

“For those lost at Aberfan and the wonderful Welsh people.”
“Till we meet again”

ABERFAN

Dr David C F Wright (1967)



At about 9.15 am on Friday, October 21, 1966, many thousands of tons of colliery rubbish swept quickly with a jet-like roar down the side of the Merthyr Mountain which forms the western flank of the coal-mining village of Aberfan. This massive breakaway from a vast tip overwhelmed two Hafod-Tangiwys-Uchaf farm cottages on the mountain side and killed their occupants. It crossed the disused canal and surmounted the railway embankment. It engulfed and destroyed a school and eighteen houses, endangered another school and other dwellings in the village before its onward flow ceased.

In this disaster, no less than 144 men, women and children lost their lives. 116 of the victims were children most of them between the ages of seven and ten, 109 of them perishing inside Pantglas Junior School. Of the 26 adults that died, five were teachers in that school. In addition, 26 children and 6 adults were injured, some of them seriously. 16 houses were damaged by the sludge, 60 houses had to be evacuated and others were unavoidably damaged in the rescue operation. Many cars were crushed by the initial fall. It is estimated that 140, 000 cubic yards of rubbish were deposited in Aberfan.

This fall was from Tip number 7 where a vast quantity of loosely-tipped, uncompacted material had, over the years, become saturated with water in its lower parts.

On the morning of 21 October, 1966, there were several movements within the tip and shortly after 9 o'clock there was another movement and then Tip number 7 changed from a solid mass into a heavy liquid which burst from the bottom of the tip. The upper part of the tip did not liquefy but moved down the mountain.

The day had begun windless and sunny except for a belt of mist which filled the lower part of the valley. There were men working on top of the tip. Lessons began at the junior school at 9 am but, at the senior school, lessons did not begin until 9.30 am, so that while the juniors were already engaged in their studies the older children were making their way to school. At 9.15, a sound was heard like a jet plane, or thunder or loose trams running down an incline.

Howard Rees was making his way to school up Moy Road when he saw a big wave of muck coming over the old railway bridge and heading towards him. In this muck he could see boulders, trees, trams, bricks, slurry and water. This mass hurled itself against the schools and the houses between them. Three of Howard's school friends were sitting on a wall and he saw them crushed and buried.



George Williams, a hairdresser, was going to his

shop in Moy Road when he heard a noise like a jet plane. He could not see clearly because of the mist but soon saw windows and doors of houses in Moy Road caving in. After the tip fell, there was an eerie silence.

At the moment when disaster struck, Kenneth Davies, acting headmaster of the senior school, the Pantglas County Secondary School was preparing for lessons. He heard a noise like a jet plane screaming low over the school in the fog. There was a bang, the school shook and some girl pupils came running and screaming into the hail. When passing the Needlework room it was seen that the furthest corner had collapsed and the roof had started to collapse into the room. The Girls' Entrance was two thirds full of rubble. Mr Davies and the deputy headmistress, Miss G. E. Evans, evacuated the school.

The sister villages of Aberfan and Merthyr Vale are situated in the valley of the river Taff. Aberfan is on the west bank and the Merthyr Vale Colliery is on the east bank. To the west of Aberfan is the Merthyr Mountain.

Merthyr Tydfil is about four miles north of Aberfan.

The two shafts of the Merthyr Vale Colliery were sunk between 1869 and 1875 and the first tips created west of the river. Tipping began during the First World War. At the time of the disaster there were seven tips and Tip number 7 was the disaster tip. Like Tip One it was composed of mine rubbish, the discards from the coal preparation plant and boiler ash.

Tip One rose to a height of about 85 Feet, Tip Two, begun in 1918, rose to 90 foot, Tip Three, begun in 1925, to 130 feet, Tip Four, begun in 1933, rose to 147 feet, Tip Five, begun in early 1945, rose to 171 foot by 1956, Tip Six was begun in 1956 and was stopped in 1958 because of complaints from a local farmer that it was spilling over on to his land. Tip Seven was started in Easter 1958 and, at the time of the tragedy, was about 111 foot high containing 297,000 cubic yards of waste including about 30,000 cubic yards of a material known as 'tailings' which other tips did not have.

