

Family of rookie shot 5 times at Deepcut wins 2nd inquest

BY CHRIS HUGHES
Defence and Security Editor

A FRESH inquest is to be held into the death of recruit at controversial Deepcut barracks 21 years ago, a judge has ruled.

Pte Sean Benton, 20, had five bullet wounds in his chest at the Surrey base.

His death was the first of four over seven years of rookies from gunshot wounds, each ruled to be suicide.

Pte Benton's twin Tony and sister, Tracy Lewis, who believe he was severely bullied, wept after the RECRUIT Pte Sean Benton, 20

High Court decision. Mrs Lewis said: "If his death had been properly investigated in 1995, we would have been spared years of uncertainty and pain."

Pte Benton's mother Linda used the Human Rights Act to access evidence held by Surrey Police. She died last year.

The judge said yesterday a considerable amount of fresh information cast "some doubt" on the original 1995 suicide ruling.

A criminal investigation in 2002 found no evidence of third party involvement in Pte Benton's death.

TOP 10

Scents across the globe

1. Jasmine
 2. Lavender
 3. Rose
 4. Vanilla
 5. Sandalwood
 6. Musk
 7. Lemon
 8. Orange Blossom
 9. Mint
 10. Lily
- ...according to a survey for Heathrow Airport

ABERFAN:

50 YEARS SINCE THE DISASTER

116 of our school friends died that awful day... we feel guilty that we lived

- BROTHERS ANDREW & BERNARD THOMAS



THEN Brothers after the disaster with Lord Snowdon's sketch of ships

BY TOM PARRY
Senior Feature Writer in Aberfan

Surveying the sombre gravestones of the 116 child victims of the Aberfan disaster, Bernard and Andrew Thomas pick out the names of their school friends.

There is tragic Hywell Evans, who died aged six when he was trapped in the classroom Wendy house by the coal slurry that cascaded down the mountain and engulfed Pantglas Primary.

The brothers' cousins, Howard Prosser, nine, and 10-year-old Randolph Tudor are also remembered in this forlorn, heartbreaking place, the village cemetery on the hillside just above Moy Road where the disaster happened.

Bernard, 58, and 56-year-old Andrew gaze up beyond the marble tombs, to where the spoil heap that collapsed over Aberfan on October 21, 1966 used to be.

It has been raining steadily all morning, and then the black clouds lift, a rainbow appears, and these two remember how lucky they are to be alive. But they are also weighed down by survivors' guilt.

Fifty years on from the catastrophe that stole half a generation, the memories still consumes this Valley's mining community. Aberfan is a village of ghosts.

Speaking for the first time about the disaster, Bernard, who was eight at the time, says: "They say kids just bounce back, but I have never got over it. I was one of the walking wounded. I was pulled out, covered with cuts and bruises, but alive. The mental scars have never gone away though. At the time there was no counselling. Many years later, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder."

"A few weeks after it happened, my dad asked us if we wanted to move away and we said we wanted to stay, but maybe that was a bad thing."

"It has been very difficult for me growing up around families who lost a child, facing the parents and siblings every day. You feel guilty that you are still alive."

When the children walked up to their single-storey school building that fateful Friday morning, none took notice of the 800-foot high mountain of black slag above. The gigantic mound of mine waste was part of the scenery. By 9.15am, after the children had sung All Things Bright And Beautiful in assembly, it was sliding towards them like an avalanche.

A 50-foot wide wall of two million tons of slag and clay sped down the hill at 30 miles an hour. The torrent of black sludge obliterated a farm, rolled across the school playground, swallowed up the school building and battered eight terraced houses on Moy Road opposite. Caused by



NOW Bernard, left, with Andrew in village

“They say kids just bounce back, but I never got over it. The mental scars have never gone

