


The battle at Broadwater Farm

Twenty years after
the ferocious riot
in Tottenham
culminated in the
murder of police
officer Keith
Blakelock, Tony
Judge recalls the
events surrounding
his death.

 The riot on the Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham on the night of Sunday the 6th of September 1985 turned out to be the high water mark of inner-city disorders that had become a regular occurrence in the first half of the decade. The sheer ferocity of what the ultra-Left called “the uprising”, culminating in the horrific murder of PC Keith Blakelock as he tried to protect fire fighters from the mob, shocked the nation and forced the Government to ensure that forces had contingency plans to deal with any recurrence of the scenes witnessed that night.

The events at Broadwater Farm left Metropolitan police officers with a sense of burning anger at what they regarded as a collective failure by the local commanders to anticipate the threat of a riot at an estate that the commissioner, Sir Kenneth Newman, had identified as a “symbolic location” where trouble was to be expected. Twenty years later, talking to officers who were there on the night, I found that their bitterness remains.

Writing in *Police* after the event, I said:

“In the early hours of the next day, as the battered survivors of the shield lines were at last permitted to set foot on the estate (after the rioters had grown tired of their deadly sport and gone home) the frustration and bitterness of rank and file police officers shook senior officers, who found themselves facing bluntly expressed accusations of incom-

petence for what the officers saw as a succession of disastrous strategic blunders.”

The estate was notorious for crime and drugs dealing. Typical of the tower block estates of the 1960s, it had an air of looming menace for local officers who were expected to police it. It soon became a ‘hard to let’ estate, with problem families moving into flats vacated by tenants only too happy to leave. The blocks were linked by high walkways, which were to prove an ideal launching platform for the petrol bombs and missiles that rained upon the police that night. Strangers were not welcome, and many residents lived in fear of the gang of youths in combat fatigues and black berets who hung around the derelict shopping centre in the middle of the estate. To this element, the police were the enemy, and throughout that summer, the resident police team of eight officers had been subjected to sporadic attacks.

The local commander, Chf Supt Colin Couch insisted that The Farm was not a no-go area, but it was no longer safe to send police vehicles there, and patrolling had been reduced to two officers walking together once a day. Of the eight permanent officers who made up the Estate team, four had been assaulted in the week before the riot. The team kept a daily diary, in which senior officers were constantly warned that The Farm was a calamity in waiting. One senior officer dismissed the fears of the men and women on the ground as “hysterical”.

Only two days before The Farm went up in flames, the Met’s newspaper *The Job* trumpeted the success of a “unique system of community policing” on the estate, devised by Colin Couch. He and Haringey Council were anxious to portray the estate as a model of good relations. Princess Diana had paid a much-publicised visit to the Youth Association there, the haunt of the same youths who were terrorising the residents. No mention was made of the fact that the last survivor in the shopping precinct, an Asian shop-owner, had been driven out of business by constant thefts and racial harassment from members of the Youth Association.

On the same day that the glowing report of the “new” Broadwater Farm was splashed in *The Job*, the estate’s policing team sent a report to Chf Supt Couch. It said: “The usual missile throwing and anti-white and anti-police abuse has continued with renewed vigour. It is a case of waiting to see if the estate youths try to copy their Brixton counterparts.”

A week earlier, Brixton had witnessed two successive nights of rioting that far exceeded the mayhem of the previous disturbances there in 1981. It followed a police raid on the home of a wanted criminal in which a woman had been shot by a police inspector and seriously wounded. The police station was attacked by petrol bombers; shops were looted and set ablaze. Motorists were dragged from their cars and beat-

The battle at Broadwater Farm

en-up. Over fifty cars were destroyed by fire. More than 200 arrests were made as the police, using the tactics based on mounting experience of spontaneous rioting, gained the upper hand and restored order. Lambeth Council, led at the time by 'Red' Ted Knight, sided with the rioters and blamed the police for the violence. Local community leaders and many grateful residents praised the police for their firm response to the looters and fire-raisers.

Sir Kenneth Newman became commissioner shortly before the 1985 riots, after commanding the Royal Ulster Constabulary in its battle against terrorists. No chief officer in the country had a greater understanding of public order

issues. On taking charge of the Met he had insisted that there should be a contingency plan for outbreaks of disorder on all the estates identified as hot spots. The plan for Broadwater stressed the vital importance of gaining control of the overhead walkways, warning that if this were not achieved, rioters would bombard the police with missiles and make it impossible to move reinforcements around the estate in police vehicles. This plan was totally ignored on the night of the riot.

