

# Eyewitness, Birmingham, 4pm, Tuesday 9 August 2011

Thom Davies provides photos and commentary

Having driven down the Soho Road in Handsworth, north-west of the city centre, an uneasy atmosphere prevailed. The night before, businesses in the area, renowned for being one of the city's focal points of British-Asian culture, had been vandalised and looted. With the exception of a few brave grocers, most shops by this time had their shutters down, and yet outside the properties, on benches and against the walls, business owners stood waiting, chatting about the previous night's events and wondering what the evening would bring. 'Community'; this is the name we sometimes give to crowds we don't understand. And yet this is the word that sprung to mind as we watched the social interaction on the streets of Soho Road. It was possibly

the safest stretch of public space in the city.

We moved on towards the city centre. The previous night had seen the looting of several high street shops. Although it was approaching rush hour, the roads were eerily quiet. We made our way to the city's famous Bull Ring shopping centre where a line of riot police stood, cordoning off the entrance from the adjoining streets. We were let through the cordon without hesitation; we might be males in our twenties, but our dress alone was enough to convince the police that we weren't a threat. Photographers, journalists and researchers stood out as non-threatening; able to move effortlessly between police lines. Not so for some of the others in the area; youths in sportswear with

Blackberrys in hands were to be feared.

Suddenly there was a crowd's cry behind us. A group of young teenagers rapidly moved towards Corporation Street from behind House of Fraser, and as they rushed past us, we realised they weren't interested in researchers and photographers. Their only aim was to goad the police, challenging them vocally, attempting to provoke the police to charge. Senior officers checked the police lines, ensuring that the junior ranks remained calm, but one shouted, 'Oi, take off your fucking hood. Oi. Take it off.'

A young man in his late teens stood with a hood and scarf shrouding his face from view, only 30 yards from the police line. Although the crowd was too large for the police to manage, their visibility was proving to be their vulnerability and they cowered from the gaze of the police, some of whom were armed with cameras. A group of youths kicked at the window of a jewellers and this provoked the first charge of a long evening. As the crowd began swelling in numbers, one started to see older men there, in their 30s and even 40s. Teenage girls goaded on some of the male participants to challenge the police, some chest out with pride, others standing, or stooping casually under their hoods, nonchalantly. It



Photo courtesy of Thom Davies



seemed to be a fairly multi-cultural crowd; black, white and Asian men all represented, as well as a significant proportion of women.

The tactic of the rioters was to 'hit and run': to goad the police into charging and then running through side streets and escaping. Then repeat. The casualties of the day: a

shop selling hats and a Poundland store, both looted. The police looked tired and weary, as the cat and mouse game continued till late in the night, long after we had left. ■

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