

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. Nevertheless, some were quicker than others in realising that something terrible was amiss, and some escapes were made by means of normal exits and others through windows and by other methods that were still available, but for many there was little hope.

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. In one instance, three children were killed when a house was pushed on top of them while they were sitting on a wall, and there were numerous other ways in which death or injury was caused both to children and adults. Many houses were damaged or destroyed causing injury or death to their occupants and others who were in the vicinity.

When the stark reality of what had happened was fully understood and that the suddenness of the event was an element which unavoidably caused that kind of delay only to be expected in human reaction in such circumstances, urgent steps were taken to set in motion the necessary emergency services to rescue those who might have been still living and to tend the sick and suffering. These were at first provided by the local residents and men from the local colliery, by local and county services and later, national services lent their full support. From the beginning, many voluntary services rendered immeasurable and constant support, and indeed there were many others rendering assistance whose identity was unknown.

It was inevitable that, with the turmoil created by the suddenness of the event, confusion prevailed for a time. Worse still, there was uncertainty among parents and other relatives as to whether their children, husbands, wives and other relatives had perished in the disaster. With restoration of some semblance of order and rescue operations under way, arrangements were made to take the bodies of the victims to Bethania Chapel which had hastily been brought into use as a temporary mortuary in the main street of Aberfan. When that became inadequate, the Aberfan Calvinistic Methodist Church was also utilised for the purpose. Identification presented an especial problem with so many victims, most of whom were young children.

It must be pointed out the emotional strain was greatly intensified because many parents and relatives were unaware of the fate of those whose safety they hoped to establish - inadequate communications tended to make matters worse. For instance, a parent might be told that a child had been rescued and sent to hospital on account of injuries only to find on enquiring at the hospital that the child was that of another family and this would mean a return to the mortuary to await an opportunity for searching among the deceased and the reverse situation sometime applied.

More harrowing still were those instances where a family lost two children or, as happened in two cases, where a man lost his wife, two children and his house and home. The search for the injured and the dead continued for several days. Altogether 116 children died bereaving 99 families some of which suffered multiple losses not only of children but also of adults. In addition, 28 adults were killed including the breadwinners of families and, in some cases, persons who had assumed some measure of responsibility for certain of their relatives. Then there were the injured 29 children who 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

After the near-fruitless rescue, the repercussions and the grief came the memories - and the flashbacks. The mental scars are so hard to heal some 40 years after the Aberfan disaster.

It must have made a terrific roar. None of us will ever know what it was like in the moment when the Aberfan tip slid down the hill and struck Pantglas Junior School, and few people would want to imagine it.

However, for those who survived the slip, it can be revisited upon them at any time.

It can occur when a lorry thunders past their house, when a low jet passes over, or when a certain smell reaches the nostrils.

Even today, those survivors remain reluctant to send their own children to school on the days when it rains, because there was such bad weather on the morning of the disaster.

Then there was the employment tribunal a couple of years ago, after a survivor had been fired from her job in a local factory because she refused to work nights, arguing that she still had severe problems in coping with darkness, like the black of the slurry that hit Pantglas.

It isn't just the children that have had to deal with the trauma. Among those parents still alive who lost children, there is a feeling that others have died before their time, the result of grief and terrible memories.

And it hit the witnesses hard, too. John Humphreys has spoken of the horrors he had seen as a young reporter at the scene.

The veteran journalist and broadcaster Gwyn Llewelyn, the first television correspondent to reach Aberfan on the morning of the disaster, recalls how, "On the way back to Cardiff on the Sunday, instead of going home to my wife – Luned and I had only just got married at the time – for some reason I went instead to see my colleague, the broadcaster Gwyn Eryl, and broke down crying as I opened my heart to him.

"Then, as I was broadcasting from the studio on the Monday, I broke down again live on TV and couldn't continue with my report."

To reduce experienced reporters to tears gives an indication of how traumatised people became.

But two major medical studies into the survivors of Aberfan have demonstrated that immediately in the aftermath and many years later, survivors were still vividly reliving the day.

The first was carried out by a consultant psychiatrist from South Wales. He said, "As this was not a natural disaster and the National Coal Board were ultimately held liable, preparations were required for possible litigation at a later date.

"I was given the task of conducting medico-legal examinations of the survivors. I had the opportunity of studying the many effects and problems precipitated by such a disaster."

The main study took four years, but a number of children who were partially asphyxiated were followed for 10 years.

