

Communities Linked by Tragedy – Remembering Aberfan

by Laura Henley Harrison, JHAW/CHIC Project Manager

21 October 2026 marks the 60th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster when coal tip number seven collapsed catastrophically, killing 144 people in the Welsh mining village of Aberfan in Merthyr Tydfil. Pantglas Junior School was directly in the path of the deluge, and out of the 144 lives lost that day, 116 of them were children. Among the rubble they found a small clock which had stopped at exactly 9.13am, and each year our valley communities hold a minute's silence to remember those who lost their lives. The community continues to deeply mourn this missing generation, children who should have gone on to have children and now grandchildren of their own.

One of our oral history interviews brought my thoughts back to Aberfan this month and highlighted how during times of great tragedy our communities pull closer together. In the days following the disaster, emergency services and volunteers from across South Wales worked around the clock to locate survivors.

Among the volunteers was Ellis Pruchnie, who was Company Director of Pearl Paints which was based at Treforest Industrial Estate. He was also the chairman of AJEX (The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women). Ellis's son Michael was interviewed by the Jewish History Association of Wales, and he recounts a childhood memory of his father returning home from Aberfan after trying to locate survivors:

“The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women was a very close-knit group obviously of ex-military people. It was a way in which they kept together and devoted a lot of time and energy not just to the [Jewish] community, but also to different groups outside Judaism.

In fact, in 1966 during the Aberfan disaster, my father took up ten ex-servicemen to Aberfan and they worked there for two days. They weren't asked, they just went and did it, and this was the nature of the group...that disaster affected all ten of the men, most of whom had been in the Second World War or other fighting scenarios and I certainly remember my father and one of the others coming to our house, stripping off... all their clothes were rotten from all the digging and both men were just in tears because they didn't save anybody.”



*Ellis Pruchnie (seated) and his son Michael Pruchnie.
The photograph was taken in the office of Pearl Paints in
Treforest in 1989.*

Image courtesy of Michael Pruchnie.

Julian Bloom, whose father was a G.P in the Merthyr area, also recalls that day in 1966.

“And on the day of Aberfan the... the broadcast was interrupted specifically—I can’t remember I was already home for lunch from school so it must have been about 12:30 ,12:45 that there had been a disaster in Aberfan and... and anybody who could come down there should please come down there. My father was not physically very well in those days, but we went down there; my uncle Sammy, his wife Nora, was the commandant of the local Red Cross, so she went down there. We were all—I was sixteen—so we were encouraged to take spades with us...In the event they were not allowed to be used because it was... it was so dangerous there. Yes, my father was there but there was nobody to be saved. These poor children had died. They were overwhelmed by the slurry which came down the slope. But yes, everybody from Merthyr who could get down there was there.”

Another Merthyr G.P was Leslie Hamilton, who had moved with his family to Cardiff in 1964. His son, Stephen, who was 12 years old at the time, remembers returning with his father on the day of the disaster to offer assistance.



Stephen Hamilton with his sisters Sharon and Susan in the mid-1960s.

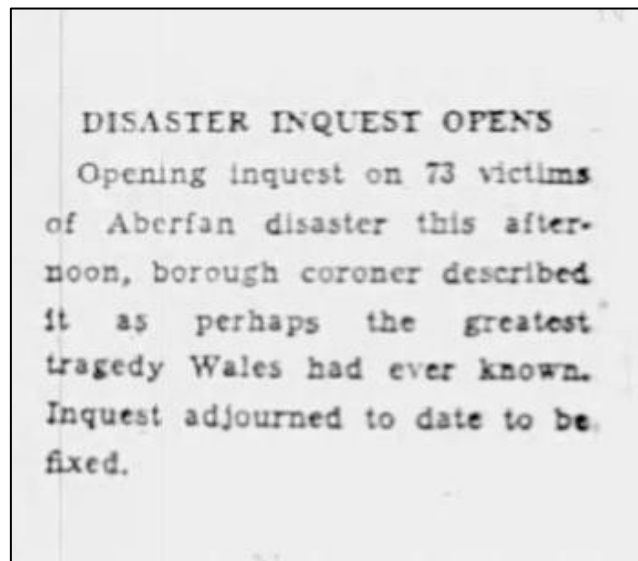
Image courtesy of Stephen Hamilton.

“...a lot of the people caught up in the tragedy were former patients of his and he felt a need... he had to go there to assist and I know he went with a GP colleague late morning, but were prevented from getting through by the police, because the place was overrun with volunteers and helpers, so Dad came back and then heard later on the news that sadly it wasn’t true that the Headmistress, who had been one of his patients, had been brought out alive, and he had his desire to go back. I remember I was the only one at home at the time with Dad—my mum and sisters were away—so I went up with him, he wasn’t going to leave me on my own and I went up with him to the village and this time, we were allowed to get through but I can remember parking up on the side and he going off saying, “Oh, be back soon,” and he went for what was, to me, an eternity... many, many hours, and I thought... I was worried, I thought maybe the tip had further collapsed again, which wasn’t so, but all that time, unfortunately, there was nothing to be done except for him helping to identify bodies, which was very traumatic, for him.”

Oral history projects build up a picture of our past in layers. We see historical events through local eyes, and these stories can only be told for a finite amount of time.

To emphasise the importance of capturing stories before they vanish, we should remember Benjamin Hamilton, a prominent member of the Merthyr Jewish Community at the time of the

Aberfan disaster. He was the Honorary Secretary of the Merthyr Hebrew Congregation, a well-respected local solicitor, and the coroner in charge of the Aberfan inquest.



South Wales Argus, 22 October 1966, p. 8.

He had to visit the site of the school and determine the cause of death for all the victims, which was cited on the death certificates as asphyxia and multiple injuries. As he continued reading through the names, the father of one of the children disagreed with his findings, stating, “No, Sir, buried alive by the National Coal Board”.



South Wales Argus, 24 October 1966, p. 1.

The press documented this information, as they were present at the meetings, but it does not describe Benjamin's personal feelings about what he experienced or how he reconciled his work as a coroner with the local community's overwhelming grief and anger. Benjamin Hamilton died in April 1979, and his memories of this event would have been lost forever if he had not been interviewed in an oral history project by David Jacobs in 1977. His words are now held in the archives of St Fagans National Museum of History and give us his very personal insight into a very public tragedy.

Our archive proudly builds on the work of those historians who came before us, preserving these memories for future generations.