When he arrived on the scene just after midnight, Sir Kenneth demanded to know why the police had not "taken the high ground". The answer was simple; the rioters had been in possession

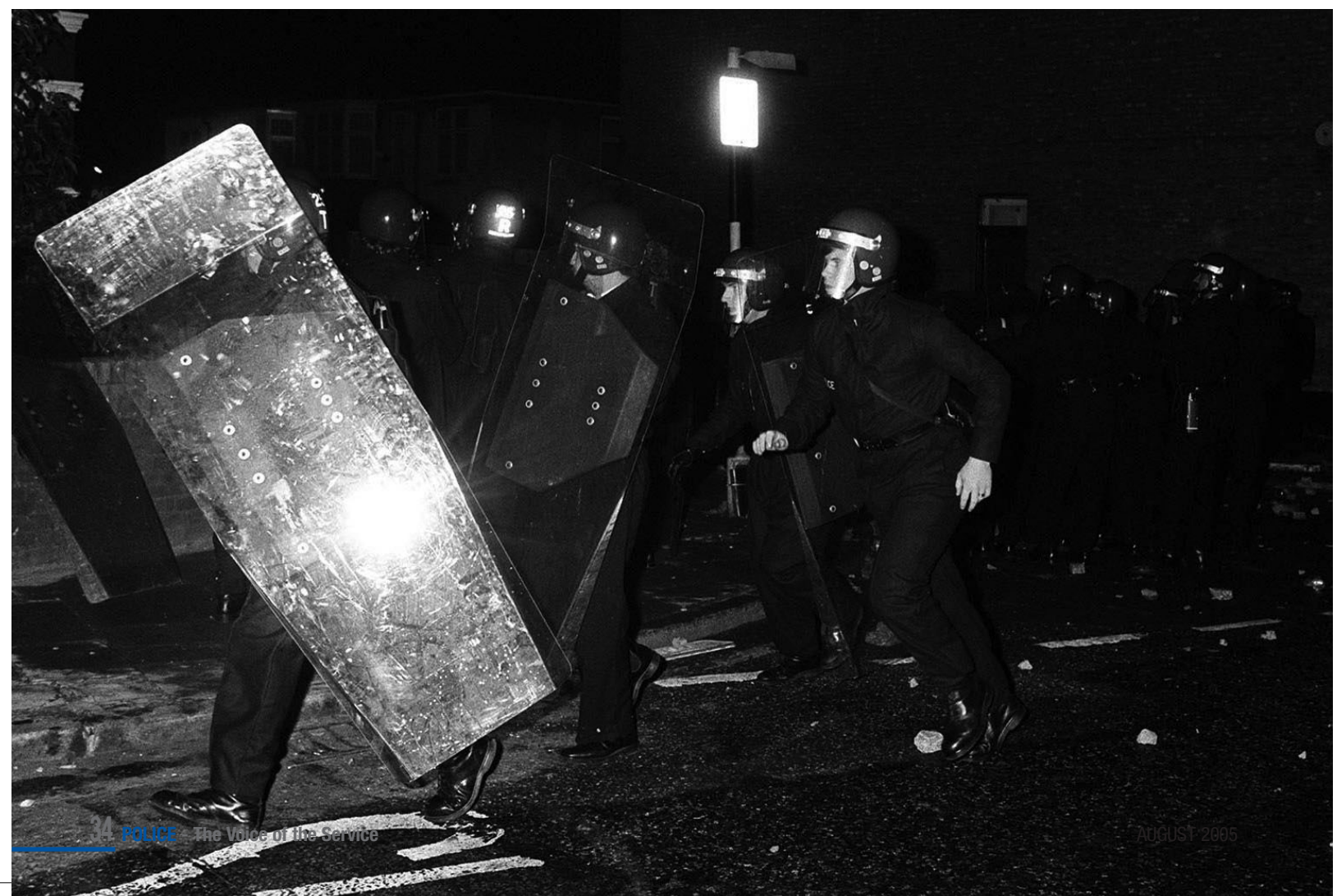
of the walkways all through the previous day.

The spark that ignited the powder keg came on October 5, when police raided a house near the estate in search of a wanted man. During the raid, the householder, Mrs Cynthia Jarrett, the mother of a prominent member of the Youth Association, collapsed and died. From that tragic moment, the probability of a full-scale riot became a certainty.

In spite of the obvious link between Mrs Jarrett and The Farm, the senior officers did not see the estate as the likely focal point for disorder. They were far more concerned that rioters would come out of the Farm and start looting the Wood Green shopping centre, two miles away.

