

Testimonies

ANTI-FASCISTS

Source A: Reg Weston

Extracts from an eyewitness account by Reg Weston, Higham resident and life-time member of the National Union of Journalists

‘We came to the tube entrance, together with hundreds of people who had been on the same train. There we stopped.

The pavements were packed, the whole street - Aldgate High Street - was packed solid. Crowds were everywhere as far as we could see. It was impossible to make any progress. Parked in the middle of the street, towering over the crowds was a line of tramcars - marooned and empty. They could not have moved, even if anyone had wanted to move them.

The rumour went that the first tram in the line had been deliberately driven to the point by an anti-fascist tram driver, placed there to form a barricade against the fascists.

As we stood blocked from moving on there came the sound of shattering glass. One of the big plate glass windows of the store at Gardiners Corner was smashed in. Rumour said that a policeman had been thrown through it, but it was probably just a victim to the sheer pressure of the crowds. There was not a single policeman in sight. We did not see one for hours.’

‘As I said, I was at the Battle of Cable Street. But that was not literally true. My comrades and I never had a chance to get within a mile of Cable Street on that afternoon. In between us and Cable Street was a solid mass of people. Estimates afterwards said there was anything up to half a million people out on the streets of the East End that day. But no one could possibly have counted them.

So we stood there, packed like sardines, for an hour or so while all sorts of rumours and tales floated through the crowds. No one could say exactly what was happening. But we gathered that the first protesters had been up early in the day and had been preparing a reception for both the police and the fascists long before either had arrived.’

Source B: Joe Jacobs

Extracts from an eyewitness account by Joe Jacobs, a Communist Party activist in the East End. The extracts are taken from "Out of the Ghetto", Joe Jacobs; London 1978, & Phoenix Press, London 1991.

'Came the Big Day. I was up fairly early and after a good breakfast, I went as arranged, to my sector of the front, which was Gardiners Corner. Our headquarters were in Manningtree Street, behind the fire station in Commercial Road, about sixty yards from Gardiners itself. We had a first-aid post as well as facilities for dishing out leaflets, banners, posters etc. We were equipped to receive messages and runners to carry messages to all the other sectors, particularly in Cable Street, where we anticipated there might be a lot of problems.'

'Around midday, the police were beginning to show their hand. There were skirmishes going on all over the place. I was told that down in Cable Street, which is quite a narrow street, it was already impossible to pass. By about one o'clock there was a tram stuck on the rails, right in the middle of the road junction at Gardiners Corner. Young people were perched on all the lampposts and any other vantage point, displaying posters and directing the crowd towards the weak spots in the front with the police. The crowds were roaring 'They shall not pass.'

The police were making periodic baton charges, both mounted and on foot, in an effort to keep the crowds back. Many people were being arrested. It took several policemen to escort anyone arrested to the station. This was because they were not equipped with the number of vehicles and other crowd control technology that exists now. As anyone was grabbed by the police there were determined attempts by others to secure their release. So each arrest meant that a large number of policemen would have to leave the main cordons, thus weakening them. For every ten arrests about a hundred policemen were engaged in getting them to the police stations. After a while the senior officers realised what was happening and the arrests almost stopped. They were content to baton charge and inflict heavy wounds on the front ranks of the demonstrators. This they did with great effect.'

'It appeared that the police were trying to force a way through Cable Street to clear a path for Mosley and his supporters. I was never in Cable Street that day, so I had to hear and read all about what happened there later.'

Source C: Fenner Brockway

Secretary of the Independent Labour Party, in a message to the Home Secretary

‘There are a quarter of a million people here, they are peaceful and unarmed, but they are determined that Mosley's provocative march shall not pass. If you permit it, yours will be the responsibility for the serious consequences’

Source D: Angela Davis

Angela's mother Millie was 17 in 1936. Here, Angela tells us what she was told by Millie, who disobeyed her religious father and, with her two sisters, went to Aldgate.

