

# Spurs and the Jews: the how, the why and the when

This exclusive extract from a new history of Spurs sheds light on the Premier League club's unique history

[Martin Cloake and Alan Fisher](#)

Tottenham Hotspur goalkeeper Pat Jennings punches the ball away from the goal and clear of Leeds United player Jack Charlton in 1969

"We f---ing hate Tottenham and we hate Tottenham." The spirit of hospitality extended to both home and away supporters hadn't spread to a gaggle of Sheffield United supporters as they spilled out of a popular pre-match venue before the League Cup semi-final in 2013.

One of them shouts "The Jews..." and laughs. We were leaving the Irish Centre but the irony passed her by. Yet this inconsequential incident captures two major elements of being a Spurs supporter. To fans of other clubs, Tottenham Hotspur is a Jewish club: we are the Yids. Second, when fans of other clubs use the word, it's always a term of abuse.

The rest of the group left it there and decided instead to express in song their apparent disdain for Cockneys. Yorkshire rivals Leeds were known for many years as a

Jewish club – another city with a large Jewish population, football mad and owned in their golden years by a Jewish family. But not Yids.

A proportion of Spurs' support has long been drawn from the London Jewish community and the three chairmen since 1982 have all been Jewish businessmen with pre-existing degrees of allegiance to the club. Yet the proportion of fans who are Jewish, impossible to know precisely, is likely to be small. The best estimate is a maximum of 5 per cent of the crowd. Arsenal have at least as many Jewish fans. But they are not Yids.

Spurs supporters did not grow up as "Yids"; they became Yids in adversity through a complex and contested process of identity formation. Forced to respond to pejorative, abusive taunts from rival supporters, many in the crowd embraced the term in order to render the abuse impotent. But the word yid remains highly controversial. Many Jewish Spurs fans support their club despite the word, not because of it.

The Jewish community in Tottenham began to grow in the early 20th century. Eastern European Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia came to Britain from 1880 onwards, with a surge in 1905/06 as their persecution intensified. Many settled in the East End amidst its long-established Jewish community. Others then moved further north, taking advantage of the good transport links and employment prospects in the Tottenham area. The Jewish Dispersion

Committee encouraged the move from overcrowded Whitechapel and Brick Lane.

Unskilled work was plentiful in the fast-growing industrial sites around Tottenham Hale. Several large businesses were Jewish-owned. Lebus furniture, at one time the largest furniture manufacturer in the country, moved to the area in 1899. Most famous for its cheap and cheerful post-war utility furniture, it also made parts for the Mosquito bombers and Horsa gliders used on D-Day. Gestetner became a world leader in duplicating machines, the forerunner of modern copiers. The Eagle Pencil works, later known as Berol, and Fleteau Shoes employed thousands.

Over the next 30 to 40 years, Tottenham Hotspur became part of the lives of these predominantly working-class Jewish men living in the crowded streets between the Hale and Landsdowne Road.

For many Jews, the drive for assimilation has been an overriding imperative and football has been instrumental in that process. Writing about this powerful anglicisation, Anthony Clavane says football is: "A space where ethnic identity has connected, even become intertwined, with national identity; an arena where Jews have fought the notion that they were invaders who needed to be fended off, newcomers who did not belong."

Many Jews, especially the second generation who were born here and called Tottenham home, sought belonging

and identity on the terraces at White Hart Lane. They weren't the only ones: the history of Tottenham Hotspur is linked inextricably with the lives of the newcomers, the displaced, the ambitious, the hungry who came to Tottenham in search of work and a better life. Generations have found comfort and comradeship in the swaying masses who follow the navy blue and white. Through their club are expressed hopes and aspirations, of being part of something, of being somebody. The Hotspur was Tottenham.

**The infamous game in 1935 when the German team gave the Nazi salute**

This assimilation was particularly important in the Tottenham community that faced hostility, often violent, after the so-called "Tottenham Outrage" in 1909, when a botched armed robbery by two Russian immigrants led to a police chase involving hundreds of officers from Tottenham to Chingford that ended with a policeman and a child caught in the crossfire dead and 24 injured. This case attracted unprecedented national interest and provoked a period of anti-alien feeling, which in Tottenham meant "anti-Jewish".

