# Police crackdown at Stonehenge free festival sparks enduring civil liberties debate



On a balmy June afternoon in 1985, a convoy of more than 100 vehicles, filled with festival-goers heading to a free gathering at Stonehenge, snaked through the picturesque Wiltshire countryside. Unbeknownst to them, they would not reach the ancient stones; instead, they encountered an imposing wall of police, determined to enforce an injunction aimed at halting the growing festival, which had become a notable fixture in the cultural calendar.

What unfolded that day, as described by witnesses, has become etched in the annals of British history as one of the most brutal clashes between citizens and law enforcement. Eyewitnesses recall scenes of chaos and violence, with both parties offering conflicting narratives about the events. The clash was not just about a festival but symbolised a deeper struggle over civil liberties, an issue that resonates even today. The altercation inspired the poignant 1991 song "Battle of the Beanfield" by the indie folk band The Levellers, which painted a haunting picture of the violence of that day—a portrayal then immortalised in lyrics that described heartbreaking scenes, including injured women and frightened children, capturing the emotions and turbulence of the moment.

The incident marked a significant escalation in the UK government's efforts to curb what they viewed as public disorder. In an aftermath that shocked many, over 1,000 police officers were deployed, leading to 420 arrests and 12 individuals requiring hospitalisation, a toll that highlighted the ferocity of the encounter. Significant scrutiny followed, especially regarding police tactics, which some observers have likened to a “coordinated assault” against unarmed civilians. Testimonies from that day suggest the use of heavy-handed policing, raising serious questions about the enforcement of public order and civil rights at a time of social upheaval.

The implications of the Stonehenge Free Festival conflict went beyond that single day. It instigated tighter regulations on public gatherings and led to the closure of Stonehenge during the summer solstice for 15 years—a considerable restriction on the public's right to assemble freely. Many activists and scholars viewed the events as a pivotal moment in the erosion of civil liberties in the UK, where the use of police power was starkly evident.

Despite the passage of time, calls for a public inquiry into the events of that day persist, though the Home Office has been unyielding, stating there are no plans to revisit this contentious episode. The divergence in perspectives—from those who condemn the police actions as a gross violation of rights to supporters of the police who viewed their response as necessary to maintain order—continues to fuel discussions over the legacy of the Battle of the Beanfield.

Moreover, this confrontation is emblematic of larger societal issues regarding the policing of protests and the rights of marginalized communities, particularly the New Age travellers who constituted the festival-goers. As memories of that turbulent day are recounted, it serves as a cautionary tale about the fragility of civil liberties in the face of powerful institutions and the ongoing quest for justice and accountability.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c780ve9nde0o), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c780ve9nde0o)
* Paragraph 2 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-27405147), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/jun/01/remembering-the-battle-of-the-beanfield), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/apr/05/billy-barrett-battle-of-the-beanfield)
* Paragraph 3 – [[6]](https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/the-battle-of-the-beanfield-the-violent-newage-traveller-clash-with-police-at-stonehenge-remembered-30-years-on-10287028.html), [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c780ve9nde0o)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c780ve9nde0o> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c780ve9nde0o> - In June 1985, a convoy of over 100 vehicles en route to a free festival at Stonehenge was halted by police enforcing an injunction. The ensuing confrontation led to significant violence, with both sides disputing the events. The incident inspired the 1991 song 'Battle of the Beanfield' by The Levellers. Calls for a public inquiry into the events have been made, but the Home Office has stated there are no such plans.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-27405147> - The 1985 Stonehenge Free Festival was abruptly ended due to a violent clash between festival-goers and police. Over 1,000 police officers were involved, resulting in 420 arrests and 12 hospitalisations. The incident marked a turning point in the suppression of civil liberties and led to the closure of Stonehenge to the public during the summer solstice for 15 years.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/jun/01/remembering-the-battle-of-the-beanfield> - Andy Worthington reflects on the 1985 Battle of the Beanfield, where police clashed with a convoy of new age travellers heading to Stonehenge. The event is viewed as a significant suppression of civil liberties, with the government using the incident to curtail the public's right to gather freely without prior permission.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/apr/05/billy-barrett-battle-of-the-beanfield> - Billy Barrett discusses the 1985 Battle of the Beanfield, a clash between around 600 New Age travellers and 1,300 police officers near Stonehenge. The event is described as a coordinated assault on unarmed civilians, with police using truncheons and riot shields against the travellers.
6. <https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/the-battle-of-the-beanfield-the-violent-newage-traveller-clash-with-police-at-stonehenge-remembered-30-years-on-10287028.html> - The Independent recalls the 1985 Battle of the Beanfield, where a convoy of travellers was confronted by thousands of police near Stonehenge. The event is remembered as a defining moment, with mixed feelings among those who were there, some viewing it as a day of infamy and others as a successful operation.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2013/jun/22/archive-1985-policemen-hippy-camp> - An archived article from The Guardian dated 22 June 1985 describes how police turned a hippy camp near Stonehenge into a no-go area. After heavy rain, about 3,500 hippies decided not to visit Stonehenge for the summer solstice, and police sealed off the campsite, allowing people to leave but not permitting entry to journalists.