The 1981 New Cross Fire

An easy read summary to help people with learning disabilities find out about the New Cross Fire

by Paul Christian

with Sue Ledger, Sarah Garrod, Nicola Grove and Generate Voices
This is an easy read story about a fire where young people died. It may make you feel very upset.

Maybe it is enough to know that the fire happened.

You don’t have to know more than this.

We are telling this story because it is an important part of British history.

If you don’t feel comfortable reading the story alone then you might like to have someone with you to support you.
You might like to take a break if the story upsets you.

Do not feel you have to read the whole story.

You can stop at any time.
What was the New Cross Fire?

The New Cross fire happened on Sunday 18th January 1981.
13 young Black British people died in a fire.

No one knows how the fire started.

The police did not arrest anyone.

Things did not happen as they should have done.

To explain this we have put a red cross.

After the fire there was a very big protest march in London.

New Cross Poster: Chris Abuk
We still have lots of questions about this terrible event.

You can read more about it here.

What do you think?
In the 1970s and 1980s some people were making Black people feel frightened and unwanted. We call these actions racist attacks.

There were racist attacks on Black people’s houses.

There were racist attacks on Black bookshops, music places and youth clubs.
A group called the National Front wanted Black people to leave Britain.

This group protested about Black people being in Britain.

They marched in UK cities.

They marched in London.
This is the story of a fire one night in a place called New Cross in the UK.
Yvonne Ruddock lived at 439 New Cross Road in London.

In January 1981, she was 16.

She had a birthday party with her friend Angela.
| The birthday party was at Yvonne’s house. |  |
Around 40 young people came to the party.

Her brother Paul came.

Her mum was downstairs.
| A big fire started downstairs in the house. |
| The flames spread quickly. |
| People were trapped. |
| Yvonne and her friends couldn’t get out. |
13 young people died in the fire.

Yvonne and her brother died.

Many other young people were hurt.

It was a very, very sad time.

So many Black children and young people died.
Here is a picture of people laying flowers.

The families wondered if racists had started the fire.
The police did not collect enough information.

They missed important clues.
The police did not arrest anyone.

Black families wanted the police to do more work to find out what happened.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black people said British newspapers did not write much about the fire.</th>
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</table>
| Black families were very upset.  
They wanted the newspapers to write about their children. |
| They used the words ‘13 dead, nothing said’. |
Black leaders wanted to help the families. They were worried that the police did not arrest anyone.

They set up a group to help. It was called the ‘New Cross Massacre Action Committee’.

A massacre is the name given to the murder of a lot of people.
It was led by a man called John La Rose.

There is an easy read about the life and work of John La Rose if you want to find out more information.

Many Black people helped them.

They raised money to pay for the funerals.
They interviewed people who had been at the party on the night of the fire.

A Black newspaper offered a reward for information about the fire.
They set up a big march in London.

It was called the **Black People’s Day of Action**.

This happened on 2\textsuperscript{nd} March 1981.
The march started at New Cross.

They marched to Downing Street.

20,000 people came from all over the UK.

They walked for 12 miles.

It took all day.
It was a very calm protest.

Most of the people were Black.

There were old people, young people and children.

Families carried the names and pictures of the people who died.
At Blackfriars Bridge police blocked the march.

Still everyone was calm.

The march moved on.

In 1981 the newspaper offices were in Fleet Street, London.

Some newspaper staff there threw things.

Others made monkey noises.

This is racist.

Some of the marchers got upset and angry.

The journalists took photos of them.

The journalists printed the photos in the papers.

Rampage is a violent riot
They said these photos showed Black people on the march doing bad things.

This was not true.

These pictures are from real newspapers from 1981.

The marchers asked for Black people to be treated better.

They asked for **racism** in Britain to stop.
Marchers wore this badge. The badge said ‘Come what may we are here to stay’.

