

Merthyr Vale and Aberfan notes

A sad but true story

The village appears in Richard Fleischer's 1971 film, a British crime drama [10 Rillington Place](#) starring Richard Attenborough and John Hurt. As Timothy Evans (Hurt) comes back to Wales, various scenes then shot inside the main village are seen. The locations include: Merthyr Vale Station, Coronation Place Aberfan, and Cardiff. The film dramatises the case of British serial killer John Christie (murderer), who committed many of his crimes in the titular Notting Hill (London) terraced house, and the miscarriage of justice involving his neighbour Timothy Evans, played by John Hurt who won a BAFTA Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal. Timothy Evans was a Welshman born in Merthyr Tydfil wrongfully convicted and hanged for the murder of his wife and infant daughter at their residence at 10 Rillington Place in January 1950; after new evidence emerged, he was granted a posthumous pardon.

One of the great miscarriages of justice of modern times and one of the cases that led to the abolition of hanging. But it was easy to see how it happened:

Evans was prone to making up stories about himself to cover for his lack of self-esteem. He confessed and made up stories about the disappearance of his wife.

He was a heavy drinker and his wife not good at managing the family finances and they had violent rows.

Idloes Owen

[Idloes Owen](#) (1894-1954), founder of the Welsh National Opera (WNO), was born in Merthyr Vale, 30 Crescent Street.

He and his brothers followed their father into the coal mines at the age of 12.

Idloes was later diagnosed with tuberculosis and after leaving the mines, was able to pursue his passion for music. There was a strong community spirit in the mining village, and his neighbours in Merthyr Vale recognised his musical ability, and raised money to send him to Music College to develop his talent.

He later moved to Cardiff and became a composer, arranger and conductor, and performed with the pre-war Lyrian Singers in Cardiff.

His greatest success and legacy came with the founding of the Welsh National Opera Company. He became its first Conductor, General Manager and Musical Director. In November 1943, at a gathering of a small group of music lovers, at his home in Llandaff, he was instrumental in forming The Lyrian Grand Opera Company. A month later at its first general meeting the name was changed to The Welsh National Opera Company. It was formed from members of the old Cardiff Grand Opera Company, the BBC Welsh

Singers and the Lyrian Singers. The company gave early performances in 1945 with concerts and operatic excerpts at various venues in Cardiff. And the rest as they say is history.

Untruth: He had originally intended to call the opera company the Welsh International Opera Company until a friend pointed out that in that case they would probably be called the WINOs.

Thomas Henry Morgan (1898-1957), who composed the music to "We'll Keep a Welcome" (given by Idloes Owen to Mai Jones who premiered it in 1940) was born in Merthyr Vale, 8 Station Terrace. The song has since become a Welsh standard, and a popular song sung at Welsh Internationals.

Far away a voice is calling
Bells of memory chime
Come home again, come home again
They call through the oceans of time

We'll keep a welcome in the hillsides
We'll keep a welcome in the Vales
This land you knew will still be singing
When you come home again to Wales

This land of song will keep a welcome
And with a love that never fails
We'll kiss away each hour of hiraeth
When you come home again to Wales

Untruth: It is also a little known fact that he wrote the Tom Jones hit 'Sextomb'.

Lavernock boating tragedy

Seven volunteer soldiers drowned off the coast here in a boating accident in 1888.

The Merthyr Vale detachment of the Welsh Regiment's Third Volunteer Brigade was on summer camp at Lavernock at the time. On the evening of Wednesday 1 August, 10 soldiers hired the boat Maggie to take them to Penarth. The boat was operated by Joseph Hall, aged 31.

It was almost high tide when the boat passed the Ranny pool, where several fishing poles were located and a reef caused a strong current. Joseph tried to pull clear of a fishing pole which was submerged by the tide, but the heavily-laden boat struck it. Reacting to the collision, the passengers became agitated, stood up and moved about. Their movements caused the boat to ship water and eventually capsize.

Four soldiers tried to swim to shore but were drowned. The rest managed to right the craft, but it capsized again as they scrambled to get back into it. This happened a number of times. At one point Joseph was lucky to extricate himself from beneath the upturned boat.

By the time help arrived, three more soldiers had drowned. Joseph was saved along with three of his passengers: Albert Williams, William Dowdeswell and Watkin Moss. The drowned men's bodies were recovered the following week: two on Monday, two on Tuesday and the remaining three on Wednesday. Most were recovered fairly close to the accident scene but the last to be found, James Potter, was picked up off Barry, c.10km away.