The Farm only came into police planning because of the perceived need to stop youths moving off the estate, which on the afternoon of October 6 was virtually cordoned off. Meanwhile, support units were drafted in to Wood Green. PC Blakelock, a community beat officer, was part of a contingent sent from Muswell Hill to protect business premises in Wood Green High Road.

All the indications coming from the estate were that "the youth" were gathered in force, augmented by supporters from a wide area of north London and further afield. Their objective was to entice the police into a trap, where they would be easy targets for the petrol bombers and stone throwers. The majority view of the



officers involved in the operation was that an early show of force by Police Support Units in full riot gear, backed up with vehicles, would have enabled the police to take control of the central areas, but this was not done.

In the late afternoon and early evening, fires were lit, cars and other property were damaged, and because of the increasing threat to the safety of residents, the police began to move in, along with fire fighters. Immediately, the mob launched its barrage. During the evening, shotgun blasts were heard and police officers and journalists reported being hit by shotgun pellets. When this was reported to Sir Kenneth, he immediately authorised the use of "plastic bullets" and CS Gas, which had never been used on the British mainland. Officers trained in their use were brought to The Farm but, in spite of pleading from the police units under constant attack, they were not used.

PC Blakelock was killed shortly after 10pm. He was protecting fire fighters who were dealing with a fire at the foot of a narrow stairwell when rioters attacked. The officer slipped and fell and was immediately set upon and hacked with what was said to be a machete. He sustained horrific injuries and was found to be dead on arrival at hospital.

The local MP, the late Bernie Grant, said after the riot that the police had received "the bloody good hiding" they deserved. Asked if he regretted the murder of a police officer, Grant retorted; "Who said it was murder? He could have been stabbed by another policeman." This contrasted with the dignified response of Keith Blakelock's widow, Elizabeth. Asked what she thought of her husband's murderers, she said; "I feel pity for them. I don't think they can know what they have done."



PC Keith Blakelock, QGM

After the riot, police officers flooded *Police* with accounts of their experiences. One officer, writing on behalf of himself and six named colleagues, said:

"We stood our ground, as instructed, for several hours under a hail of bricks and petrol bombs. At times the youths came close enough to hit our shields with machetes. Twice, the 'snatch squads' were sent in, twice when the rioters were too far away. On both occasions, officers with long shields were ordered to 'stand firm'; this meant that officers with short shields had no back-up.

"We were bombarded from above with missiles. Surely we should have moved backwards or at least have had three men or ten man overheads to afford protection? I saw three officers on fire. Not one fire extinguisher could be found. These fires were put out by other officers with their hands.

"The sight of the D11 Specialist Weapons Unit lifted morale and a great cheer went up from all the officers. How disheartened we felt when it became apparent that the order to use D11 had been rescinded.

"There also appeared to be a breakdown in the control of the units. We were on duty for 24 hours and got nothing but a cup of soup and a packet of biscuits. No relief arrived although many shield units were on standby nearby. I heard the crew that was ambushed calling for help on their radios for more than five minutes but the only response was that standby units were to remain at YD and were not to respond. It appears that officers have become expendable in order not to provoke rioters."

Sir Kenneth and the Met hierarchy dismissed all criticism of

their handling of the riot as "the wisdom of hindsight". Newman said that police public order training stressed the need for minimal force and the operational commanders were not "in a Gung-ho mood to charge Hill 29 and such-like". It was not surprising, therefore, that the commissioner faced an angry audience when he addressed a crowded meeting of the Metropolitan Police Federation a month after the riot. A Peckham constable spoke for his colleagues when he told Sir Kenneth that senior officers that night "permitted our men to be humiliated. He said:

"We heard call after call for assistance. We pleaded with our inspector to call the so-called control at Wood Green. We were only a hundred yards away and they did not know we were there. He refused to call them. We could have crushed this riot because there were so many units standing by. We are sick to death of appeasement by senior officers frightened of politicians. We were told not to make arrests but to stand and take everything."

After the riot, PC Blakelock and the other members of his unit were awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal.

The "full investigation" promised by Sir Kenneth reported its findings some months later, but the report was never made public.

Twenty years have passed, but the Met has never forgotten Keith Blakelock. Three men were convicted of his killing, but the Court of Appeal quashed the verdicts. The murder investigation has been reopened on several occasions and recently it was suggested that an object unearthed in a search might have been the murder weapon. The one positive to emerge from a night of mayhem and tragedy is that nothing like it has been witnessed in Britain since then.