This badge says that Britain is home to Black people as well as white people.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The families wanted the government to help them.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They said the police should work to help Black people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>They said newspapers should write about Black people in a fair way.</td>
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</table>
The **Black People’s Day of Action** showed that Black people in Britain had a voice.

That Black people could come together and stand up for better treatment.

After the march a **court** looked again at what happened in the fire.

**Lawyers** were involved.

The **government advisor** about law was involved.
The police shared what they had found out.

They did not know who started the fire.

The **court** said the police had not done their job well.

The government’s chief law person said that they should have done more.
Today there are **memorials** to remember the children and young people who died.

- Andrew Gooding, age 14
- Rosaline Henry, age 16
- Patrick Cummings, age 16
- Patricia Johnson, age 15
- Owen Thompson, age 16
- Lloyd Hall, age 20
- Humphrey Brown, age 18
- Steve Collins, age 17

These are the names and ages of the young people who died.

The memorial had 14 names as it includes the name of one young person killed himself after being at the fire.
- Gerry Francis, age 17
- Peter Campbell, age 18
- Glenton Powell, age 16 (died in hospital)
- Yvonne Ruddock, age 16 (died in hospital)
- Paul Ruddock, age 22 (died in hospital)
- Anthony Berbeck, age 20 (took his own life in 1983)

We still do not know who started the fire.
No one has ever been arrested.
You can find lots of films and photos about the New Cross Fire online.
See what you can find out.
What do you think about this story?
Have things changed for Black people in Britain?
We need to remember this history.
### Helpful Resources

George Padmore Institute  

### Helpful Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Black People’s Day of Action</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This was the name of a big protest that took place in London on 2 March 1981.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20,000 people came from all over the UK.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Court</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>A court is a place where a judge and other people come together. They listen to what has happened and decide how the law should work in a situation.</td>
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</table>
Government

A group of people who lead a country. They are voted in by people like you and me to lead the country.

They make rules and control where the country’s money should go.

Government adviser

These are people who give the government information to help them decide what to do.

Journalists

People who write or take photos or film for newspapers, magazines, or news websites.

Lawyers

People who are trained in the law. They are experts in how the law works.
March

When people show that they disagree with something or feel strongly about something by walking somewhere together.

People on a march often shout and carry signs.
A memorial is something built to remember a person or people.

It can also be to remember something that happened.

This circle is on the wall of the house in New Cross Road where the New Cross Fire started.

This is to remind people about the fire.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Front</th>
<th>New Cross Massacre Action Committee</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This group believes that non-white people should leave Britain.</td>
<td>This was the name of a group set up by Black leaders to help families after the 1981 New Cross Fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They believe that white people are better than Black people.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>There are other groups with different names that believe this too.</td>
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"Keep Britain white. Blacks go home."
The person in charge was John La Rose.

The group were asking for the police to find out more about how the fire started.

They were asking for the government to do more to help the families.

They wanted to tell people that newspapers were writing unfair things about Black people and about the fire.

A massacre is the name given to the murder of a lot of people.
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<th>Police</th>
<th>Protest</th>
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<tr>
<td>The police are people who make sure that every person follows the country’s rules and laws. They are paid by the government to stop crime and to try to keep people safe.</td>
<td>A protest is an event or action where people stand up for their views and rights in public.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Racism

Racism is the word we use when we talk about the unfair treatment of people with a different skin colour.

This is unfair treatment based on the wrong belief that some people from race or ethnic groups are better or worse than other people.

For a long time, people have treated Black people badly because of the colour of their skin.

Racism can be words and actions like name calling or bullying.
But it can also be harder to spot. It can be the ways that society is run like our schools, laws and support systems.

Racist

Someone who believes that their race or skin colour make them better or more powerful than other people and who does or says harmful things because of what they believe.
Racist Attack

Attacks can be done in lots of ways. It can be threatening people or hurting them.

It can also be writing bad things about people.

Something done to scare or hurt another person or group because of their race, or skin colour or faith.

Some racist people or groups try to make Black people feel frightened and unwanted.
We call these actions racist attacks.

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