‘The girls all went out with pepper pots in their coat pockets to throw pepper into the faces of the fascists. They were all prepared to literally do battle with them. They wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with the dockers – working people the same as they all were, and socialists.’

Source E: Alf Seller

Alf was 10 years old in 1936 and lived in the East End. He described the atmosphere on the day.

‘A lot of talk about this march... everyone was talking about it; you couldn't help to know.’

Describing what he saw at Aldgate: ‘All I know is that when I saw that I thought 'there's gonna be some trouble'’

Source F: Willie Myers

Willie Myers was a 15-year-old anti-fascist. A member of the Young Communist League, he had already been involved in disrupting fascist meetings, and he took part in the resistance at Cable Street. Below is a summary of his recollections.

He describes himself as being "right in the middle of the trouble".

He recalls violent confrontations between protesters and police and a determined effort by local residents, Jewish groups, communists, socialists, trade unionists and dockers to prevent Mosley's Blackshirts entering the East End.

Source G: The Guardian

This description of the barricades was reported by the Guardian newspaper at the time.

‘In Cable Street a crowd seized materials from a builder’s yard and began to construct a barricade. They used corrugated iron, barrels, coal, and glass to construct a barrier, even pulling up paving-stones.’

FASCISTS

Source H: BUF member Arthur Mason

Arthur Mason, along with George Dunlop, ran the Limehouse Branch of the BUF, in Essian Street. He describes his arrival at Royal Mint Street, the intended starting point for the march.

‘Sunday was a tense day, and led by Teddy Brown who had slept in my bed in daytime for a week, several hundred members and supporters made their way to Stepney Green underground station for Royal Mint Street [*which leads into Cable Street*]: and as we left the Tube, the first out were attacked by hundreds of Reds wielding clubs with barbed wire attached. Several of our lads including Tommy Moran caught it, but Tommy put down about a dozen with his fists before going down from a blow from behind. Nevertheless we managed to fight our way through and join our comrades on parade.’

‘4th October 1936 stood out in the minds of those fine lads that are gone, and those who still remain, as one of the greatest days in our Movement’s history.’

Source I: John Charnley

Charnley was a Hull District Leader of the BUF and was one of many fascists who travelled to London that day.

‘There never was a Battle of Cable Street, unless it was the mild effort of the police to prevent the erection of barriers on the route of our proposed march. Peter Whittam and I had taken two parties of Blackshirts from Hull and Leeds, travelling overnight in one of our Bedford trucks we nicknamed ‘agony wagons’. When we arrived, a street fight was already in progress.

We won that scrimmage and eventually made our way to the main assembly point. It has always surprised me that in the heat of battle fear is seldom experienced, but the example and sheer guts of Tommy Moran on that occasion is an event which never loses its clarity. He was a great fighter, and on such occasions was a source of inspiration.’

Source J: Johnny Warburton

Johnny Warburton was 17 years old. This was his first Blackshirt march.

‘I had been in London only six weeks, having spent the previous three years as a lone semi-active Blackshirt in a small Lancashire village. I had joined the BUF at 14, saying I was 16!

On the day heading to Tower Hill by underground with a group of my new comrades from Clapham Branch, we landed a coach packed with Reds bound for the same destination. Much abuse and fighting talk ensued, but they would not take us on – probably because they only outnumbered us by about three to one.

On arrival there were Blackshirts everywhere and as we lined up, along the ranks came the head-bandaged, bloody, smiling Tommy Moran, whom I knew slightly from the North (...). After the Leader’s inspection, the march westwards, and the dismissal, many of us made our way to National HQ in Great Smith Street, where Mosley appeared at an upstairs window.

Source K: Fred Shepherd

Shepherd was a young BUF cadet who was helping the Shoreditch Branch “hold the pitch” at Aske Street where Mosley was due to speak.

‘When the news came through that the march and meeting had been banned, we had an impromptu march to Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green – another speaking point, where there was a large crowd. Blackshirt discipline ensured that the crowd ultimately dispersed in good order, although feelings were running high.’