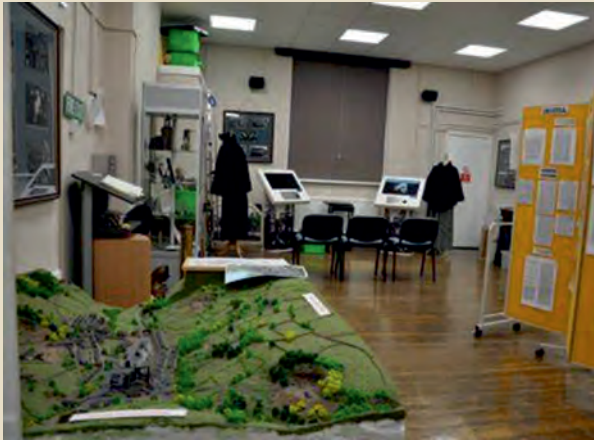


Welsh National & Universal Mining Memorial and Aber Valley Heritage Museum



Pit Disasters at Senghenydd 1901 & 1913



The Welsh National and Universal Mining Memorial was unveiled on the 100th anniversary of the 1913 Universal Colliery disaster on the 14th October 2013. The Memorial includes a Memorial Wall for all those killed in the 1901 and 1913 explosions and a Pathway of Memory documenting all Welsh mining disasters. This is open to visitors every day (except Christmas Day). **Postcode CF83 4GY.**

In 2009 a Heritage Museum was opened within Senghenydd Community Centre, Gwern Avenue, Senghenydd, Caerphilly, CF83 4HA. The Museum contains many interesting artefacts and records relating to both explosions as well as details of village life through the ages. Groups please book in advance.

Please check on our website www.abervalleyheritage.co.uk for opening times.

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The Universal Colliery, Senghenydd was owned by the Lewis Merthyr Consolidated Collieries Ltd. It was part of a huge mining empire run by Sir William Thomas Lewis, the first Lord Merthyr of Senghenydd. Lewis was the most powerful coal owner in Wales. He had founded the Sliding Scale and the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coal Owners Association.

The sinking of the colliery had begun in 1891. Two shafts were completed, the York and the Lancaster, both almost 2,000 feet deep. The workings were divided into two

areas, the West side and the East side. Each side was divided into a number of districts. The West side districts reflected the times of sinkings for they were named after battles in the Boer War, Pretoria, Mafeking, Kimberly, Ladysmith, Bottonic and West York.

When people talk of the Senghenydd disaster, they usually refer to the 1913 disaster but it should be remembered that two disasters have occurred in this pit, the first in 1901.

How to Find Us



THE UNIVERSAL COLLIERY - Lewis Merthyr Consolidated Collieries Ltd.



24th May 1901

The first disaster, took place on the 24th May 1901. Mercifully it happened at the end of the night shift when many of the miners had been brought to the surface. There were 82 left underground at the time of the explosion. Of these, only one survived. The real tragedy of this explosion was that the lessons learned at such a cost in human life were never used to prevent the scale of the 1913 explosion.

Professor W Galloway of Cardiff University, a former Inspector of Mines, had been asked by the Home Secretary to report on the explosion. The report showed that fire, coal dust and air produced a deadly mixture which could be ignited without a methane gas explosion. Senghenydd was a hot, dry, dusty pit with temperatures some 25° higher than surface readings. The quantities of dust were greatly increased because of the method of loading coal drums and because of the open framework ends of the drums. Galloway

urged all owners to thoroughly water roadways to prevent the danger of explosion and to spray all dusty areas.

In 1911 the Coal Mines Act collected together a number of regulations for safe working learned from bitter experience. The Act covered control of electrical equipment to prevent sparking, watering of dusty areas and also the need for all mines to have reversible fans so that clean air could be provided in cases of emergencies. This Act demanded that the fans be reversible by 1st January 1913. The mine owners at Senghenydd asked for and secured an extension which was to run out on 16th September 1913.

At the time of the explosion, the fans were still not capable of being reversed at Senghenydd. There can be little doubt that if the full terms of the Mines Act had been operational at Senghenydd in October 1913 the death toll would have been significantly smaller.

14th October 1913

The second disaster, at Senghenydd happened on 14th October 1913. This time, tragically, it took place at 10 minutes past 8 in the morning just after 950 men had descended the pit and began to work the morning shift. A huge blast sent the two ton cage shooting up the Lancaster shaft from pit bottom tearing off the head of the banks-man on the winding gear and wrecking the pithead. The explosion and fire which followed it was concentrated on the West side of the pit.

The men working the East side were brought safely up to the surface but on the West side an inferno raged and there was no adequate water supply to deal with it, nor was it possible to reverse the fans to draw off the dangerous fumes.

On Wednesday the 15th hopes were raised when 18 men were found alive in the Bottanic district, some 1200 yards from pit bottom but those were to be the last men found alive. On the 16th hope was abandoned and the fire was ringed in by sandbags. By the 20th the death toll had reached 440 = 439 miners and 1 rescuer. 406 bodies had been recovered of which 346 had been identified, 48 were still unidentified, 6 had died in hospital and 33 men were still entombed in the pit.

The Coroners Court and the Commission of Inquiry held after the explosion could not agree upon the cause origins of the disaster. The only point of agreement was that methane gas was involved. What did become apparent during the course of both

inquiries was that there had been numerous violations of the 1911 Coal Mines Act. It took the force of public opinion led by the Miners Union into pressing the Government to act upon these violations. In May 1914 the manager, Edward Shaw, faced 17 charges in the Magistrates Court while the owners faced four.

Of the 17 charges against Shaw, he was convicted of 8 and 9 were dismissed. The total fine amounted to £24. A local newspaper headlined the news "Miners Lives at 5 1/2 p each." It took until February 1916 for the owners to be found guilty of just one charge – the failure to fit reversible fans, for that they were fined £10 with £5.25 costs. Lord Merthyr, the owner, had died in August 1914 before sentence was passed. The public outrage at the events and their deep sympathy at the appalling loss was reflected in their response to an Appeal fund. By July 1914 £126,000 had poured in for the 800 dependents, 205 widows, 542 children and 62 dependent fathers and mothers. In 1928 the Colliery closed.

The Colliery has been cleared, the surface buildings destroyed in 1963 and in 1979 the two shafts were filled and capped and with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund the opportunity was taken to upgrade the Heritage Room and artefacts.

What can never be removed is the memory of the loss and the costs in human suffering which can never be calculated.

