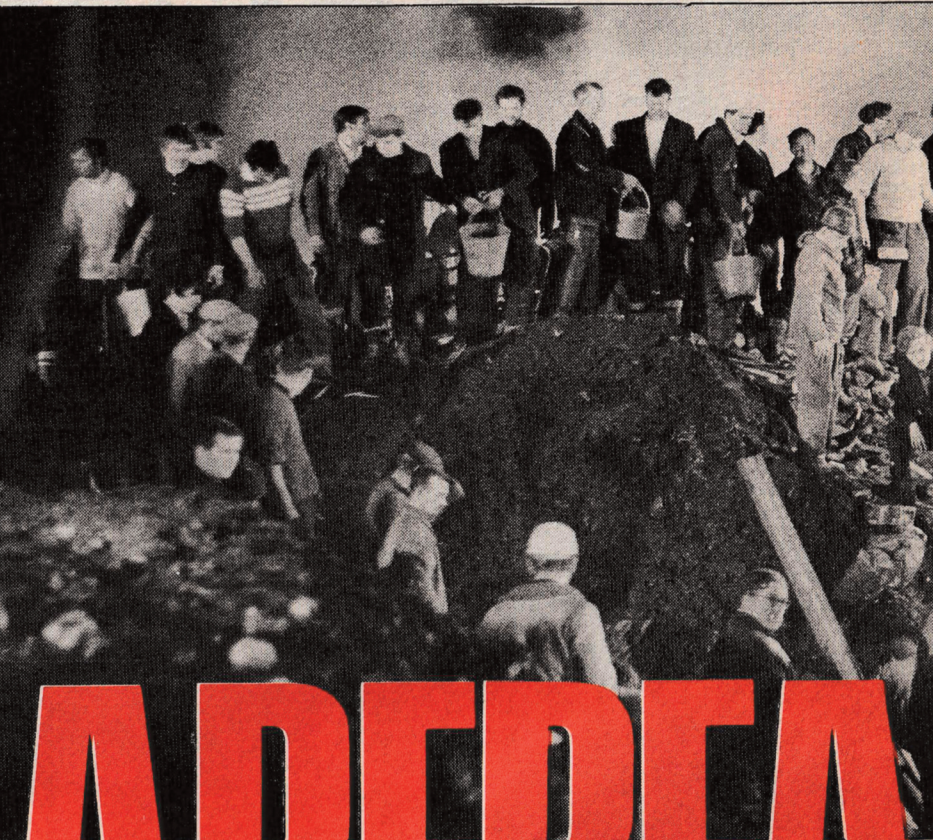


On 21 October 1966, 116 children and buried under tons of slurry. Now, 20

28 adults died when their school was years later...



# ABERFAN - THE TRAGEDY GOES ON

Twenty years ago, almost an entire generation of children perished in Britain's worst human disaster, in the South Wales mining village of Aberfan, near Merthyr Tydfil.

At 9.14am on 21 October 1966, a tip of coal waste slid down a hillside above the village and engulfed Pantglas Junior School. The adjoining infants' school was untouched, but a farmhouse and a row of terraced houses were demolished. Of the 144 who died, 116 were children. They had been due to break up for their half-term holiday at noon.

The school was buried under 45ft of slag and mud.

By nightfall on 21 October, 71 of the dead had been recovered. The bodies of 14 children were found in one classroom. In another, the school's deputy headmaster was found dead with his arms clasped round five children, also dead, whom he had been trying to protect.

Six days later, 10,000 people attended the mass funeral of 81 children and one woman in Aberfan's small, hillside cemetery.

Two decades on, CHAT sent Anthony Hayward back to the village to find a community still mourning for its lost children.

On a hillside high above Aberfan, two long rows of graves look down on the village. They stand as a monument to Aberfan's lost generation.

One headstone reads: 'In memory of Richard, who loved light, freedom and animals.'

Twenty years after the disaster, the community is still traumatised by grief.

Waiting for children who arrive late home from school causes parents an anxiety that only they could know.

Nine-year-old Sylvia Richards was one of those who never returned from school on Friday 21 October 1966.

Her mother, Elaine, was in a Merthyr Tydfil hospital recovering from an abdominal operation. She heard about the disaster on the radio. 'By 10am, we knew that a tip had slipped and children were buried,' she recalls. 'My first reaction was disbelief. I couldn't imagine it.'

Sylvia's miner father, Emlyn, soon found out the reality. 'I had taken Sylvia to school that morning,' he says. 'After we had changed in the baths at Merthyr Vale colliery, we were told to go back up to the school.'

'It was a hell of a mess. The first lot of houses were still there and the tip was moving down slowly.'

'Some of us got a few children out. I didn't know where Sylvia was.'

