

## Background and Context

On 21 October, 1966 Tip No 7 which forms part of the main complex of tips at Aberfan slipped and descended upon part of the village killing 116 children and 29 adults. The tragedy occurred just after nine o'clock in the morning under circumstances which apparently precluded the issue of warning. The presence of a mountain mist obscured the cascading torrent of slag so that, except for an ominous rumble, the villagers were unaware of the catastrophic fate which was about to overtake them. To make matters worse the roaring torrent burst the water main in the disused canal and several million gallons of water were released converting the slag into slurry or a muddy slime. Immediately in the path of the torrent was the junior school which was attended by pupils in the age range five to eleven years and classes had already begun. The school received the direct impact of the rolling mass and it was not long before the slurry found entry into the school through windows, doors and other apertures caused by the effect of the damage. Some account of what followed has been given by those who survived the disaster and it seems that, with the total unexpectedness of such an onslaught and the attendant delay in realising what was happening, there was naturally a time lag between the engulfing of the school and the attempts by those inside to escape or to take measures of safety.

Nearby was the senior school which was attended by pupils in the age range eleven to fifteen years. Little damage was done to this school where, in any case, it so happened that classes commenced later than those of the junior school. However, many of the senior school pupils were on their way to school when the avalanche of slurry descended, some of them were engulfed by the slurry and either trapped or injured by the floating debris which it had gathered up during its descent. Many houses were damaged or destroyed causing injury or death to their occupants and others who were in the vicinity.

The search for the injured and the dead continued for several days. Altogether 116 children died bereaving 99 families some which suffered multiple losses not only children but also of adults. In addition 28 adults were killed including the breadwinners of families and in cases persons who had assumed some measure of responsibility for certain of their relatives. Then there were the injured 29 children were admitted to hospitals although many of these returned home within 24 hours, after receiving treatment, eight of them however suffered injuries which are likely to affect them the rest of their lives.

## How the Topic was Handled

Over the years since the disaster, a number of commemorations have been witnessed, especially during the 25, 30 and 40 year anniversaries. During these occasions, there have been a number of newspaper articles, both local and international, and television documentaries made (one received a Bafta Award in 2006 with regards to the villagers battle with the Government over the removal of the tips).

## 40th Anniversary Events (2006)

- A special Civic Service was held in Merthyr Tydfil and in Aberfan.
- About 100 people gathered at Aberfan cemetery to lay wreaths, among them some families who had never before attended before the 40th anniversary day. Welsh Secretary Peter Hain and First Minister Rhodri Morgan were among those who joined in the prayers as the wreaths were laid.
- A special documentary (filmed by the BBC Wales News) followed the last survivor to be pulled out of the school - Councillor and then Mayor Jeff Edwards MBE. It highlighted his work for charities and as an advisor to the Government, and saw him being reunited with the Fireman who had rescued him during that fateful day, who happen to be a fellow Councillor at Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.
- The documentary also charted the progress of work being carried out by American artist Shimon Attie with the people of Aberfan to create new images of the village. The artist had never heard of Aberfan before going to the town, and wanted to help provide the village with an alternative public face from the well-known pictures of the disaster.

He said: "I'm trying to use modern art to help normalise the village. I want it to be merely an ordinary Welsh village amongst other Welsh villages."

- Welsh sporting events marked the anniversary during the weekend. Cardiff City players wore black armbands during their game at Norwich on Saturday, and there was a minute's silence before football matches in the Welsh Premiership and at rugby games.

## Funding for Disaster Memorials

The funding for disaster memorials is not a short term issue. Trustees of funds need to secure funding long after the event. For Aberfan, the Welsh Assembly Government agreed on 31 February 2007 to provide grants totalling £2million to the Aberfan Memorial Charity and the Aberfan Education Charity to underwrite their work in maintaining the graves and the memorial as well as supporting local schools. The 40th anniversary in October 2006 raised fears about how the upkeep of the graves and the memorial gardens would be funded in the future. The Assembly Government grant has allayed those fears.

## Lessons Identified

None available.

## Contacts for Further Information

[www.merthyr.gov.uk](http://www.merthyr.gov.uk)