at the corner of Orgreave Road and Poplar Way. Almost immediately, the coke lorries left the plant and drove towards this cordon. Pickets and police now took up positions the length of Poplar Way, the pickets inside the Recreation Ground, the police four or five deep between them and the road. As the convoy passed, there was a shove. Immediately after, the police charged the crowd in the Recreation Ground and scattered them. It was at this point that all the Catcliffe end arrests that day were made. An attempt was made to grab Jack Taylor.

We all said 'Are we going to stop these lorries or what?' Really we couldn't have done, there were too many police, army and police. Then they charged, snatch squads went in. Three bobbies, when they saw Jack Taylor, they jumped on him. He was down the embankment at the side of the road, on the field. We got him by the arms and pulled him back. ()

I was stood on my own in the field doing nothing. I was watching the lorries come past [and could see this struggle with Jack Taylor out of the corner of my eye]. Next thing, they jumped me, pulled me to the ground, gave me some thump and kick. The next minute I was being dragged along the road, handcuffed behind my back. They put me on the bus and one undid the handcuffs. When he saw the Chief Inspector, he tried to handcuff me to a rail. The cuffs wouldn't work so he said 'Just hold your hands there as if you've got them on'. So he knew I wasn't a rogue, because if I had been I could have walloped him. I don't agree with violence. I'd go there

and support my union and shout but if it came to it, I couldn't really hurt someone. They took me to Sheffield and charged me with unlawful assembly. I was shaken up about it, I'd never been in trouble with the police before. They charged me and finger-printed me, and then locked me in a cell until 5.00 p.m. Then they took us all to Rotherham, put us in a compound there. It was terrible. There were 20 or more blokes sat around there, most of them had busted arms, broken ribs, busted faces, which police had done to them - obviously they'd not all fallen over. One oldish bloke said he'd gone to the aid of a copper hit by a stone and some other copper jumped him, kicked hell out of him, dragged him across a dyke face down, busted his glasses, gave him some more boot and chucked him in the van. Another lad got his head smashed in and his kneecap nearly broke, they'd taken him to hospital. The nurses asked him how he did it. He said 'these bastards have hit me'. After they patched him up they got him in the van and stamped on him between the legs. Anyhow, they brought us handcuffed into the special court they set up that night. There were pickets outside. We were treated like war heroes, everybody was cheering us. That's something my parents can be proud of. (LL)

LL was bailed on a 9.00 p.m. - 7.00 a.m. curfew. A short time later an additional charge of riot was preferred against him. This carries a life sentence. His case never came to court. In September 1985, after the acquittal of the first batches of Orgreave pickets on the same charge, the charges against him were dropped.

Back at Orgreave, most of the action at the Catcliffe end had subsided. The main action reverted to the Handsworth end. Another shove had occurred when the first convoy left at 9.30. It was followed by two more mounted police charges in five minutes, the second of which involved 42 horses. Behind the horses ran the shield units, chasing the crowd with batons drawn. In the first of these charges Arthur Scargill was felled and concussed. The pickets regrouped and the crowd was not dispersed until after 1.00 p.m. Police statements read to the court during the Orgreave trials indicated that the police lost count of the number of charges made into the crowd after the fifth at 9.30. During one of them, another Thurcrofter was arrested and also later charged with riot.

Changes in Policing and Picketing

Policing and picketing entered a new phase with Orgreave. Numbers on both sides had never been so high. Despite the climate of fear, the number of pickets going from Thurcroft rose from a daily average of 50 to 70, and the total number of pickets present on June 18 was about 10,000. The police put their own numbers that day as 4,000-plus officers trained for riot duty.

From the policing viewpoint, Thurcrofters saw Orgreave in terms of a double escalation. On the one hand, the police had gone over to a more aggressive strategy (constant use of truncheons) in response to which, picketing changed too.

We wanted to stand on the gate [at Orgreave]. They wouldn't let us stand on the gate. So we tried to push our way to the gate. Then they brought the [tall] shields out and [when you got up to them] there were other policemen behind going over the top of the shields with their truncheons

and hitting people. So what do you do when you're just in T-shirts, jeans and trainers? We dropped back. I personally never threw a stone the whole length of the strike, but a few started slinging stones. Then the police got onto dogs and horses. [And so it went on.] (F)

On the other hand, the policy of 'taking prisoners' was now associated with bringing charges of severely deterrent character against those arrested. Keeping people on restrictive bail conditions on minor charges might take those individuals off the picket line, but did not scare others from replacing them.

[Up to then] they just wanted pickets out of the way. They weren't worried about whether or not they were ever found guilty. They had the intention of arresting as many people as they could just to keep them off the picket line. When we'd been picketing and it was time to go home, the coppers have stopped us from going and provoked us, hoping somebody would have a go so that they could get them in the van, in court, put these conditions on again. (LL)

Early on, in Notts, there'd been a sweeping-in tactic. They'd sweep people in on some barmy charge - sometimes threatening behaviour but usually just breach of the peace or obstruction. For the first few weeks the attitude of a lot of pickets was 'They can't do this to us, this is a free country' and all this misguided rubbish. After that we started to not allow ourselves to be arrested so easily because the original tactics were getting rid of hundreds and hundreds of pickets. The South Yorkshire bobbies brought in this tactic of plain intimidation. Their attitude was 'give them a good kicking'. Usually, they only arrested people they had to - if there was blood all over them and they had to justify it being there. For Orgreave I think they decided part way through that they were going to make a thing out of it. 'Take prisoners, Mr. Simpson', everyone heard that on the TV. They used that several days at Orgreave and precisely what they wanted the prisoners for was to set them up with unlawful assembly, riot and affray and see if that could act as a big intimidation against the strike in general. You weren't any longer going on a picket line and risking a good hiding and a £200 fine, you were risking a life in prison. Because Leon Brittan came on the TV and said that's what he was going to do. So to fit those charges they carried out the arrests as well, not so much to get the pickets out of the way but to intimidate the union from being involved in those situations. (C)



B. Gibbon

Thurcroft Village Band, Rotherham Miners' Gala 1985