Jewish attendance at football matches rose after the First World War, especially among second-generation young men. Partly this reflected changes in social patterns as, in the East End, Saturday became a day for leisure rather than strict religious observance. The British-born generation forged their own identity in this fast-changing urban world.

Proud of their heritage and faith, people adopted football as another element of this new anglicised Jewish culture alongside the old customs. So in the words of a correspondent to the *JC*, for a Saturday kick-off at 2.30, "it was possible to be in synagogue until the end of musaf, to nip home for a plate of lokshen soup and then board a tram from Aldgate to White Hart Lane."

One creative interpretation of religious law claimed that the Shabbos tradition could be maintained by purchasing a ticket on the Friday morning and going by an electric tram, not a combustion-engined bus, although we suspect not every rabbi agreed. However they travelled, the good transport links made the journey straightforward.

Tottenham Hotspur appealed to all sections of society with a history of welcome and independence. Arsenal's Jewish support grew later, in the 1930s, from the more affluent north London community. They were the team for the Jewish émigrés, the intellectuals attracted by the splendour of the ground and the team's dominance under Herbert Chapman.

Spurs were by far the most popular team within the community at the time. The *JC* confidently stated that in the 1920s almost all Jews who followed the game were Spurs supporters and the Jewish fanbase continued to grow in the 1930s. A reporter from the *Daily Express* writing in 1934 said he was surrounded by Jewish fans on the terrace. The following year, several papers quoted a figure

of as many as 10,000 Jews in the crowd, a third of the total.

These figures became newsworthy in December 1935 when White Hart Lane was chosen by the FA as the venue for an international between England and Germany. Playing at Tottenham was seen at the time as an affront to the Jewish community, demonstrating that in the mid-1930s Spurs were widely perceived as a club with a large Jewish support. Opposition was organised. "The Jews have been the best supporters of the Tottenham club ever since its formation, and we shall adopt every means in our power to stop the match," one of the protest organisers told the *Star*, London's paper. "We regard the visit of the German team as an effrontery, not only to the Jewish race but to all lovers of freedom."

4 December 1935 was the day the swastika flew over White Hart Lane. The German team gave a wincingly sinister Nazi salute to the crowd before kick-off but England did not. The flag didn't last too long - a fan climbed onto the roof of the West Stand and pulled it down. Neither did German notions of superiority - they lost 3-0.

The following year, the British Union of Fascists led by Oswald Mosley used the Tottenham crowd to attack the "Jewish sporting mentality" which was at odds with the upstanding principles of the "Nordic race". They alleged that a supposed increase in barracking on the terraces emanated from Jewish supporters unable to comprehend the decency and fair play that characterised British

sportsmanship.

The club was reluctant to reciprocate this dedication that spanned generations. Mickey Dulin played for Spurs in the late 1940s and kept quiet about his heritage. "They didn't know I was Jewish, Turkish or Greek, we didn't talk about it. We all just kept *schtum*," he says. Spurs "superfan", businessman Morris Keston, was given five shares in the pre-plc days but the club refused to register him. "People used to say to me: 'They [the board] don't like you because you're Jewish.' They didn't want any outsiders," he told Anthony Clavane. Another writer, Mihir Bose, says that before Irving Scholar took over in the early 1980s there was "unofficial apartheid" between Jewish supporters and gentile directors.

Arsenal, on the other hand, openly acknowledged the connection. In the mid-1960s, for example, their programme wished supporters well over Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Spurs did not follow suit until 1973. When Chapman died in 1934 his *JC* obituary praised him as a 'friend of the Jewish people'.

Despite the club's attitude, Jewish Spurs fans continued to feel they belonged in the stands and on the terraces at White Hart Lane. Changing patterns of class and affluence meant that by the 1960s, the local community had shrunk considerably but family allegiance remained strong in the large Jewish communities in north London and south Essex. Many moved from terrace to the seats but they still

felt safe and secure.

Jewishness then became more inextricably intertwined with the identity of being a Spurs fan as Tottenham became the "Yids", an aspect of supporter identity that persists to this day and remains intensely controversial.

At some point from the late 1960s onwards, opposition fans began to chant abuse at Spurs supporters using the word. Most Jewish supporters of that era are convinced they know when it began but probably are recounting the first time they heard it. One told us with certainty that it was started by Charlton fans in the early 1960s. Another saw Spurs win the 1967 FA Cup Final from the Chelsea end and was appalled by the antisemitic abuse.