BERNARD THOMAS ON HOW THE HORRORS HAVE NEVER LEFT HIM



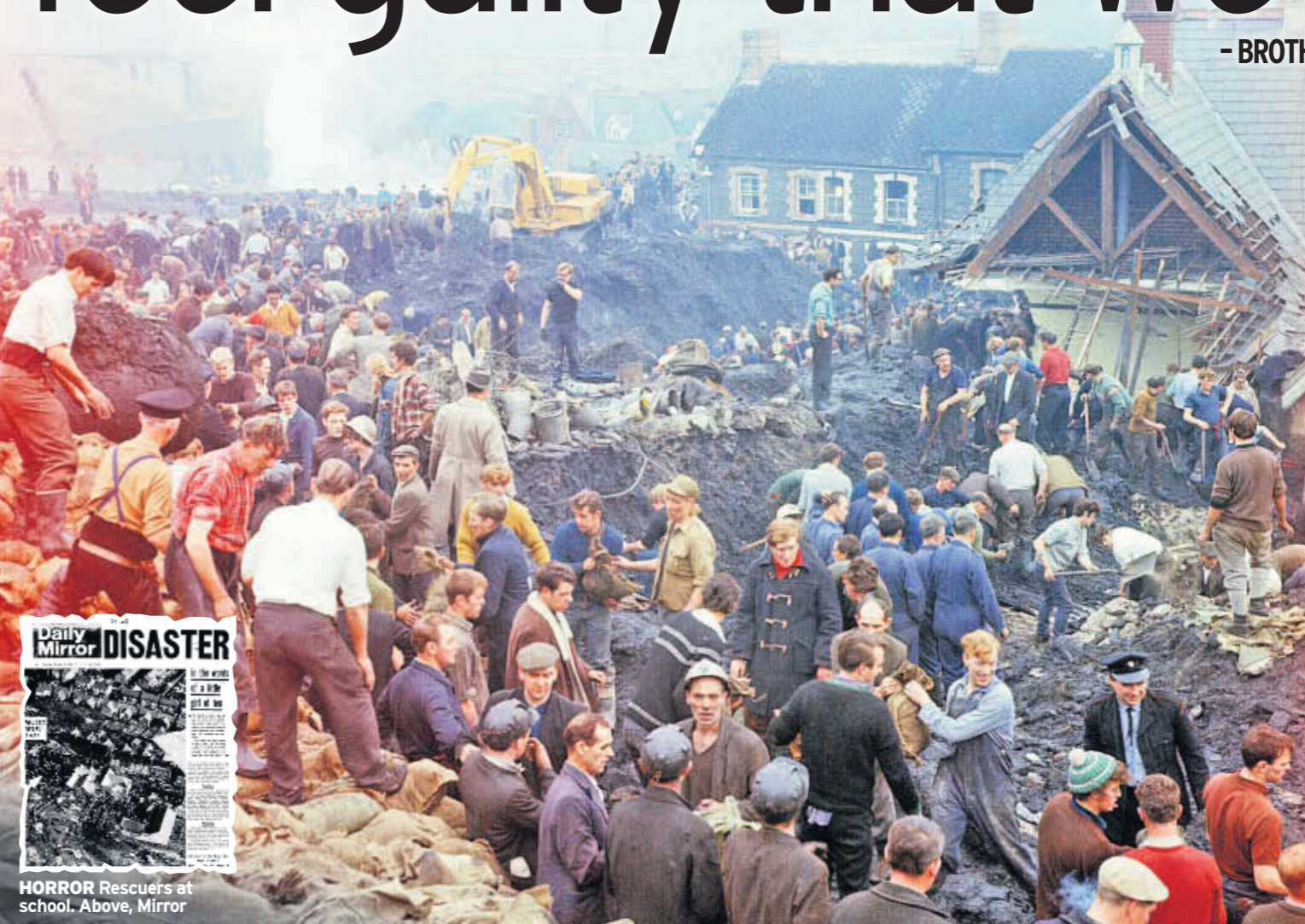
SOMBRE Looking at graves of the victims

a build-up of water from days of heavy rain, the disaster was over in a matter of minutes. As well as the 116 children killed, there were also 28 adult victims, several of them school teachers.

Some died from suffocation underneath the sludge that smothered the school. If it had happened a few minutes earlier, the pupils would not have been in their classrooms. A day later, and they would have broken up for half-term.

Bernard, who lives with their 86-year-old mother Gwen a few streets from where the devastated school once stood, says: "It was thick fog that day. I remember going up the path just behind this house. There was an assembly for the whole school first and then we all did some reading. We were around desks in little groups."

