

SKINHEADS: THE UNEXPLODED TIME BOMB

SKINHEADS have been regarded by many people with a certain amount of dread, like unexploded time bombs. They looked troublesome. They made troublesome noises, and they came from areas which, in earlier years, had spawned youth trouble of other kinds.

Isolated incidents were connected with skinheads, and odd excursions into vandalism were laid at their door. But generally, skinheads, since they first appeared in Dublin, three or four years ago, have been a latent rather than an actual threat to law and order.

Now, that has changed. The recent vandalising of a train on the Dundalk/Dublin line, together with what the police witnesses in court last Monday described as "a full scale riot, the length of O'Connell Street", has made people look again at the whole skinhead phenomenon, and look with a certain amount of fear. The big question in many people's minds is: "Can the same thing happen here as happened in England—the knifings, the gang battles, and the football match fracas?"

There is every indication that it can. In the first place, the areas from which the English and the Irish skinheads come are very similar. They are the new suburbs of look-alike housing, minimal facilities, and large families. In the case of the larger English cities, the size and anonymity of the conurbation was the cause of disaffection.

In Ireland, what seems to be happening is that many of the young people who have become skinheads are the children of families who were moved from the older, central city parishes. Picking up the threads of life in an area in which they feel as strange as if they had emigrated, they tend to rely heavily on gangs of friends as the only people they can identify with. In every way, the Irish skinhead conforms to the English

pattern.

They wear the same clothes—high-ankle boots, wide trousers falling short of the ankle, tight sweaters, occasionally braces and, of course, heads which are close-cut or shaven. They use the same language — "Aggro", "Bovver" and so forth. They carry the same weapons.

In England, many of the skinhead riots which have hit the headlines have centred around football matches as skinheads tend to follow soccer with a ferocity of loyalty which is unbelievable, even to Irishmen, who are not exactly indifferent to the fate of their own favourites in the league. Already, the same pattern is emerging here, and games have been so disrupted that one soccer club, Shamrock Rovers, has had to publicly disassociate itself from those of its skinhead followers who have been regular trouble makers, before, during and after matches.

"Half the time the boys that cause the trouble are boot boys, not skinheads at all. We know lots of boot boys—fellas who dress like us, but have longer hair, who get in fights and we're always blamed."

The speaker was Paul, aged seventeen, a skinhead from Edenmore in Dublin. I met Paul, John and Tony strolling along a couple of days ago after the riot in Dublin. They were eager to talk about their experiences and views as skinheads, and very regretful that more of them had not been around when the riot started.

"We're sorry we weren't there," Tony told me. "We'd have went in on them, and we'd have had our weapons."

"I was there," John said. "But I hadn't a weapon. I got hurt too." He had a cut hand from a slash received during the fight, and a bloodied knee from a fall.

Do they, I asked, often carry weapons?

Above: Skinheads slogans on walls and in doorways around the centre of Dublin.

CAN THE same thing happen here as happened in England — the knifings, the gang battles and the football match fracas?

In the wake of the most recent outbreak of violence in the city, PETER THORNTON talks to some of the skinheads about their way of life.

"Not around here. Not just walking here where we're known, and where we know the people. But nowadays," Paul said very seriously, "you can't go round without carrying a weapon. You won't go into town, like, or to a dance, without your weapon."

The weapons vary, depending on the individual tastes of the skinhead. Hatchets, carried in the inside of a jacket, knives, bicycle chains, were all mentioned.

"What," I asked, "if you find yourselves needing a weapon but without one with you?"

"Snap off a car aerial," was the answer.

Generally speaking, however, the skinhead isn't caught unawares. Fights, according to boys who talked to me, are the result of boredom. They talked as if there were a predictable cycle of boredom-fight-fade into the woodwork. There is rarely any logical reason for rows—as one of them put it—"When you get bored, you start a fight." They have almost a rating system on fights.

"When the time comes for it, aggro is good," Paul told me, with the air of a psychiatrist explaining that repression was bad for people. "It's first in, first to win."

They avoid the question, which naturally follows: "What happens when you kill someone?" It hasn't happened yet, they say.

The people who most rouse their aggression are "greasers", which they used to describe long-haired, drug-taking young people, whom they regard as weaklings and cowards. Oddly enough, while many people tend to group skinheads and hippies and long hairs together in their minds as potential, and like-minded juvenile delinquents, the so-called generation gap has nothing on the gap between the young people with long hair and the youngsters whose heads are shaven.

Skinheads don't fight with other skins, even when they come from different areas, but regard longhaired hippie types as fair game. They hold their "love" philosophy in deep contempt, and regard them as idlers.

"Most skins are working," Paul said. "We all work if we can. But, of course, some of us can't get jobs because of the bad reputation—the way they bad-mouth the fellas with short hair. Two of us here are in the army, and we're going to stay in when we've finished being trained."

The curious paradox about the skinheads, who are seen by many older people as a threat to society, is that they are essentially right-wingers of the juvenile scene. They are not drug-takers. Pints of bitter and shorts are their drinks. They have no social consciousness whatever, reacting to situations rather than thinking about them. They are gang-operators, rather than individualists. Even the skinhead girls, wearing suede-cut hair and high, heavy laced platform shoes, tend to move in groups of three or four, trailing, arms linked, along the footpath.

One of the most distinctive things

about the skinheads is their choice of music. Robin McCron and Graham Murdock, Research fellows of the University of Leicester Centre for Mass Communication Research, first pointed this out in March of this year, when they published the results of an investigation into music preferences among young people.

While all teenagers and people in their early twenties shared the same basic map of pop, they found considerable differences emerged between major social groups. The researchers found, for instance, that skinheads favoured reggae and soul music.

"Firstly," McCron and Murdock reported, "they saw the music and its performers as expressions and extensions of their own values of action, toughness and physical competence. Secondly, the music's strong beat made it ideal for dancing, and dancing provided opportunities for publicly showing individual physical competence and group solidarity."

This was borne out exactly by the skinheads to whom I talked in Dublin.

"We go for reggae, Tamla Motown, that sort of music. We like Slade (former skinheads themselves, forced to grow their hair by the exigencies of the English ballroom circuit) and Gilbert. Progressive, heavy stuff is for the greasers."

The more the three skins talked, the more I became conscious of this group solidarity. They rapidly identify and reject young people from other groups boot boys, suede heads, greasers, or whatever.

"Where would I fit in?" I asked them, as I prepared to go. They made a few verbal passes at description, and then stopped.

"You're just a man," said Tony eventually.