The method of tipping on Tip 7 was obsolescent. The rubbish from the mines were loaded on to trams at the surface of the mine and hauled by ropes up the Merthyr Mountain. On reaching the engine-house the trams were allowed to run by gravity (being braked by a rope) to a crane which lifted the tram into the air to empty it so that the rubbish fell down the side of the tip where the crane jib was pointing.

Merthyr Mountain receives about 60 inches of rainfall per year and the area has several streams on its eastern side which slope down to Aberfan. Tips 4, 5 and 7 are all directly over such water courses and tip 7 is also over the line of the spring. Tips 1, 3 and 6 were situated on saddles of land and were not a risk. Tip 4 slid down the mountain side in 1944. Tip 5 developed a large bulge at the foot of its south eastern side and Tip 7 caused the disaster.

It was the water under Tip 7 stored in fissures in the sandstone rock which was a major contributing factor to this tragedy. The tipping gang and crane drivers used to get drinking water from the spring at the foot of the tip. Boys used to play here and dig with shovels to see the water come bubbling out.

Tips 3, 4 and 5 came into being through successive Labour Governments. It was Clement Attlee's Labour Government of 1946 that nationalized the coal industry, a policy the Labour government wanted, so that no colliery would be privately owned and therefore be deemed for the benefit of capitalists.

However, it could be argued with success that if collieries were in private hands and their owners were accountable rather than being owned by the National Coal Board there may well have been greater care exercised by the owners to prevent claims being made upon them.

At the Tribunal into the Aberfan disaster, counsel for the National Coal Board said that the slips from 1944, 1963 and 1966 all resulted from the fundamental mistake of tipping both over surface streams and springs and due to the seepage emanating from the permeable strata forming the sloping hillsides

without taking any preliminary drainage measures. Professor Nash for the National Coal Board admitted that all these problems were fully known by the Coal Board and that the implementation of drainage, which essential procedures were also fully known to the Coal Board, would have prevented the disaster.

The danger of these tips was a concern to local residents, including miners, and complaints were regularly made to the Merthyr Tydfil Council.

D. M. John of 35 Pantglas Road wrote on 28 October 1960 about flood water than ruined many homes and how often the flood water reached to his knees. In the 12 years he had been living there, he had been flooded four times and the Council had promised to do something. The wall which had been built to hold back the tip was never repaired.

Meetings were held but nothing was done. It was not until 55 days after the disaster that the Coal Board announced that they would build a completely new culvert to take water from the tips straight into the river Taff at a cost of £20,000.

Ronald Scriven had written to the Town Clerk on 16 December 1964 about more serious flooding at Aberfan and at Merthyr Vale and the very serious flooding near the Social and Democratic Club at Aberfan and highlighted the threat that this posed, especially to children.

About the same time the parents of the children living in The Grove brought a petition to Miss Jennings, 64, the headmistress of the junior school who was to become a victim in the disaster.

At the Tribunal, Mr Tasker Watkins, Q.C., said that six months after the disaster, the National Coal Board still had not given any consideration to tipping despite the history of coal slides in South Wales and that fate was tempted with the massive size of Tip 7. Mr Desmond Ackner, Q.C. accused the National Coal Board of eight years of folly and neglect and that the Aberfan disaster was a terrifying tale of bungling ineptitude by the Coal Board and by the people charged with tasks for which they were totally unfitted, and of their abject failure to heed clear warnings.

Returning to that fateful day, the gang of men who worked at the top of the tip arrived there shortly before 7.30 am although their charge-hand Leslie Davies was due to deliver his weekly report to the Unit Mechanical Engineer, Vivian Thomas, at the colliery. When Gwyn Brown, the crane driver, and David Jones, a slinger, arrived at the point of the tip they found that it has sunk about nine or ten feet and that two pairs of rails forming part of the track on which the crane moved had fallen into the depression thus created. Mr Brown was troubled at this and told Mr Jones to go down and report this to Mr Davies. As the telephone at the top had been damaged, Mr Jones set off down the mountain and Mr Brown used the crane to recover the tram landing-plate from the depression and, with the help of the gang, moved the crane further back from the edge of the tip.

