



SOUTH WALES POLICE
MUSEUM

The Aberfan Disaster October 1966



The History of Policing in Wales

The Aberfan Disaster

October 1966

“ I have been asked to inform that there has been a landslide at Pantglas. The tip has come down on the school ”

Emergency call received by Merthyr Tydfil Police at 9.25am on 21st October 1966.

The Tragedy

At approximately 9.15am on Friday 21st October 1966, Merthyr Vale colliery tip situated on the mountainside overlooking the village of Aberfan in South Wales, slipped and descended on Pantglas Junior School.

The tip slid like an avalanche. It destroyed the school, 20 nearby houses in its path, and rendered other houses in the vicinity unsafe for habitation.

Half a million tonnes of coal waste in a tidal wave 40 feet high hit the village. The school was in session as it was the last day before half term week.

144 children and adults died; 116 were school children. Half of all the pupils at Pantglas Junior School were killed together with five of their teachers.

The tragedy was caused by two days of continual heavy rain loosening the coal slag, which was situated on top of an underground spring.

The Role of the Police

Police officers played a key role in the rescue operation, coordinating search efforts, all victim identification, funeral arrangements and the final fatality call.

This was a disaster unprecedented in the history of coal mining in Wales, and the police had to overcome their own feelings of shock and grief to deal with the practicalities arising from the tragedy.



The scene immediately following the disaster at Pantglas Junior School

Police supervised all of the victim identifications at Bethania Chapel, under the ministry of Reverend S. Lloyd, which was provided as a temporary mortuary 250 yards from the scene of the devastation.

With its balcony, the chapel seated a congregation of 500, and was approximately 30 yards by 20 yards in size.

The vestry, 20 yards by 10 yards, housed voluntary workers for the Red Cross together with St John's Ambulance stretcher-bearers.

The chapel was in use as a mortuary and missing person's bureau from 21st October until 4th November 1966.

The mortuary was set up by officers of the No. 8 (Welsh) Regional Crime Squad.

Officers provided 24-hour coverage through two 12 hour shifts, with identification going on throughout the night.

They organised a water supply to the chapel, telephone installation, and an administration system.

They also made the necessary arrangements for identification and medical examination of the deceased; inquests and the issuing of burial and cremation orders.

200 LOST AS COLLIERY TIP ENGULFS SCHOOL

Mothers join in night search for their buried children

85 BODIES RECOVERED, 36 INJURED



Prime Minister promises all help

After visiting the wrecked school and watching rescue work last night, Mr. Wilson said: "There will be the most high level independent inquiry it will be possible to mount into this tragedy."

He assured those in charge that they need not be inhibited by procedure, cost, or lack of statutory authority. "All the necessary powers in the name of the Government have been given to them to take any action they need", he said.

Immediately on arriving by air from Liverpool he went into conference at Merthyr Tydfil with the chief constable and heads of the rescue services. Also present were Mr. Cledwyn Hughes, Secretary of State for Wales, and Mr. Thomas, Minister of State for Welsh Affairs.

A death roll of about 200 is feared in the disaster at the Welsh mining village of Aberfan, Glamorgan, where yesterday morning a rain-soaked 800ft. slag tip slipped and engulfed a school, a row of terraced cottages, and a farm. Early today known deaths totalled 85.

The slag was part of a colliery tip linked to the Merthyr Vale colliery. Two days of heavy rain are stated to have caused it to give way. Last night while 2,000 men and women worked under floodlights, using shovels, picks and their hands, the slag was still moving slowly. Several rescue workers were injured.

The south-western division of the National Coal Board said last night that the fall away ran for about half a mile before it engulfed the school and other buildings.

Casualty figures announced early today were:—

Children dead	76
Adults dead	9
In hospital	36
Missing	about 80

The school, Pantglas infants' and junior, was overwhelmed as the boys and girls were about to start their first lesson. The children were aged seven to 11 years.

Rescuers found the bodies of 14 in one classroom. Bulldozers and earth-clearing equipment were brought in. Mothers worked deep in mud as they tried to find their children.

Hundreds of volunteers—including many miners—shifted coal slurry by bucket chain. When faint cries could be heard there were shouts of "Quiet!". Bulldozers stopped and a hush fell upon the rescuers. The cries were pinpointed, digging and shovelling were resumed, and the bulldozers started up again.

The body of Mr. D. Beynon, the deputy head teacher, was found near midnight. A rescuer said: "He was clutching five children in his arms as if he had been protecting them."

A woman and her two grandchildren died in the farm engulfed by the slag. A woman who lost a son in the disaster was taken to hospital to give birth to a child.



The scene at Aberfan yesterday, showing the path of the slag as it engulfed the Pantglas infants' and junior school, houses and a farm. Most of the rescue work is concentrated on the school (left). Other pictures on page 16.

