

# Mum made us leave the stand She always wanted to miss the

25 years ago, the Bradford fire claimed 56 lives – and was witnessed at first hand by a horrified 12-year-old Gabby Logan. Here, she recalls the fateful decision that saved her

by **Antonia Hoyle**

It was supposed to be a day of celebration. Bradford City Football Club were playing their last game of the season against mid-table Lincoln City. It was a formality – Bradford were runaway leaders of the old-style Third Division and the trophy had been presented to the team before they had even set foot on the pitch.

The sun was shining, promotion was assured and the 11,076 supporters packed into the club's Valley Parade ground were so jubilant that, as the first half progressed, they hardly noticed the billows of smoke that started to spiral up from beneath the seats in stand G. But within four minutes, the 76-year-old wooden structure had become a fierce inferno as flames swept the length of the stand. The atmosphere switched suddenly from joy to terror as men, women and children struggled to escape.

The lucky ones scrambled to the safety of the pitch. Others were not so fortunate. Some died as they tried to crawl under the turnstiles. An elderly couple burned to death in their seats. One man, engulfed in flames, made it on to the pitch but later died in hospital.

Those not directly involved could simply watch in paralysed horror. Fifty-six people died in the blaze and 265 were injured. The Bradford City disaster on May 11, 1985, highlighted the serious safety failings at Britain's often dilapidated stadiums and changed for ever the way supporters watch the game.

Among the crowd that day was a young Gabby Yorath, the then 12-year-old daughter of Bradford City's coach Terry Yorath – who himself was injured, though not seriously, as he bravely helped to rescue trapped fans.

Gabby is now better known as respected BBC sports presenter Gabby Logan – host of sports magazine show Inside Sport and a BBC Radio 5 Live show. She is married to Kenny Logan, a former Scottish rugby international, and is the mother of four-year-old twins Reuben and Lois.

Like her father, Gabby will for ever have vivid memories of what she saw that day. Now, to mark the 25th anniversary of the disaster, she has made a haunting Radio 4 documentary about the fire in which she relives her experiences. 'Going through the day moment by moment was tough. To share those memories was quite moving,' she says. 'As a 12-year-old I didn't fully understand the gravity of what had happened. This programme has helped me put into perspective what my dad must have gone through and made me feel really, really sad for him.'

'It made me realise that you can have absolutely no control over things that happen in your life. I went to Valley Parade that day expecting to go to a football match and instead I came away from one of the biggest sporting disasters this country has ever known.'

'An experience like that makes you aware that, as much as you can try to be safe, sometimes things happen that you can't legislate for. In that respect, the Bradford fire has shaped me as a person. It has made me someone who tries not to worry about failure. Life is too short. I spoke to one of the last men

to get out of the stand alive,' she says. 'His proximity to the flames was incredible. He literally had fire at his back, and yet he still stopped to help another lady and a boy who were trapped. It is important that we remember the heroic work done by both the emergency services and civilians that day. I think a younger generation of listeners will be amazed to hear what happened. The Bradford fire sometimes gets overlooked, with Hillsborough being the football disaster that most people remember.'

Gabby had grown up with football. Her father, a Cardiff boy, played for Leeds, Coventry, Tottenham and Wales before moving his family to Canada to join the Vancouver Whitecaps. In 1982 they returned to Britain and he began his coaching career with Bradford.

Terry, the club's assistant coach, was determined the last match of the season before his team went up would be a family occasion. He took his parents, his wife Christine and children Gabby, Louise and Daniel to what should have been the crowning game of the season.

'We were very excited,' recalls Gabby. 'There was a great sense of community and family and a realisation of how far we'd come as a club. Because there were so many of us, we couldn't all fit into the box we normally sat in, so Daniel, Louise and I sat outside.'

The whistle blew at 3pm. At 3.38pm,

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# just minutes before half time. crowds. She saved our lives



**INFERNO:** Fans watch helplessly as flames engulf Valley Parade on May 11, 1985. Below left: Gabby – in striped top – with her sister Louise a few months after the Bradford disaster

didn't know what to say. In the immediate aftermath Dad was thrown into this surreal life of funerals and inquests which probably took him away from the reality. He wasn't immediately introspective. It was all a process. It's not something he willingly starts talking about.'

Yet he was determined to shield his children from the harsh realities of what he had seen. 'He saw and smelt and heard things that he didn't want to talk to his children about,' she says. Her younger brother, Jordan, was conceived shortly after the fire. 'He was something of a miracle; an unexpected gift,' she says.

Gabby adds: 'Nobody wants their parents to be sad but kids are resilient and bounce back. The day after the fire my sister and I wanted to go to our gymnastics class. None of the other parents could believe we wanted to be there but we didn't fully realise what we'd been through.'

