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**Society for the Study of Labour Research Report on a Bursary Granted to Examine Material
Relating to the Senghenydd Disasters (1901 and 1913)**



Welsh National Mining Memorial, Senghenydd

In 1913 the worst mining disaster ever to occur in the UK happened at the Universal Colliery in the small village of Senghenydd. This disaster, in which 440 men died, followed just twelve years after another explosion in the same colliery in which 81 men perished. This double tragedy in Senghenydd makes it a significant site of research, not only because of the death toll, but because of the social impact of two significant explosions within a short number of years. Research into these Welsh disasters provides a counterpoint to previous research undertaken in the North East of England. My thesis, titled 'The Ephemera of Remembrance in the Wake of War and Disaster, c.1899-1939' seeks to understand the personal ways in which families and individuals grieved throughout the period. It primarily uses ephemeral items and small objects which were used to remember the deceased by. This means that all sorts of items are consulted in my work; from postcards to napkins, to portraits and memorial glass. Because of the nature of these objects, my research tends to lead me to many varied archives. This trip was no different. Visiting seven archives in five days was a challenge, but with the wonder of modern technology (and the willingness of the wonderful archivists to allow photographs to be taken in the majority of the archives visited), the research trip funded by the Society for the Study of Labour History was wonderfully fruitful.

My week began with Ceri Thompson, Curator of Coal at the Big Pit National Coal Museum, providing numerous cups of coffee while discussing the disasters and offering his expert knowledge of the various archival holdings relating to it (having collected a substantial portion of it from the donors' houses himself). A week later the coffee was in full flow again as Gill Jones and Jean Sellars from the Aber Valley Heritage Centre kindly gave up their time to add to this understanding of just how significant the disasters were to the people of the Aber Valley. The Heritage Centre is a fabulous resource for researchers interested in the disasters, as it holds a number of ephemeral items donated by descendants of those affected by the disaster.

The ephemeral items found in various repositories across Southern Wales have added depth to the research already produced in relation to disasters in the North East of England. The South Wales Coalfield Collection, split over two sites under the auspices of Swansea University, is a wonderful resource for any historian of industry. Among the various useful reports and ephemeral items relating to the disaster there were a few items in particular which offered fresh insight. One of these was a video which showed Ivor Jones, a former colliery official, discuss a visit to the site of the Senghenydd disaster as a boy. His father was a Sgt Major in Abertridwr (and helped with the funerals of the victims), and Ivor remembers women crying and ministers at the pit head. Another incredibly valuable document is stored in the Glamorgan Archives: the transcript of a conversation between grandmother and granddaughter held in 1989. In it they discuss the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and Elizabeth (the grandmother), describes how her mother identified her father (one of the victims of the explosion). Such personal insights are rare. As with the First World War, those who witnessed the effects of the disaster firsthand are now no longer alive, however oral history recordings from the 1970s and 80s sometimes contain references to disaster and the destruction that it brought. It must be said that this is very rare, and this transcript held in the Glamorgan Archives has added significant depth to my findings from the North East.

The Glamorgan Archives also hold a useful collection of material about the Barry Relief Fund. Inhabitants of Barry Island formed a memorial fund committee, staging plays and collections for the families of the victims. This collection is significant, as it not only provides evidence for the largely unexplored area of spontaneous disaster collection, but letters within documents the tense relationship between various funds independently begun by different regions.

This trip proved that very similar memorial forms existed in physically distant mining communities across the UK. In this search for ephemeral information about Senghenydd I also found some important documents relating to other disasters which has only strengthened this argument. Most importantly, this trip will allow me to tell of the aftermath of Senghenydd using the words of those who experienced it firsthand.



View from the Big Pit National Coal Museum