Others blame the popular 1960s and 1970s sitcom *Til Death Do Us Part* and its central character, the bigoted West Ham-supporting Alf Garnett, played with gusto by Spurs season ticket holder Warren Mitchell, who referred to Spurs supporters as Yids. However, it's more likely this came from writer Johnny Speight's sharp ear for the East End vernacular.

Through the 1970s abuse from opposition fans referring to Spurs fans as Jews was commonplace, especially when going away. The chant "does your rabbi know you're here?" was mild and amusing compared with the rest. "I've never felt more like gassing the Jews...", "one man went to gas, went to gas a yiddo...", "Spurs are on their way to

Auschwitz, Hitler's gonna gas 'em again", Nazi salutes and, perhaps most insidious of all, the hiss of escaping gas. Supporters of Tottenham Hotspur, Jew and gentile alike, have heard it all. And to the authors' knowledge it has never been directed at Arsenal fans.

In response, something remarkable happened. Instead of repudiating the long history of Jewish support and the Jews who stood amongst them, fans embraced it. In response to the abuse, fans danced up and down on the terraces singing "We are the yids, we are the yids, we are we are we are the yids!", appropriating a chant "We are the Mods!" from an existing subculture and providing yet another example of the swirling soup that is London culture. Supporters wore skullcaps to games. The Israeli flag flew from the terraces. The Star of David was incorporated into home-made banners or the decorated white butchers' coats that were popular at the time.

Using the word as a term of endearment and comradeship nullified the negativity before the words left the mouths of abusers. Context is key to meaning: Spurs fans do not use the word in a derogatory way. They refuse to be demeaned or controlled by the abuse.

It would have been easy, in the face of the abuse, to blame the Jews - after all people have for the last 3,000 years - and turn on them. Instead, the response was acceptance, as it always has been on the White Hart Lane terraces. Tottenham resisted the casual racism endemic in 1970s

football. During the many troughs in our fortunes over the last 35 years, there have been few hints of antisemitic feeling towards any of the three Jewish owners. The thread of a heritage of independence and inclusivity runs through the fabric of support to this day.

To label this awareness of the process of discrimination as political consciousness would be to overstate the case, but supporters are conscious of the process of discrimination and they refuse to accept it.

While the term has been in regular currency for decades, over the past ten years it has been used more readily in chants and in social media to define loyalty, continuity and heritage, perhaps in part because Spurs supporters have become more conscious than ever before of their history and identity in response to outside forces such as the consistent success of rivals Chelsea and Arsenal. What makes Spurs fans unique has become extremely important in an homogenised, money-dominated Premier League and many choose to express this through using the word Yid about themselves and their team.

It has become so embedded, the recent re-igniting of the debate about the word showed that many younger supporters had no idea about the origins, it was just part of being a Spur. Yet the term remains the subject of intense, sometimes bitter controversy.

Mark Damazer, born and brought up in a north London

Jewish family and a supporter since 1961, explains the case against the word from within the community: "I first came across the chant in the mid-1990s. I was with my two small children. I thought the crowd was shouting 'yeast'. I asked a neighbour and was shocked when he told me. I am still shocked when I hear it.

"Well-meaning non-Jewish Tottenham fans may think of it as a defence mechanism to employ against antisemites among opposing supporters. But this is a word that for centuries has not merely been used to convey ignorance, suspicion and prejudice. It has also been a way of identifying people who subsequently were marked out for servitude and death."

This view, that context is rendered insignificant compared with the prejudice and abuse intrinsic to the word, is supported not only by representatives of Jewish organisations but also by a substantial number of Jewish Spurs supporters, who tolerate its use rather than embrace it. One of the authors of this is Jewish and wholeheartedly defends its use by Spurs supporters while at the same time never using it to describe himself or other fans, because deep down it does not feel right.

The most voluble critic of Spurs supporters' use of the word from outside the club is David Baddiel, the Jewish comedian and author. His view is that Tottenham fans should stop using the word completely. The tribalism that bedevils contemporary fandom means many reject his

arguments purely on the basis that he is a Chelsea fan. In fact, his campaign began when he admonished Chelsea fans chanting antisemitic abuse in a match against Spurs.