Mr Jones made his report to Mr Davies who, in turn, told Mr Thomas who sent men with an oxyacetylene burner to sever the overhanging rails and gave directions for the crane to pull back as far as possible from the point of the tip. He added that on Monday he would go up the tip himself to direct tipping in another place.

Mr Davies told Mr Brown these instructions but, first, the men went into the cabin and had tea. This is what saved them from going down with the slide. However, Mr Brown remained behind and witnessed what happened.

“I was standing on the edge of the depression. I was looking down into it, and with what I saw I couldn't believe my eyes. It was starting to come back up. It started to rise slowly at first. I still did not believe it. I thought I was seeing things. Then it rose up pretty fast, at a tremendous speed. Then it sort of came up out of the depression and turned itself into a wave — that is the only way I can describe it — down the

mountain... towards Aberfan... into the mist.”

Mr Brown’s shout brought out the rest of the tipping gang and Mr Davies continued the story:

“When he shouted, we all got to the top of the tip and all I can tell you is it was going down at a hell of a speed in waves. I myself ran down the side on No. 3 tip all the way down towards No. 2 and No. 1 tip on the side. As I was running down I heard another roar behind me and trees cracking and a tram passing me. I stopped - I fell down in fact. All I could see was waves of muck, slush and water. I still kept running... I kept going down, shouting. I couldn’t see. Nobody could. I heard a voice answer me and he shouted, “Come out of there, for God’s sake.” That man was Trevor Steed... I went with Trevor Steed down on to the old railway line. By that time my mates had come down with me, behind me. We went along the line as far as we could go towards the school, which we could see. All the houses were down. We could not pass that way because there was too much water rushing down... we could not go the way we wanted to go.”

The Member of Parliament for Merthyr Tydfil, S. O. Davies told the Tribunal that, before the disaster, he was fearful that Tip 7 would slide and that when he expressed these fears he was told not to say that or ‘they will close down the colliery’. Mr Davies said that there was a real threat of an accident which could result in the loss of life. Mr Brian Gibbens, Q.C., representing the National Union of Mine Workers, ridiculed Mr Davies by saying that he must bear the responsibility for what had happened since he showed inactivity in dealing with it.

However, counsel for the National Coal Board stated, “I wish to say in unequivocal terms that blame for the disaster must rest upon the National Coal Board and that responsibility begins with management. Clear instructions were not given. Nor was any procedure laid down, so that both officials and workmen were left without proper guidance.”

Lord Alfred Robens, of the National Coal Board, was asked if there was any inspection procedure at all for the tips at Aberfan. The reply was that there were no regular or adequate inspections. Robens had been the Minister of Labour and National Service in Clement Attlee’s government from 1951.

Mr Alun Davies, Q.C., appearing for the Merthyr Tydfil Council asked Mr Baker, a group Mechanical Engineer, “Are you seriously putting forward that unless a tip begins to move, no precautions are necessary?”

The reply was, “That’s the way it has always been!”

On 5 December 1939, after a period of heavy rainfall, a large slide of a tip belonging to the Albion Quarry (owned by Powell Duffryn Company) occurred at Cilfynydd Common, near Abercynon some five miles from Aberfan. The Taff was blocked to a depth of 15 feet and to a distance of 500 feet, the main Cardiff to Merthyr road was blocked for 585 feet to a depth of up to 25 feet, the Glamorgan canal was blocked and the tip moved some 1430 feet crossing the main road.

On 27 October 1944, a large portion of Tip 4 at Aberfan slid down the mountain side, a distance of 1,800 feet. The effects of this could still be seen at the time of the Aberfan disaster of 1966.

But the Coal Board did not take these matters seriously and they did not implement inspections or precautions.

