

Approach of 60th anniversary of Aberfan disaster (October 1966)

As with the rest of the world, we heard the shocking news of the disaster in Aberfan on the Friday it happened (Friday 21st October 1966). I'm not sure when or how we became aware of the news. We didn't take a daily paper, although the shocking news would not have made it into the first editions as the disaster happened at 9.15am. The morning news on the BBC Home Service likewise would have been too early but the 10,30 news summary carried news of the disaster. Mum and Dad would not have been listening to the radio in work but someone may have heard the news and spread it around in their hearing. I don't recall hearing any rumours or reports at school. But by the time of the Six o'clock evening news it would have been a lead item.

As a Welsh family, from a mining village the other side of the hills separating Senghenydd from the Taf valley we were immediately empathetic. As children, my brother and myself were familiar with watching the 'buckets' tipping their loads of slag on the hilltop above the Windsor colliery, Abertridwr.

At the time of the tragedy we were living in Chandler's Ford in Hampshire. Our dad had been an electrician in the Windsor colliery Abertridwr in the 1950's. Most of our male ancestors were miners in the Aber Valley but we had other family in Nelson and Merthyr. Our great grandfather had been one of the rescuers in the Universal colliery disaster, Senghenydd in 1913 (still the worst mining disaster in Britain).

It was a typical Saturday morning, with dad taking mum to work in Southampton, rather than her taking the bus as per week days. We boys always went along for the ride. However, this journey did not go as usual. Having driven up the long hill out of Chandler's Ford and reaching a large roundabout, instead of taking the exit for Southampton dad went all the way around and back down the hill towards home. He said nothing but we somehow knew instinctively and instantly what he was doing. We went home and collected clothing for the weekend and set off on the long journey to South Wales.

Our grandparents in Aber and Senghenydd did not have telephones, so, I assume that mum and dad must have telephoned our aunt and uncle who owned a garage in Abertridwr. They would have asked them to pre-warn our grandparents in Abertridwr to say that we would be arriving in a few hours. The Severn Bridge had just been opened in September, so the journey was shorter than the previous route via Gloucester.

Dad dropped us at Windsor Place, Abertridwr and drove off to get to his aunt's house, Wern Las, near Pentre Bach, Merthyr. He borrowed work clothes from his uncle and walked down a mountain track to reach Aberfan. It was fortunate that he knew the area well because the most direct route was not available as roads were shut to all but essential vehicles. He found a route to get as far as Merthyr which avoided the closed roads.



Dad joined one of the bucket chains helping to clear the filthy material that had made up the slag heap that engulfed the school and the first row of terraced houses.

We boys didn't know at the time that one of our mother's cousins, from Nelson, was a teacher at Pantglas Junior School. 22 year old Marjorie Ann Rees was quite newly married and not too long qualified as a teacher. Mum's family used to walk over the mountain to Nelson to visit the family there.



Marorie's resting place at St. Mabon's Churchyard, Llanfabon.

She had been married there.

Dad must have walked back to his grans for the night on Saturday and gone back to be on a bucket chain again on Sunday morning. Sometime later on Sunday he walked back to Wern Las, changed his clothes and then drove back to Abertridwr to pick up mum and us boys. Both mum and dad were expected at work in Hampshire on Monday morning, so dad had to drive back to Chandler's Ford on Sunday evening.

Dad never discussed what he did or experienced on the weekend with my brother and me. Any details of his time helping at the recue scene have been gleaned from other family members.

We suspect that Dad would not have spoken about his weekend with mates back at work and mum probably didn't share our weekend with people she worked with either.

On the 40th anniversary I shared this story and the whole disaster with children in my school in Bournemouth. It was a very moving assembly for both children and staff.

I have often viewed photos and videos trying in a futile attempt to see if our father is in any of them.

Memories of Michael & Peter Webb. April 2026