It took two weeks, and another tragic football accident, before the fire's full horror hit Gabby.

**T**hree weeks after Bradford, on May 29, Gabby watched scenes from the European Cup Final between Liverpool and Juventus at Heysel Stadium in Brussels on television. A stadium wall collapsed before kick-off, killing 39 people and injuring 600. 'My parents were having friends for dinner at the time,' she says. 'We stopped and watched the whole scene unfold. It was awful. It made us realise again how close we'd come to disaster.'

An inquiry into the Bradford fire – held the following month – heard that it had probably been started by a cigarette dropped through the stand's wooden boards on to piles of rubbish that had collected underneath over the years. The inquiry was to have a profound impact on football. Timber stands were banned, and many other safety measures were introduced.

Valley Parade was reopened in December 1986 but the findings of the inquiry into its fire were not enough, of course, to prevent the Hillsborough Disaster in Sheffield in April 1989, when 96 Liverpool fans were crushed to death at the FA Cup semi-final.

'There was disappointment that we hadn't managed to cover everything,' Gabby says. 'There are still old grounds but even the lower-league stadiums are safer, better and more comfortable. Out of the Bradford disaster came something very positive.'

Gabby says her father Terry, now 60 and retired, is pleased she has made the documentary, even though they rarely speak of the tragedy.

'We don't relive it,' she says. 'It's not something that needs to come up. We're fortunate. So many supporters went into the stadium that day not realising that they wouldn't come out. I always thank God that my family did. But I know we came very close.'

● *Archive On 4 – The Bradford Fire: A Day That Will Live With Me For Ever* is on BBC Radio 4 on Saturday May 1 at 8pm. Gabby also presents a daily show, Monday-Friday, 12pm-2pm, on BBC Radio 5 Live.

with the score 0-0, Christine waved to her children to go to the players' lounge for half-time refreshments. 'Mum always wanted to avoid the crowd by leaving a minute or two before half time,' Gabby says. It was a habit that may have saved their lives. Had they left it another five minutes, they would have been trapped in the mass of supporters trying to vacate the stand.

**A**s it was, they had barely arrived in the players' lounge at the back of the stand when a member of the club's staff told them a fire had started. 'At first nobody was worried,' says Gabby, even though her brother Daniel had disappeared. 'Although he was only nine, everyone in the club knew him and it wasn't a big deal,' she says.

But by 3.44pm, smoke had started to fill the stand. Wearing matching pale yellow and orange trouser suits, the sisters were easily recognisable, and Christine guided them to safety through an outside door and on to the street outside. But they were still missing Daniel. 'Mum was frantic,' says Gabby. 'We were being evacuated from a burning building and as far as she knew Daniel was still

inside.' He was found in Terry's office a couple of minutes later by Bradford striker Don Goodman. The boy had been searching for his father's supply of Mars Bars. 'He'd been trying to save on his pocket money,' says Gabby.

Having been escorted off the pitch, other players roamed the building, looking for loved ones. 'We had this naive optimism that everyone would either make their way down to the pitch, or out of the back door like we had,' Gabby adds. Her father, meanwhile, had been trying frantically to urge others to safety. 'As one of the guardians of the club, he had a natural responsibility,' says Gabby. 'He was part of its fabric.'

Yorath, acknowledged as one of the heroes of the day, heard the trapped supporters' screams of agony, powerless to do anything to save them. He walked into a ground-level bar where drinkers were oblivious to the disaster developing around them. Yorath screamed at them to leave and went back into the stadium. But by then there was a wall of thick smoke and fire. He threw a chair at a window 20ft above street level and jumped out. 'He looked a mess. But he was alive,' says Gabby. 'I'd seen him bloodied and battered on the football pitch before so that



aspect of the day wasn't traumatic. Mum was amazed that his was the only injury sustained by anyone we knew. Luckily, my grandparents had walked down on to the pitch and were safe.' Acrid smoke quickly filled the narrow streets which surrounded the stadium. Still, recalls Gabby, the atmosphere was strangely muted. 'There wasn't any screaming, or a stampede to escape,' she says.

It wasn't until the Yorath family gathered in a pub 40 yards away from the stadium that they realised the scale of the disaster developing around them. The pub was filled

with Bradford fans – watching live pictures of the blaze on the pub's television. Gabby says: 'In those days lower-league matches weren't always filmed. But it was a promotion day and Yorkshire Television was there.'

'I'll never forget watching it on television and then seeing the inferno through the window. The sirens were relentless and flames dominated the skyline.' Her parents struggled to make sense of the tragedy. 'They couldn't lie and tell us nobody had died,' she says. 'They hadn't experienced anything like this before. They