

TERROR AT THE FAIR

IT'S THE FAIR

The only cruelty our reporter saw at Smithfield was by minority who carried out such senseless violence

IT WAS a real Bloody Sunday

And the *Sunday World* was in the thick of the action.

When two shots rang out across Smithfield square in Dublin's inner city last Sunday, at first I thought they were fireworks.

Moments later I watched as a teenager collapsed in a pool of blood right in front of me. Boxing champ Westley McDonagh (17) had left a trail of blood across the cobbled square as he fled a gang who had almost ripped his arm off with slash hooks.

Two other men were shot in the hip and leg.

For a few frenzied minutes, Garda sirens competed with horses' whinnies and people yelling. Horses tethered to lamp posts reared. A few broke loose from and bolted over the cobbles.

Maldron Hotel manager Gemma Jordan, who described it as "Beirut with horses", rescued a toddler from a buggy, trapped under a horse.

Gardai later arrested a local man and found a home-made shotgun and pistol.

It was just the ammunition critics needed to call for the fair's closure.

The violent scenes may be the nail in the coffin for the 346-year-old event.

The Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (DSPA) tell horror stories about run-down nags bought by kids for €40.



HORSE PLAY: Mark Maxwell with his children; (centre) violence erupts and (right) a garda assists injured a victim

By GERALDINE COMISKEY

But from the moment the first horse arrived, just before 7am, to 3.30pm when the last left the square, I saw not one sign of cruelty to animals.

Victims

Over the past week, I have listened to Dublin City Mayor Gerry Breen, the DSPCA and various commentators as they spoke of "appalling cruelty to animals", at the fair.

I asked three DSPCA officials and the Gardai for evidence of cruelty to back up their claims, but got nothing.

In fact, the only victims of cruelty at Smithfield were people - the young boxer who saw his dreams of glory disappear as his left arm was slashed,

the two men who received minor injuries in the shooting, and the crowd which spent a few terrible minutes in a state of panic.

The horses were the first to calm down. But some went berserk again as the Garda helicopter flew overhead. Traders cursed it as they struggled to hold on to their animals.

With half an hour, it was back to the real business of Smithfield - horsetrading. The first horseman had arrived just before 7am, bareback on a skewbald pony.

Soon the sterile square, with its bleak, bare walls, came alive as about 200 horses were led in, prancing and whinnying. It was like a child's fantasy - My Little Pony meets Black Beauty.

English and American tourists were delighted to find themselves in the

middle of a real Irish horse fair.

By 9am there were at least 500 horses in the square. Palominos with Rapunzel manes stood alongside shire horses with fluffy fetlocks like Ugg boots.

Proud owners brushed their horses' manes, patted them, babytalked them and even kissed them on the nose.

Sulky

Riding bareback, with no whips, helmets or body-protectors, the young horsemen (and a few girls) would put many a professional rider to shame.

Most of the Smithfield crowd seemed to be from the local community, with a few travellers from all around Ireland and the UK.

Carl Boylan from Baldoyle, north Dublin, invited me to go sulky racing

with him and his wife.

John Byrne from Blanchardstown in west Dublin proudly showed me his purebred trotting stallion, Sebastian, who had a head like the knight on a chessboard. "He's only three-and-a-half and he's a daddy of two," John said.

Philip Finglas let me sit bareback on his beautiful three-year-old chestnut mare, Molly.

He was asking for €700. "She's worth a lot more but that's the way the economy is going," he sighed. One young lad wanted €5,000 for a hunter - a far cry from €40 nags.

Later Philip and his mate Gareth Preston told me they had been kicked by their own horses in the stampede.

Gareth, originally from Sheriff Street in the inner city but now living in Balbriggan in north Dublin, was ready to part with his eight-year-old mare, Blaze, for €1,500.

He got his love of horses from legendary Sheriff Street coalman Paddy "Whack" Richardson - aka 'John Wayne'. "He taught me everything I know about horses," Gareth said.

Mark Maxwell (15) from Coolock sat astride his skewbald steed, Flash, with his little brother Robert (6) riding pillion, while mates Leon Hayes and Graham Curley gave Flash a pat.

"He's like a flash car," he laughed. Later the young lads were close to tears as they overheard their dads saying this might be the last fair.

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