The setting up of Tip 7 happened at Easter 1958. The rules are that in setting up a new site for a tip expertise from the experts is essential. But the engineers and the Coal Board simply did not investigate this site and this was admitted at the tribunal and it was agreed that there was no excuse for this failure.

The Chairman of the Tribunal, Sir Herbert Edmund Davies, asked, “If I had walked on Tip 7 before it fell

could I have seen that there was a stream on the land?“. The reply was that he could not fail to see it. The Chairman then asked whether the spring was also visible. The reply was that he could not fail to see it.

Clearly no inspection or precautions were taken. The Coal Board obviously did not want to spend money to find a new site further afield, or to employ engineers to make the chosen site safe with proper drainage facilities.

It was stated at the Tribunal that Tip 7 had begun because of a local farmer's complaints about Tip 6. Three men went on to the mountain side to consider a new tipping site for Tip 7. They were Vivian Thomas, Joseph Baker (no. 4 Group Mechanical Engineer), and R. N. Lewis (Merthyr Vale Colliery Manager). They had no Ordnance survey map, no plans, they made no bore holes, they came to no conclusions regarding the limits of the tipping area and consulted no one else. They arranged for no drainage since they considered none necessary. As Mr Geoffrey Howe, Q.C., appearing for the British Association of Colliery Management, said it was a case of the blind leading the blind. The so-called inspection that these three men made was worthless. Mr Lewis was asked why the site for Tip 7 was chosen and his revealing reply was it was the only available site and it was convenient to Tip 6 making it easier for the transfer of equipment.

Professor Alan Bishop, the Tribunal's expert, said that should never have been a site there without a proper and thorough site investigation and emphasised and repeated the point that, as there was no inspection, there should have never been a site there. The Chairman said, "And if no tip, there would be no slide!"

It must be emphasised here that for 40 years there had been regular complaints of flooding at Aberfan and they became more frequent after Tip 7 was begun. Fears of slides from this tip were being forcibly expressed as early as July 1960.

The matter of tailings was brought up at the Tribunal. They are very fine particles left after a chemical process. When tipped on flat land they can cause oozing and spreading and would be even more dangerous on a slope. They induced a low angle of repose---10%. By February 1962, the tipping of tailings was about 80 tons out of a total of 250 tons tipped daily. It was troublesome material and as soon as it was deposited it made holes in the sides of the tip making it unstable. If they dried out they became rock-like and would dam and hold back water.

On 24 July 1963, D.C.W. Jones, a Borough and Waterworks Engineer took up a complaint from Mrs Williams, a local Councillor, stating that the NCB were depositing slurry on this tip, the same slurry that caused trouble at the Quarry at Merthyr Vale, and this tipping was at the back of Pantglas schools. The position was so serious that as the gradient was so steep it would not stay in position in heavy rain.

There was an exchange or correspondence but the tipping of tailing continued.

When questioned, D. L. Roberts at No.4 Area Headquarters said that he had remarked in March 1964 that after another 6 to 8 weeks 'we would not like to continue tipping on the mountain side where it is likely to be a source of danger of danger to Pantglas School.' However, John Bradley said that tipping was necessary to maintain production from the Colliery. In addition, Mr Bradley said that it was accepted that coal waste could slip and enter the properties of the people of Aberfan and that this potential was always there.

Late in 1963, there was a warning about the danger from Tip 7. Derek Colston, an acting tip charge hand, was in Aberfan village at 6.45 am when he heard a noise like a jet engine. When he reached the top of the tip he saw that about seven and an half yards of the point of the tip had slipped about three-fourths of the way down the face. The mechanic was summoned and he arrived with a burner who burnt off the portions of the crane-rails which overhung the point of the tip. The crane-driver, Gwyn Brown, said that he had no doubt that the 1963 and 1966 slips started from the same position at the top

of the tip and that on both occasions the crane would have gone down with the slip had it not been drawn back from the point. The movement troubled a slinger, Elvet Jones, since the slip had travelled hundreds of feet and reached the field known as Coedcae. The hole extended two thirds up the tip; the width was about 90 yards.