Newspaper clipping from the time of the disaster

By 11.30pm on the day of the disaster, 67 bodies had been brought to the mortuary and identification had begun. By the following morning, every pew in Bethania Chapel, both upstairs and downstairs, was occupied by a body. Stretchers were subsequently brought into use and placed across pews.

Coffins were supplied from South Wales, the Midlands, Bristol and Northern Ireland. Between Saturday and Monday, 192 coffins arrived at the mortuary and were stored in part of the vestry.

On Sunday morning, 400 embalmers arrived at Aberfan and cleaned, dressed, and cofined over 100 bodies.



Officers assisting in the grim task of digging for survivors

An officer from Cardiff Borough Force, together with colleagues from the Merthyr Borough Force, supervised the work of the embalmers and attended to the proper release of coffins to the undertakers.

The embalmers had to work in the vestry where space was extremely restricted, but despite these restrictions the police were satisfied that their work was to the highest standard. Arrangements were made for the bodies to be released to the bereaved relatives from 10am on Monday 24th October.

The Coroner for Merthyr Police made sure that only two doctors were involved in the certification of death and the examination of bodies. The bodies were identified to the Coroner's Officer and then in turn identified to the doctor and the coroner at the inquest.

Arrangements for the burial and cremation orders were handed to representatives of the bereaved families. Notification of all inquests was pinned to the Chapel door. The cause of death was typically found to be asphyxia, a fractured skull or multiple crush injuries.

As bodies were brought to the mortuary, each was labelled with a consecutive number in the presence of a police officer, then recorded and placed in the chapel to await identification.



A young boy looks on as rescuers dig for survivors

After identification, the name was inserted on the label and in records. The body was then dealt with by the embalmers, properly coffined, and released to undertakers in accordance with the wishes of the relatives. The label never left the body.

To ensure best identification, relatives were admitted to identify one body at a time. No room was available in the early stages to accommodate everyone waiting, so the other relatives patiently and co-operatively waited on the forecourt of the chapel. The situation was explained and seats provided.

Where no identification could be obtained, a description of the missing person was obtained by police officers assisted by selected red-cross workers.

The method of identification was visual where possible, and confirmed by clothing or property. Otherwise, identification was made by means of clothing or property, combined with a general description.

There were 15 difficult cases and four cases where the lower limbs formed part of a body. Fingerprints were taken in these instances and checks were made from school dentistry records in relation to children.

A second mortuary at Aberfan Calvinistic Chapel was also used from Saturday 22nd October until Saturday 29th October. This was a smaller chapel 50 yards away from Bethania, and was used as the final resting-place for the deceased before burial.

Police ensured that all burial arrangements were made in accordance with the wishes of the relatives.



A Police officer rescues a child from the rubble.

The relatives of the deceased met at Zion Chapel to discuss funeral arrangements. A mass funeral was favoured, but some relatives expressed a preference for individual burials or cremations.

Police officers explained the procedure of identification to relatives to reassure them that correct identifications had been made in all cases prior to burial.

In addition, officers guaranteed that the bodies had been revered throughout the process of checking, embalming and burial.

The coffins were placed for viewing in the vestry at Aberfan Calvinistic Chapel.

The main funeral took place at Aberfan cemetery on Thursday 27th October 1966, but individual funerals were carried out daily between 24th and 31st October.

The Final Fatality Roll

The police painstakingly determined the final fatality roll by arranging for press and television publicity asking everyone to notify either the police or Bethania Chapel if they knew of any missing people who might have been involved in the tragedy.

A check was then made on named individuals via house to house inquiries. Only two class registers were available for the staff and children at Pantglas Junior School. In order to determine the numbers of deceased, it was necessary to rewrite the missing registers by checking on all possible pupils in the school's admission book.

Pupils in Pantglas Senior School were also counted as all the class registers were available. The class registers were checked with three surviving teachers and the borough education department. No discrepancies were found.

A count was carried out for the occupants of the demolished houses, and checked with the electoral register, health executive list, the school list and the Reverend K Hayes who kept his own list. There were no discrepancies.

The Aftermath

As a result of the disaster at Aberfan, the Mines and Quarries Tips Act of 1969 was introduced. This act was passed in order to prevent disused tips becoming a danger to members of the public.

The combined police forces of Merthyr Tydfil, Glamorgan and Cardiff played a key role in controlling and co-ordinating both the immediate rescue efforts and aftermath of the tragedy. They dealt with the many offers of help from all over Britain and abroad, consoled devastated parents as they identified their children and ensured that the media coverage of subsequent events was appropriate.



Aberfan cemetery

In the wake of a number of national disasters elsewhere in Britain, an emergency-planning department was established by the South Wales Constabulary in 1992.

Notes

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KEEPING SOUTH WALES **SAFE** THROUGH TIME