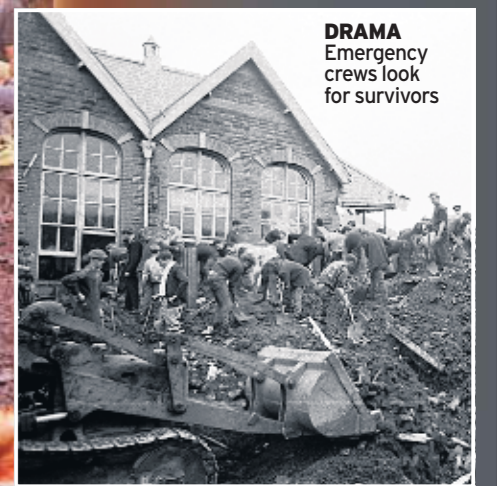
"Out of nowhere, there was this rumbling noise. I didn't have a clue what it was. It started getting worse. Then it was like being caught in a black tidal wave. The



HORROR Rescuers at school. Above, Mirror



HOPE Two pupils pray as search goes on



DRAMA Emergency crews look for survivors

noise was horrendous. It was complete pandemonium. Everybody started running and screaming. Children were going down like skittles. I was knocked unconscious. I have no idea how long."

Recalling coming round, Bernard adds: "I remember the sound of the other kids' screams. I was covered in coal dust. I could move though and no bones were broken. The teacher was behind me and helped me out by smashing the windows."

"I had to clamber across other children, some were badly injured and a lot were dead. When I got outside I was on top of the slurry, several feet deep, and I was walking over whatever was trapped underneath. One girl was under her desk but we couldn't get her out because she was covered in slurry."

Andrew's class was across the corridor. At six, he was one of the youngest pupils. But his memories are just as vivid as

his elder brother's. He says: "We were having an English lesson. Then there was this noise like a jet going over, and the door fell in. We could see this smoke in the corridor. Our teacher told us to get under our desks. After that the dividing wall collapsed."

"That's when the boy in my class got killed. He was in the Wendy house next to the wall and was crushed."

"Our teacher smashed the window with a chair and then passed us through, one by one, to the caretaker who was outside. Luckily for me, my classroom was at the front of the building, facing the road. That is why I am alive."

The caretaker who pulled Andrew out was one of the heroes that day. He clawed through the landslide to help her desk but we couldn't get her out because she was covered in slurry."

Andrew's class was across the corridor. At six, he was one of the youngest pupils. But his memories are just as vivid as

adds: "Before going into class, I was paying dinner money outside the hall."

"Howard's classroom was just to the left and he waved at me when he saw me through the door. I waved back and then the teacher closed the door. That was the last time I saw him."

Bernard and Andrew were driven to a nearby hospital by a teacher. In between them was a boy who had been hit on the head by falling masonry.

It was at the hospital that the two brothers met Lord Snowdon, then married to the Queen's sister Princess Margaret, who had been the first member of the Royal Family at the scene.

A Welshman himself, the renowned photographer stayed near Aberfan to help victims and one day gave Bernard a sketch of a ship he had just done.

The boys were photographed holding Snowdon's drawing, one of the first

images of child survivors in the aftermath of the tragedy.

Neither knew how their experience would affect the rest of their lives.

After leaving school, Bernard worked in furniture factories and at the Hoover washing machine plant in Merthyr, but he has been unemployed for many years.

Andrew lives in Plumstead, South East London, and is employed by Crown Estates. After leaving Aberfan at 17, he joined the Royal Navy.

Virtually everyone in the tightly-knit community knows someone who died. Another survivor, who does not want to be named, says nearly all of the school's ex-pupils still live in Aberfan.

They meet in the working men's club every week, but rarely talk about the events of October 1966.

Most of his closest friends were also among a handful of his classmates who survived the tragedy.

"I lost my older sister that day," the

man tells me. "In my street, I was the only boy who lived through it. Afterwards my parents were asked to leave Aberfan with me and stay elsewhere."

"The other families in the street said they couldn't stand the sight of seeing me outside because it reminded them of the sons they had lost."

"We came back here after two years but life has never been the same. I felt guilty for living through it. That's why I still don't talk about it publicly."

There is due to be a commemorative service today at the Memorial Garden in Aberfan, where the school once stood.

It will be attended by representatives of the King's Own Royal Border Regiment and the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, who were part of the rescue teams in 1966.

A mournful moment for the 50-something men and women who survived to remember their school mates who never grew old.

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