The insouciance of the NCB was remarkable. Their lack of concern is the reason for this tragedy.

In fact the Tribunal found that the NCB were to blame for this disaster. The blame was shared between the Board's headquarters, the South Western Divisional Board and certain individuals.

This disaster touched the hearts and consciences of people in Britain and throughout the world. The loss of so many young lives was very distressing. Children who would never reach teenage years or experience the love that leads to marriage, or to have their own children or homes or to earn money, or be a doctor, nurse, politician, famous personality or professional footballer.

It was being said that the atrocious carefree attitude of the NCB was the price of years of cheap coal and more profits for the executives of the NCB and the Treasury.

The Mayor of Merthyr Tydfil launched a disaster fund to aid the bereaved. The fund ran for about three months with nearly 90,000 contributions totalling £1,606,929 which works out, on average, as £17.85 per donation.

Due to the utter stupidity of the selfish Labour Government under Harold Wilson (1964-1970) and particularly the Treasury Department, the Fund had difficulties from the outset. If funds were given out immediately it could affect the compensation to be paid by the NCB and they would pay out less stating that relief had already been given by the Fund. However, monies were distributed by the Fund and then, as the fund had become so generous, it was unclear how the money should be used. To add to the complications members of the village on the Fund Committee were very few and so the villagers felt that they had little say in the distribution. The media, who can be grossly irresponsible, exaggerated the split between the committee and the villagers. Some donors wanted the money to go exclusively to the bereaved, others that it should benefit the wider community and a few thought it should be used to remove the tips but that was the responsibility of the NCB.

To add to the problems the paradox was that the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time was Roy Jenkins who was the son of a Welsh miner. As the NCB was a nationalized industry it was owned by the people via the government. What Wilson and Jenkins did was highly immoral in using the charity monies to attempt to get themselves and the NCB off the hook.

However, the Fund aided regeneration of the village paying for a memorial, house repairs, holidays for the villagers and a community hall.

The publicised and widespread fears that the money would stagnate in investments accounts were proved to be unfounded. Controversy did surface over the salary of the Fund's secretary/treasurer, Gerald Davis, and the siting of his offices in Merthyr Tydfil rather than in Aberfan. He was awarded an annual salary of £3,000 plus £250 for car expenses.

Harold Wilson and his government, along with the NCB, proved to be the villains and were grossly insensitive, not wanting the NCB or the Treasury to take full responsibility for the disaster and so forced the Fund to pay out £150,000 towards removing the tips from the village. This is also highly immoral and ruthless showing the insensitivity of the government and that they did not care or exercise their duty of care.

The donors, villagers and the local MP were understandably outraged. But, in 1997, this money was repaid to the Fund.

It is both unbelievable and scandalous to realise that no organisation, person or persons have been taken to Court over this disaster. There have been no civil proceedings and no criminal proceedings and yet, years later, individuals were charged with the criminal offence of manslaughter after the Hatfield rail disaster in which four people died. At Aberfan 144 people died!

On the day of the Aberfan disaster, Harold Wilson made a fleeting visit to Aberfan staying less than two hours. The following day, Lord Snowdon visited and returned the next day. The Duke of Edinburgh also visited and the village was full of reporters from all over the world asking the usual stupid questions such as how did grieving parents feel. The volume of additional traffic hindered progress. The NCB said that certain drainage work had been carried out and the tips were now safe. Lord Robens said that the stream under Tip 7 was the cause of the accident and that local miners, knowing that, should have made it safe. Many of the children that died had fathers who were miners and they would certainly not put their children at risk and many had been in mining accidents and tragedies. In fact, they had actively complained for years about the safety of this tip, and of other tips.

When the inquest was opened on 24 October one angry father demanded that on the death certificate the cause of death should read "buried alive by the National Coal Board." What he said was absolutely right but his demand was not met. The first funerals, which were private, were held on 26 October and a mass funeral took place the next day in which 82 victims were buried. The hymn Jesu, Lover of my Soul was sung to the glorious tune Aberystwyth. It was sung slowly and with a local band.