In [a widely circulated short film and subsequent discussions around the subject](#), Baddiel not only says the word has no place in football grounds or anywhere else for that matter, he also contradicts the process of reclamation, saying that as non-Jews, Spurs fans have no right to the word in the first place.

While Baddiel's viewpoint is a serious attempt to address the complexities of reappropriation of language, he ends up in the contorted position of requiring Spurs fans to stop, regardless apparently of anything sung or done by the opposition, thus denying the context of decades of abuse and implying that rival fans are justified in their use of Yid for as long as Spurs fans use the word. His argument sounds suspiciously as if it is their own fault.

That contorted logic emerged in a different and surprising context in 2013 when the debate went national, involving the police, the FA and the then Prime Minister, David Cameron.

When in early September 2013 he pronounced his verdict on the long-running debate, his intended audience was those involved in the free speech debate. Yet he struck a chord with the majority of Spurs fans. "There's a difference between Spurs fans self-describing themselves as Yids

and someone calling someone a Yid as an insult," he said. "You have to be motivated by hate. Hate speech should be prosecuted – but only when it's motivated by hate."

No doubt sensitive to issues around discriminatory and abusive language in the light of other cases such as the prosecution of England captain John Terry for alleged racist language, the FA took it upon themselves to address what it termed the Y word debate. The organisation outlined both sides of the argument and, significantly, reached a conclusion: "The FA considers that the use of the term 'yid' is likely to be considered offensive by the reasonable observer."

Having acknowledged the complexity of the debate, the FA reached the conclusion that "rules on acceptable behaviour and language need to be simple, understandable and applicable to all people at all levels of the game".

This definition was endorsed by the Metropolitan Police, who declared before the home match against West Ham in September 2013 that all fans who use the word, including Tottenham supporters, could be committing an offence under section 5 of the Public Order Act. A year previously, the Met had stated that fans would not face prosecution in these circumstances because there was "no deliberate intention to cause offence".

Context had been removed. There was now no apparent distinction between opposing fans giving Nazi salutes and

singing about gassing the Jews, and Spurs supporters getting behind their team. And the argument had moved from one about prejudice to one about offence, a much broader and very different debate and one which raised uncomfortable questions about the limits of free speech.

At the game against West Ham, songs about Hitler and gas chambers were clearly audible from the away section. Nazi salutes were also seen. A fan was arrested, a supporter of Tottenham Hotspur who had used the word Yid in a chant. In the following weeks, two more Spurs fans were arrested for racially aggravated public order offences. Unusually, their names were released by the police. Publicly named as racists, the fans had bail conditions imposed that did not allow them within 2,500 yards of any stadium where Spurs were playing from four hours before until four hours after a game. The club banned the fans from its ground and withdrew their memberships and season tickets. The presumption of innocence until proof of guilt had apparently been cast aside.

After months in which the three fans remained publicly labelled as racists and during which time the case was repeatedly postponed, the Crown Prosecution Service announced that the charges were to be dropped because there was "insufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction". The club rescinded its ban, reinstated memberships and refunded money for games missed.

The fans had been backed throughout by the Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trust, the membership of which had itself debated whether or not to back the fans. The Trust put the fans in touch with a legal team which, once the case was dropped, issued a strongly worded statement criticising a "misguided and over-zealous approach by the Crown Prosecution Service and the Metropolitan Police". The defence team went on to support the refusal to concede the word yid to the fascists and bigots, and concluded: "Any organisation or individual that sets out to brand Spurs fans' use of the word Yid as being racist runs a high risk of being perceived as pursuing other self-serving agendas. We urge them to focus their attention on those who are clearly using threatening or abusive words or behaviour towards others based on hostility or hate towards others' race or religion."

Ironically, this episode popularised the use of the word Yid among Spurs fans after a period when use of the word seemed to be falling away. It cemented it as an expression of pride in being a Spurs fan, and in so doing removed it still further from its original roots. Something that could be seen as the ultimate irony.

What the whole episode did was underline once more the complex identity of the Spurs crowd, the network of references and experiences that are woven together to create identity. It is arguably one of the most complex cultural constructs in football, quite some achievement in the world of football fandom where the appetite for and

imagination deployed creating cultural realities is particularly strong.

*A People's History Of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club: How Spurs Fans Shaped the Identity of One of the World's Most Famous Clubs by Martin Cloake and Alan Fisher is published by Pitch Publishing at £17.99*