

## Handsworth revolution

Rioting reaches  
Birmingham, 1985



## FLASHPOINT

In 1981, rioting in Britain's inner cities created a blueprint for civil unrest that has lasted 20 years. **Philip Watson** looks back at a summer of discontent

In many ways, it was a halcyon summer. Prince Charles married Lady Diana Spencer at St Paul's Cathedral and the ripples of flag-waving monarchist hysteria lasted long into the following decade. It was the long, hot summer of Ian Botham's heroic match-winning centuries against the Aussies and Sebastian Coe's world-record-beating middle-distance runs. It was the season that saw the rise of New Romantics, style magazines, designer labels and the SDP. The summer of 1981 seemed like a period of unrivalled change and optimism.

And then there were the riots in Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side and Southall. Sparked by an arsenal of antagonisms that encompassed racial discrimination, police brutality, high unemployment

and inner-city decline, the urban unrest of that summer altered the political landscape of Britain forever.

Certainly, there had been racial conflicts in British cities before. There were riots in Liverpool in 1919 when white soldiers returning from the war found a shortage of jobs and vented their anger on the inhabitants of Toxteth, the oldest black community in Britain. Riots took place in the city for similar reasons in 1948; 10 years later there were clashes on the streets of Nottingham and London's Notting Hill following the first years of large-scale immigration from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. There were violent incidents, too, during demonstrations against the National Front in the Seventies.

But the "hot summer of '81" was pivotal because it saw an escalation of these tensions on an unprecedented scale. During four nights of violence in Toxteth, more than 600 police officers were injured and nearly 150 buildings burned down. More than 1,000 young people – both black and white – besieged the police station at Manchester's Moss Side. Not only were petrol bombs thrown for the first time on mainland Britain and CS gas employed by the police in response, but the riots of 1981 proved incontrovertibly that Britain was violently fragmented and ill-at-ease with itself.

As much as Mrs Thatcher trumpeted her monetarist free market revolution, large sections of the community were acutely aware that Britain was being hit by



## The 1981 riots were a wake-up call that finally put race, poverty and policing on the agenda

its worst recession for 50 years. Factories were closing and unemployment was up to nearly three million. The inner cities were riven by neglect and decay (one of the summer's biggest hits was "Ghost Town" by The Specials). There was discrimination in employment, education and housing. And what little discussion took place about these issues was framed by the language of the civil-rights struggles in the US during the Sixties; the debate was inflamed by such pejoratives as "racism", "coloureds" and the "ghetto".

The 1981 riots were, therefore, a deafening wake-up call, a clamouring shout to the Establishment that finally put race, poverty and policing on the agenda.

**Police on my back**  
Clockwise from top left: up close and personal in Brixton, London, 1981; police move in as looting starts in Brixton Road; a police van is overturned in Brixton; hand-to-hand combat, Brixton; policeman injured in Toxteth, Liverpool, 1981; fire in Toxteth

As the clashes spread throughout the summer to 27 other areas across the country, including such unlikely hotbeds of civil disobedience as Battersea in South London, Bedford, Chester and High Wycombe, pictures of bricks, bottles and burning cars filled television screens night after night – in 1981, whatever Gil Scott-Heron might have claimed, the revolution was televised. With these images came the rapid realisation that the nature of British society had shifted – and that large swathes of it felt excluded and aggrieved.

Despite Mrs Thatcher's intransigence and disregard, and Norman Tebbit's immortal observation that, "My father

did not riot – he got on his bike and looked for work," change came quickly. The so-called "sus law" (giving police indiscriminate powers to stop and search suspects in the streets), which led to many violent and wrongful arrests, was rapidly repealed. The damning Scarman Report into the policing of inner cities forced a radical shake-up in attitudes and, eventually, legislative reform. The system of investigating complaints against the police, which began operating only in 1976, was overhauled. The recruitment of ethnic minorities into the police became a new priority; in 1981 only 110 metropolitan officers, out of a total force of 24,000, were non-white. A process of



co-operation, rather than confrontation, with local communities began.

