

The Battle of Trafalgar Street

The first and most important thing to understand is that the police were adamant the march would go ahead. Those on the lines had this realisation in between breaths, drenched in sweat, crushed. You've seen this scenario before: a small group of out-of-towners, hopelessly outnumbered by antifascists and locals, get boxed in at the train station, are permitted to briefly huddle together drinking tinnies and shouting slogans, and then are hurried back onto the trains. To do anything else would be to provoke carnage.

The marchers having been stuck impotently on the station concourse for well over an hour, the police gave their first indication that today would be different. With an immovable mass of counter demonstrators blocking Queens Road and Surrey Street, locals made their way round to Guildford Road and the streets abutting Terminus Road to ensure the fascists couldn't slip away. For a brief moment, antifascists held a perfect chokehold around the marchers. With ample numbers on all sides, there was simply nowhere to go. A separate group, possibly the Raise The Colours contingent, were trapped in The Sussex Yeoman, putting on a brave face and jeering over the shoulders of their police protectors.

Then word spread at the Terminus Road end that the fascists were being marched down Surrey Street. It was a feint from the police that too many fell for. The far end of Surrey Street was a fortress; the movement from one blockade to another threatened nothing. With only around 80 counter demonstrators left guarding Terminus Road, the police wheeled around and punched a hole through. To be clear: the fascists were nowhere near Terminus Road at this point. Having been safely contained so far, there had been no violence. Just before the manoeuvre, a calm line of counter demonstrators had been standing opposite a calm line of police. With orders given, the police suddenly attacked the line, pushing forward with horses, manhandling those at the front. The antifascist lines resisted but didn't have the numbers. They were forced onto the side street, a pathway down Terminus Road now opened up. Counter demonstrators used an alleyway to slip onto the next side street, where the process was repeated.

Apparently oblivious to the fact that every yard they could move was being hard-won for them by the police, the fascists paraded cheerily down Terminus Road, spitting insults at those now behind a line of police vans. They made it about 100 metres before getting stuck once more at the West Hill Tavern. Forward-thinking comrades had pre-emptively blockaded Seven Dials before the police could cut it off. What followed was around an hour of trade in rumours about their movements. Many onlookers wondered what the police were thinking, trying so forcefully to convey the marchers to a residential area. Meanwhile, the inmates at the Sussex Yeoman were

being evacuated by police. They made a lot of bluster and noise as they were being ferried away, but appeared somewhat self-conscious of the hundreds of locals surrounding them.

Then one of the rumours seemed to stick: police were marching the fascists back toward the station. Several hours after they had arrived, having achieved only gentle exercise so far, you would be forgiven for thinking the sensible thing to do would be to call it a day and get them on their trains. The people of Brighton had given a resounding verdict on these strangers. To maintain order, to keep the groups separate, knowing that the original planned route was a long-lost fantasy, any sane commander would send them home, right?

But in an incomprehensible, last-ditch effort to force these fascists onto the local population, police attempted to march them down Trafalgar Street and into the city. The response from antifascists was rapid, co-ordinated, and admirable. Hundreds outflanked the police and presented a vanguard action outside The Prince Albert. The local knowledge of the streets visibly paid dividends here. As word spread, Trafalgar Street swelled into a defiant mass. Halted once more, the fascists got comfortable under the leaky bridge. Police had two options: turn the marchers around and take the unobstructed route back to the train station, or carve a violent path through a thousand locals. They chose the latter.

First came the crush. Buoyed by their success on Terminus Road, police tried to push counter demonstrators to the side. Trafalgar Street is a very narrow thoroughfare. Even if this plan had succeeded, the corridor they would have achieved would have been enough only for a crocodile-style fascist march, a single-file parade in touching distance of the counter demonstrators, many of whom would have been crushed against the shop windows lining the street. The people of Brighton did not allow this to happen. With remarkable fortitude, young and old, masked and unmasked, and people of all backgrounds resisted this police surge. They held the line under the baking sun, those at the front bearing the brunt of the crush for what seemed like hours, those at the back leading the efforts to push back. It was an extremely dangerous situation, once again provoked by police commanders utterly possessed with moving the march through an impassable object.

Apparently confident they would pass, fascists had been ordered to press on down the road and came within a foot of the antifascist line. Blows might have been traded if anyone was able to move their arms. The police trying to push forward while also being crushed from behind must have wondered what on earth the plan was. Several frontline counter demonstrators nearly fainted in the crush and were somehow guided out by comrades. The reckless operation was beginning to put lives at risk.

Unable to progress even an inch, police were ordered to don helmets and draw batons. Although highly tense, the mass of counter demonstrators had resisted entirely peacefully. With no way to move, they didn't have much of a choice; resistance meant standing where you were and nothing else. Antifascists were struck with batons and thrown perilously to the floor, but still the lines did not shift. Many of those at the front were then directly hit with pepper spray, but for every antifascist who was drawn out of the crush, three more seemed to take their place, while those who had been hit had their eyes washed by their neighbours.

It was an extraordinary display of violence from the police, and in the end it was all for nought. Having assaulted and injured countless locals, the racists having managed a grand total of around 500 steps all day, and finding the way down Trafalgar Street utterly impenetrable, the reality of the situation belatedly dawned on the police. Jubilant cheers went up as police removed their helmets and retreated. Most of the marchers had already taken their cue to slip quietly back up to the station. A handful stayed to posture in their generously sized police enclosure, to the great entertainment of the locals. Once the final few had been waved away on the trains, a party atmosphere overtook the city, and the winners of the Battle of Trafalgar Street marched triumphantly up to the station to join their comrades and neighbours. There are serious questions to be answered about why the police felt so vehemently about the march entering the city that they were prepared to mete out such violence on peaceful counter demonstrators, but even with police doing all the hard work for them, fascists once again learned that Brighton is far, far stronger than they are.