

Aberfan: in memoriam

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Editor Note

It was an ordinary day in Aberfan, Wales, and it ended in a disaster. On October 21, 1966, a 34-meter-high slag heap broke loose, slid down Mount Merthyr into the mining village and buried houses and an elementary school there. The result: 144 people died, *116 of them children*. October 21, 1966 was a gloomy day in Aberfan, South Wales. It had been raining incessantly for days. But the children in the mining village were happy: they were looking forward to the autumn vacations. This was their last day at school. But then disaster struck.

No sooner had the children returned to their classrooms from the morning assembly than a 250 meter high spoil heap came loose from the Merthyr Vale coal mine. Two million tons of debris, mud and soot thundered down the mountain, burying the elementary school, a farm and an entire row of homes. 144 people were killed, 116 of them children.

The village was not warned, the telephone did not work. For nearly a hundred years, the Merthyr Vale Colliery's mine spoil had been dumped over the village. Pantglass Junior School lay directly in the shadow of dump 7. On the morning of the accident, workers had indeed noticed that parts

of the spoil heap had slumped away - a crane worker then notified the colliery office. But he could not reach the people in the valley because the telephone was not working. The wires had been stolen years ago. The debris and mud avalanche sounded like a jet plane, says David Hopkins, who survived the disaster. It took nearly a week to recover the last victim. There were seven water wells under the tailings pile. For years, Aberfan residents had warned about the seven dumps. But even their deputy did not dare to insist on its removal. He feared that additional expenses would lead to mine closure and unemployment. After all, coal mining had actually long since ceased to be profitable in Aberfan as

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well. The fatal slide had been caused by an accumulation of water that liquefied the excavated material. The fact that there were seven springs under the dump's tipping point had been common knowledge and even shown on an official map. A subsequent tribunal blamed the lack of safety policy on the part of the State Coal Board NCB for the accident. Decades of silence follow the accident. But the head, Lord Robens, declared that he had known nothing about the springs. The Coal Authority was ordered to pay compensation of 500 to 1,000 pounds per family. There are many who could not or were not allowed to talk about the disaster for decades, says a former

pupil at Pantglass Junior School. What happened in Aberfan at that time was a dark secret that we children were not allowed to talk about. People had to stay silent, especially for the sake of other people who had lost their children. At the same time, the surviving children did not talk to each other. We kept it all locked away inside us. After the disaster, when we were little, there were hardly any children left. And so we wandered the streets like lost souls. The Merthyr Vale coal mine closed in 1989. But the wounds of the people of Aberfan who had lost their children have not healed to this day. 116 children died on that day.