Yet the summer of 1981 transformed the way Britain protested forever. Brixton and Toxteth led to even more violent clashes in the Handsworth district of Birmingham and, in London, Tottenham and Brixton (again) in 1985. But they also created the template for the miners' strike, the disputes at Wapping in 1987 and the poll tax riots of 1990. And while the economic climate today is much more favourable than it was 20 years ago and police are better trained, equipped and controlled, the riots of 1981 have also influenced the violence we have witnessed this summer in Bradford, Oldham, Burnley, Leeds and Stoke-on-Trent.

It's true that the causes today are more complex – despite the fact that such familiar factors as the dubious actions of

the National Front and the inability of the police to command community confidence have no doubt contributed to the unrest. For one, the violence of this summer has been motivated by race, rather than simply directed against the police. And, for all the political infighting, it has sometimes seemed that the trouble has been sparked by little more than Asian youths exercising their street muscle or right-wing agitators out for a ruck. There is some evidence to support *The Times's* suggestion that “the desire to riot is becoming the cause of the riot”.

Yet, as in 1981, these riots cannot be dismissed lightly. It is significant that this year's violence has involved not black Londoners or Liverpoolians but Asians from the North of England. There was one evening of violence in Brixton in July after a protest against the police shooting

of a man armed with a cigarette lighter in the shape of a gun, but otherwise the only flames seen on the streets have been those used to light up locally decriminalised reefers. This summer's riots have been about a previously largely passive young Asian community asserting itself – albeit destructively – in much the same way as Britain's Afro-Caribbeans did 20 years earlier. They are about the same frustration, disaffection and mistrust.

The riots of 1981 and 2001 are symbols of a continuing awareness that for some sections of British society, as the *NME* put it this year, “violence is their clearest voice”. It is a sentiment that echoes Martin Luther King's cry that “a riot is at bottom the language of the unheard”. If the summer of 1981 teaches us anything, it is that New Labour chooses not to listen at its peril. **PHIL HARRIS**

## Babylon's burning

From top, left to right: riot police battle anti-capitalist protesters, City of London, 1999; Winston gets turfed, May Day 2000; the police make their presence felt in central London a year later; a Muslim woman covers her mouth as a school burns, Oldham, 2001



## RIOT UP YOUR STREET

Flashpoints in mainland Britain since the summer of 1981



### North London 1985

Rioting erupts on the Broadwater Farm estate after West Indian Cynthia Jarret dies in a police raid. Winston Silcott is wrongfully imprisoned for the murder of PC Blacklock.

### East London 1987

Rupert Murdoch's News International sacks 6,000 workers at its Wapping printing plant, prompting a year-long picket punctuated by pitched battles between police and protesters.

### City of London 1999

To coincide with the G7 summit in Cologne, up to 10,000 anti-capitalists protest in the City, leading to injuries, more than 50 arrests and £2m of damage.

### Welling 1993

In reaction to racist activity in the area (and, specifically, the murder of Stephen Lawrence), 50,000 march against the BNP HQ. They are met by mounted police. **PHIL HARRIS**

### Central London 1990

A peaceful march against the Poll Tax by 100,000 people (including Julian Cope in a Big Bird outfit) ends in chaos at Trafalgar Square. Over £400,000 worth of damage is done.

### Central London 1994

Violence erupts in Hyde Park when police try to prevent partying (with the offending “repetitive beats”) after demonstrations against the Criminal Justice Bill. More than 30 people are injured.

### Orgreave 1984

Mounted police supported by riot police charge picket lines at the Orgreave coke works during the miners' strike. More than 90 of the 5,000-plus protestors are arrested; 28 pickets and 41 policemen are injured.

### Oldham, Leeds, Burnley, Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent 2001

Racial tension in Oldham leads to two nights of violent rioting and fighting between Asian youths and police, resulting in injuries to 15 officers and 10 civilians. A summer of racial conflict follows, during which hundreds of people are arrested.