He studied 86 children aged three to 14-years-old. He said, "Many became very fearful of loud noises, especially sirens, low-flying aircraft and thunder, and of being left alone. Sleep disturbances were very frequent, and regressive behaviour in the younger children was particularly prominent."

Much of this, he found, was down to bereavement. Some 79 children, or 92%, were grieving for the loss of a family member or friend. This only compounded the problems they had in dealing with their own experiences, with over 80% classed as suffering from moderate to very severe psychological trauma as a consequence.

This manifested itself in a score of symptoms, such as sleep disorders, mood changes, anxiety, behavioural difficulties, phobias and physical or

psychosomatic indicators, such as loss of appetite and headaches. Jeff Edwards, who survived the disaster, an eight-year-old waiting to be rescued with a classmate dead beside him, recalls how he couldn't go back to school.

"Every family was affected, and the majority of people were affected very, very badly. It radically changed their lives, and they would never be the same again.

"Attitudes have changed now to what they were in the past. Fathers were very macho back then, and we didn't have counselling.

"It was similar to what happened after the Lockerbie disaster. Strathclyde Police had huge problems with officers who had been picking up pieces of bodies spread over a 200-mile radius. They didn't know how to deal with it. If they confided, it was a sign of weakness, so they kept it to themselves. There were major problems with alcoholism and marital breakdowns. People here had to deal with what they saw – pieces of bodies."

"I lost three to four years' education at a very important time. I was afraid to go to school, afraid the tip would come down on me again. I was displaying all the classic symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder."

Back in 1966, PTSD had yet to be formally recognised. Some 33 years after the disaster, a major new study into the long-term effects of PTSD was published by a group of psychiatrists working for the University of Wales College of Medicine. Of the 41 survivors they interviewed, it was found that some 49% had suffered PTSD.

Dr Jane Scourfield was one of the report's authors.

She said, "People with PTSD go about in a heightened state of anxiety, waiting for things to trigger off an intrusion into their thoughts. Some survivors said they didn't like letting their children go to school when it rained." But the research threw up some interesting facts. "To draw conclusions, we needed to compare survivors with another group that were similar in all respects, apart from what we were interested in.

"So the researchers compared them with other children from Merthyr Vale, and we could do that as both groups went to Afon Taf High School (in Merthyr Tydfil)," said Dr Scourfield.

It found that the survivors were academically more successful than the comparison group, with higher percentages passing O and A levels and degrees, with 10% going on to a higher degree, compared with only 1% for the other Afon Taf pupils.

And while the survivors reported higher instances of PTSD, psychopathology and anxiety and depressive disorders, substance misuse was lower, with only 5% admitting to it, compared with 13% for the others from Merthyr Vale. Dr Scourfield said, "We didn't do rates of conviction, but there were no significant differences in marriages and divorces, and employment levels were the same.

“We didn’t evaluate the survivors for this, so we can only speculate on the reasons, but there was evidence that PTSD symptoms subside.”

Cliff Minett lost two children at Aberfan. He, along with other parents, helps administer the Aberfan Disaster Fund. He estimates that he and his wife are two of around just 30 surviving parents left in the village.

“We have buried quite a few of them in recent times. I estimate that we lose a higher-than-usual number every year because of what happened here.

“I know for a fact that it puts a lot of them in their graves with broken hearts. They just can’t forget what happened, and it can take years off their life.

“A lot of them – friends of mine – should have lived a lot longer than they did. But I think quite a few of them couldn’t put up with it any longer.

“You see, it’s not like the outside world. We will mark what happened this year as we always do, with the annual memorial service. But there is not 40th anniversary, or 30, or any special anniversary, because, for us, it’s here all the time. It never goes away, and it happens every day.”

In the conclusion of his study of survivors, the psychiatrist who carried out the first study found, “The village of Aberfan has undergone tremendous changes – the overhanging menace of the black coal heaps has disappeared and been replaced by a green and wooded slope where the new generation of children may play without fear. On the disaster site there is a memorial garden, and nearby a community centre has become the hub of a wide variety of village activities.

“The people, however, continue to grieve and remember, but they seldom complain”.

Lessons Identified

It is recognised that there was insufficient after care of victims, families and friends. Survivor guilt is now a recognised condition and grief counselling is offered to the bereaved and all involved in an incident. This was not the case in 1966. Men then were expected to bear their grief 'like men' and not show 'weakness'. Parents remarked that they only had to see the surviving children growing up to be constantly reminded of what they had lost.

Psychological and behavioural problems in surviving children, their parents and in other residents are still an issue today, such as fear of the darkness and heavy rain bringing back haunting memories.

Contacts for Further Information

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