**Waiting for children who arrive home late causes parents an anxiety that only they could know**

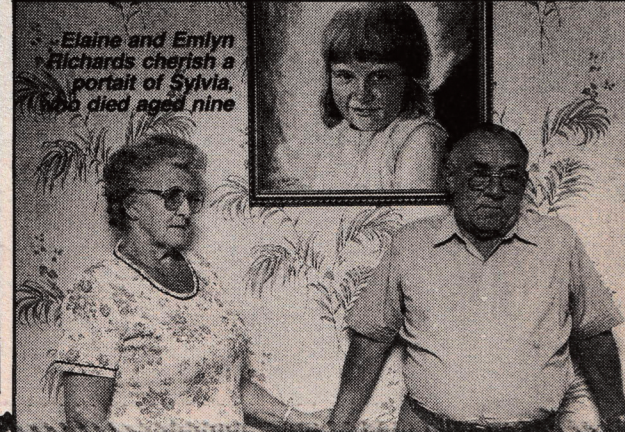
In the early hours of Saturday morning, Emlyn went to a chapel where bodies had been taken for identification.

'It was a terrible thing to see all those children - about 100

of them,' he says. 'I found Sylvia among them. It was the worst experience of my life.'

Elaine returned home from hospital a week after the disaster. 'We lived each day as it came, with our sorrows,' she says. 'We never turned to drugs or psychiatrists, as some people did. Our religious faith was the one thing we still had.'

'That Christmas was terrible. I was back in hospital with thrombosis. I remember seeing the children coming round playing their recorders on Christmas Eve. That finished me because Sylvia had just been given a recorder.'



Elaine and Emlyn Richards cherish a portrait of Sylvia, who died aged nine



Tragically Sheila Lewis lost her eldest child Sharon, nine (above), in the Aberfan disaster

Pat Lewis, who was eight a week after the disaster, survived, only to lose her nine-year-old sister, Sharon.

'She has never talked much about it,' says her mother Sheila, 'but she said at the time that she was looking at her teacher calling the register, and she could see the wall cracking open behind the teacher.'

'The teacher got all those children out immediately, but even she didn't realise what was happening.'

'I had just sent the children

**'She could see the wall cracking open behind the teacher'**

to school and was washing up the dishes when I heard a noise,' Sheila recalls. 'We were expecting a load of coal to be delivered and I thought it had been dropped.'

'Then I popped upstairs to make the beds and there was this frantic knocking at the door. It was my daughter Pat. She said: "Mummy, the school has fallen down."

'When we got to the school, it looked like a terrible fantasy. Because of the fog, you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. There were ratters pointing to the sky.'

'We ran up the steps into the school yard and my five-year-old son, Gwyn, was there, white as a sheet and one tear running down his cheek. He said: "I don't know

where Sharon and Pattie are."

'My children were very close. Gwyn said he went into a room to look for his sisters and, soon after he left it, it collapsed.'

'I sent Gwyn and Pat to a friend's house and, being a nurse in Merthyr, got in through the gym window to see what I could do.'

'There were about 20 children in the gym who had been swept forward by the blast. Those were the ones we could help, but one walked out of there, collapsed and died. We took the children to the midwife's house across the road.'

'My husband, who's also called Gwyn, was head timekeeper at Taff Merthyr colliery, and all the miners came over. The children we got out who couldn't walk

were laid on blankets in the yard. I stayed there until about six in the evening.'

'Nobody came out alive after 11am. It was the most horrifying day.'

After a couple of hours at home, Sheila and Gwyn returned to the school but were not allowed near it.

'One thing I knew I wouldn't be able to do was to identify Sharon,' says Sheila. 'I came home and Gwyn stayed there.'

'Bodies were being laid out in the chapel. After a while, there would be some that hadn't been identified and people would go in.'

'My husband had to identify Sharon. He came back at about 5am on Saturday and said he had recognised her, that she had been found with the rest of her class and her teacher.'

'I remember I was sitting on a stool by the fire when he came in. I slid back up against the corner of the room and made a terrible noise for I don't know how long.'

For months, Sheila automatically continued to lay five places at the table.

'I used to creep out of bed when everyone was asleep and do my crying downstairs. Some of those times were very necessary because it's healthy to have an outlet for your grief.'

'You've got to get on with your life and everyday problems, and carry this space in your life, this terrible, emotional hurt, forever.'

Today, Susan Robson is married with two children, Stephen, seven, and Joanne, three, and still lives in Aberfan village, a short distance from the cemetery. At eight, she was one of the children carried alive out of the buried school. The memory of 21 October 1966 has never left her.

'I remember it all went dark at school,' she recalls. 'The teacher asked us all to go under the desks.'

'The next thing I remember was seeing everything covered and mud all over me. I could hear men right above me saying they couldn't find anybody else. I put my finger through a little hole above my head, the men saw it, got me out and passed me through the window to a policeman.'

'We had about 40 in the class and many didn't get out. I was in hospital for a couple of days. A desk had gone through my foot and I had a deep cut and bruises.'

'I was very afraid of the dark for a long time. I'm all right now, but I'll never forget it.'