

Background and Context

On 26 October 1966, after resolutions by both Houses of Parliament, the Secretary of State for Wales appointed a Tribunal to inquire into the causes of, and circumstances relating to, the Aberfan disaster. Sir Herbert Edmund Davies, a respected south Wales barrister, was appointed chairman.

Davies posed the four broad questions that the Tribunal would look into.

- What exactly happened?
- Why did it happen?
- Need it have happened?
- What lessons are to be learnt from what happened at Aberfan?

136 witnesses were interviewed, 300 exhibits examined and 2,500,000 words heard. The Tribunal sat for 76 days. It was the longest Inquiry of its type in British history up to that date.

How the Topic was Handled

Before the tribunal began, the Attorney General imposed restrictions on speculation in the media about the causes of the disaster. This, together with the accusations that earlier public inquiries into pit disasters were often whitewashes, exacerbated the already tense and difficult circumstances of the Tribunal.

Evidence was given on everything from the history of mining in the area to the region's geological conditions. Those who took the stand were as varied as schoolboys and university professors. Lord Robens, the NCB chairman, appeared dramatically in the final days of the Tribunal to give evidence and admitted that the coal board had been at fault. Had this admission been made at the beginning of the inquiry, much of what followed at the Tribunal would have been unnecessary.

The Tribunal retired on 28 April 1967 to consider its verdict and its report was published on August 3. It concluded:

"...the Aberfan Disaster is a terrifying tale of bungling ineptitude by many men charged with tasks for which they were totally unfitted, of failure to heed clear warnings, and of total lack of direction from above. Not villains but decent men, led astray by foolishness or by ignorance or by both in combination, are responsible for what happened at Aberfan".

Lessons Identified

No evidence exists to state that the inquiry process was handled poorly, but findings, lessons, recommendations and matters requiring new legislation were identified and can be found in the Aberfan Inquiry reports.

Contacts for Further Information

www.merthyr.gov.uk