At the inquest it was noted that the Maggie was licensed to carry eight passengers. Joseph said he had taken the 10 men because they had told him he must take them all or none of them would go. He was found guilty of "gross neglect". He was severely reprimanded by the coroner but exonerated from guilt of a criminal offence.

The drowned men, aged 17 to 20 years, were buried at Aberfan Cemetery, Merthyr Vale, where you can still see a monument in their memory which was unveiled in 1890.

Three of the deceased were colliers, one a fitter, three building tradesmen and two of the seven were from the neighbouring area of Treharris. These two were thought to be from the Nelson Company of the Volunteer Brigade. All seven were likely friends at the Summer Camp going out to celebrate not knowing of their pending fate.

The ceremony to dedicate the monument over the graves was held on Sunday 30 March 1890, attended by dignitaries and officers and men numbering 1,118 of the 3rd Volunteer Brigade (Welch Regiment) accompanied by the Cardiff Band and Dowlais Band to the Regimental tune of "The March of the Men of Harlech". An inscribed shield of marble bears the names of the deceased.

Aberfan Disaster

9.15am on 21 October 1966

Will be 57 years ago this month.

Killed 144 people; 116 children and 28 adults.

Engulfed Pantglas Junior School and a row of houses.

The main building hit was the local junior school, where lessons had just begun; 5 teachers and 109 children were killed.

The spoil tip No 7, one of seven on the hills around Aberfan, was partly based on ground from which springs emerged. Tip No.7 was the only one being worked in 1966.

The presence of springs under the tips was known and had been marked on maps.

Previous slippages of some of the seven spoil heaps had occurred. Residents had previously raised concerns to Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, who corresponded with the NCB between July 1963 and March 1964 on the topic of the "Danger from Coal Slurry being tipped at the rear of the Pantglas Schools"

During the first three weeks of October 1966 there were 6.5 inches (170 mm) of rainfall, nearly half of which was in the third week.

During the night of 20–21 October the peak of Tip 7 subsided by 9–10 feet (2.7–3.0 m) and the rails on which the spoil was transported to the top of the tip fell into the resulting hole. The spoil movement was discovered at 7:30 am by the first members of the morning shift manning the heaps. One of the workers walked to the colliery to report the slip; he returned with the supervisor for the tips, and it was decided that no further work would be done that day, but that a new tipping position would be decided on the following week.

The pupils of Pantglas Junior School had arrived only minutes earlier for the last day before the half-term holiday, which was due to start at 12 midday.

The spoil slid 700 yards (640 m) down the mountain, destroying two farm cottages and killing the occupants.

Because of the vast quantity and consistency of the spoil, it was a week before all the bodies were recovered; the last victim was found on 28 October.

At the school, 109 children, from 240 attendees, and five teachers were killed in the school.

The adjacent secondary school was also damaged, and 18 houses on surrounding roads were destroyed

The tip was the responsibility of the National Coal Board (NCB), and the subsequent inquiry placed the blame for the disaster on the organisation and nine named employees. But neither the NCB nor any of its employees were prosecuted and the organisation was not fined.

The Aberfan Disaster Memorial Fund (ADMF) was established on the day of the disaster. It received nearly 88,000 contributions, totalling £1.75 million. The remaining tips were removed only after a lengthy fight by Aberfan residents against resistance from the NCB and the government on the grounds of cost. The site's clearance was paid for by a government grant and a forced contribution of £150,000 taken from the memorial fund. In 1997 the British government paid back the £150,000 to the ADMF, and in 2007 the Welsh Government donated £1.5 million to the fund and £500,000 to the Aberfan Education Charity as recompense for the money wrongly taken.

The aftermath of the disaster was captured by Cardiff photographer [David Hurn](#). See: [Photos of Aberfan](#).

Aberfan and the Mackintosh connection

Some of the street names in Aberfan, mirror those in Roath, such as Moy Road, Angus Street and Cottrell Road. One of the pubs was called the Mackintosh. This is because the land was presumably owned by the Richards family – Miss Harriett Diana Arabella Mary Richards married Alfred Donald Mackintosh, head of the Mackintosh Clan, in 1880. When the land in Roath was developed for housing many of the streets were named after the family connections, and the same in Aberfan. Moy Road is named after Moy House in Inverness shire, home of the Mackintosh Clan. Cottrell Road is named after Cottrell House near St Nicholas, west of Cardiff, owned by the Richards family after they moved out of Roath.