And still reporters asked the grief-stricken parents how they felt.

The Princess Margaret Toy Fund brought in 50,000 toys for the surviving children. One wonders at the wisdom of this. Did it comfort the disturbed children? Did it help the parents? What was probably hardest for the parents was to identify their children, blackened by the filthy sludge, whose little bodies were broken and crushed beyond recognition. Some could only be identified by the clothes they were wearing.

On the 28 October, the final body was found. In addition one young lad of 19 died of a heart attack after taking part in the strenuous rescue and a 22 year old just-married soldier also died. The Queen visited with her husband and was visibly shocked. Parents refused to send their children to the next nearest school at Merthyr Vale because it was so close to another tip. Later, some children attended a play school facility.

Some children were so distressed that they did not want to go to school again.

Insurance assessors had to decide on the safety of the properties damaged in the landslide. Thirty seven caravans were made available to the homeless and the Government and the NCB said the occupants must pay rent. How insensitive! Wilson and his government were so insensitive and they engendered another outburst of understandable anger. Wilson reluctantly withdrew the demand for rents.

By April, the wrecked school was demolished and temporary accommodation for the juniors was established. By the 28 April the tribunal was ended which confirmed that the NCB were solely responsible for this disaster. The report was published in August.

In June 1967 a mother of a surviving child received an anonymous letter threatening her child's life.

At such a time as this, the usual cry could have been raised blaming God for this tragedy. Nine of the dead children worshipped at Bethania Chapel which had been converted into a mortuary. Capel Aberfan lost four and its daughter church of Trinity in Merthyr Vale lost six. Twelve used to go to St Mary's Sunday School; ten went to the Catholic Church; twenty-two went to the Church of Christ; the Methodist Chapel had lost sixteen; the English Baptists had lost fourteen. Ninety three children of the 116 that died attended church; that is just over 80%.

The Presbyterian minister E. Pens Owen said, "I defy any coroner to call this an act of God. That tip should never have been put there. It was too close to the school." At his service on the Sunday following the disaster, he was surprised to find an increase of the number of children present. Wilfred Jones, minister of St Mary's, went into the pulpit and said, "This tragedy is the dire consequence of man's failure to use his intelligence and take precautions."

The Methodist minister, Irving Penberthy, had a service without hymns feeling that that might be inappropriate. But Psalm 48 was read.

Reverend Kenneth Hayes of the little Baptist Chapel lost a son in the disaster. He had a small congregation that morning, less than twenty including four children. There were reporters present complete with cameras. Mr Hayes wept openly in the pulpit and the service included the hymn:

Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on His gentle breast
There, by His love o'er-shaded,
Sweetly my soul shall rest.
Hark! 'tis the voice of angels,
Borne in a song to me.
Over the fields of glory,
Over the jasper sea.

Harold Wilson did not treat this disaster as a moral issue but as a political one. He took the wrong position on this. Moral issues are always more important than political issues. As my father said, "People matter more than politics!"

One recalls with absolute disgust the left wing activist and socialist Arthur Scargill who brought the miners out on strike in 1984 -1985. He was not primarily interested in the moral well-being of the miners but wanted to bring down the Conservative government of the day.

People matter more than politics!

The Welsh people are a lovely people.

And yet Wales was illegally invaded by the English just as Britain illegally invaded and occupied Iraq. Despite the atrocious way England treated them, it was the Welsh, in fighting with the English, which conquered the French at Agincourt in 1415 with their excellent bowman. The English took ages getting into their armour and finery while the Welsh went as they were.

In the two world wars it was the Welsh coal that kept Britain going.

And it was the National Coal Board in London that took Aberfan's children.

Try to think what the loss of the children of Aberfan meant to their parents. How would you feel if your children were wiped out like this? Can the NCB ever be forgiven?

As a school teacher, I look at my class and these lovely children and sometimes my thoughts go to Aberfan. What if it were my class that were killed?

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