

Four miners killed at private coal mine in the Swansea valley, Wales

Alana Gorton, Robert Stevens
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On Friday evening, the fourth of four coal miners who had been trapped underground at the private Gleision colliery, near Cilybebyll, in the Swansea valley, south Wales was declared dead, after the pit was flooded.

At 8.30 a.m. Friday, the police announced that a dead body had been recovered from a very deep part of the flooded colliery. A second body was found at 12.15 p.m. and a third at 3 p.m. The last of the four was announced dead by police at 6 p.m. Three miners had managed to escape from the mine and gave out the alarm. One of these remains in critical condition.

The miners killed were named as Charles Breslin, 62, David Powell, 50, Garry Jenkins, 39, and Phillip Hill, 45. All four men lived locally.

Since news of the trapped miners first broke on Thursday morning, the UK population, via live TV and online news feeds, watched the unfolding of an industrial tragedy in the Welsh valleys.

At 9.20 a.m. Thursday, emergency services were first called to Gleision after four people were reported missing approximately 90 metres underground. According to initial reports, a retaining wall holding back a body of water underground failed, flooding a tunnel that the seven miners were in and cutting off the route to the surface.

By 4 a.m. Friday morning, divers were forced to return above ground and abandon their efforts after reaching about 30 metres. A specialist seismic team, Sure Wave Technology, based in Cheshire in England were deployed in an attempt to detect any underground movement. In the early hours of Friday relief rescue teams were brought in.

Chris Margetts of the the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service said the body of the first miner was found on the “exit side of the body of water” and that it was “quite possible the team has been split”.

Over both days an estimated 200 rescuers were mobilised. Many local people attempted to help and the Rhos Community Centre, which is less than a mile from the Gleision colliery, was set up as an official support centre for the families of the trapped miners. Sandwiches, cakes and biscuits and other supplies were brought to the centre by concerned locals.

Gleision has been mined since 1993 historically, but never operated regularly, being run off and on for the past few

decades, often when coal is newly found. In the area two larger drift mines are operating. They are US-and Canadian-owned, with one employing around 300 miners and another around 160.

Gleision is a far smaller operation that the *Daily Mail* aptly described as a “ramshackle mine”. The mine was cut into the side of a hill and the coal seam is accessed by walking in. The mine is remote, with the only access to it down a narrow lane on a very steep hill above the banks of the river Tawe. The tunnels inside Gleision are supported by timber alone and are so small the miners are forced to work kneeling or lying down.

Drift mines are known for being very dangerous, with frequent accidents, collapses and problems with gas and flooding. (A picture of the mine, with its very basic wooden supports, can be viewed here).

In 1992 there were 85 similar drift mines in operation. Notwithstanding the poor safety record of private mines, these small-scale operations were a rare chance of local employment in areas devastated by unemployment in the aftermath of the year-long miners’ strike of 1984-1985. Only last year Nant Hir mine in nearby Glynneath closed.

Such mines have changed hands and opened and closed frequently, and Gleision was no exception. It has opened and closed many times and according to the *South Wales Evening Post*, “An application was submitted in 2010 by owner Coal Direct Ltd, of Victoria Road, Port Talbot, to extend underground areas of the mine” and “A subsequent application in 2010 regarding surface water arrangements and mitigation measures was later withdrawn by the applicant.”

However, the *Post* writes, “According to Companies House, Coal Direct Ltd was dissolved on August 21, 2010.” The name of the current owner has not yet been published in the media.

The BBC reported that Wayne Thomas from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) said water in any mine would be a risk, but when the mine operator applies for a licence to work a particular reserve of coal there is a national database with records showing where that seam had been worked before. This limits the dangers of operating in old workings and creates a boundary between the old and new collieries. It also reduces the chances of an inrush of water.

Thomas said of Gleision colliery, “This is a small-scale

operation, a far more physical method of mining. There would be about 10 to 15 employees". In such pits it is common for miners to work in 6 foot-high areas, boring holes to use explosives and working out the coal with shovels, he said. According to Thomas, "This does mean there are limitations to the working conditions which mean you cannot use big machinery like the old National Coal Board mines did."

The idea that a record of previous workings "creates a boundary" is hardly a reassuring safety system. Rather, it suggests that safety could be easily compromised, given that this relies on accurate record keeping. The mine went through numerous owners and was apparently only worked to make a quick profit on top of old workings, which may or may not be recorded, dating back to the industrial revolution.

The death of the four miners will have a devastating impact in such a close-knit area. Councillor Rosalyn Davies of Neath Port Talbot Council said: "I know three of the families of the miners involved", adding that one of the miners' wives "didn't want him to go to work yesterday but he insisted".

The fact is that four miners, who worked by all accounts in the harshest of conditions, are now dead. The circumstances around their deaths must be established. Whilst the event has been given extensive media coverage, with many people following the attempted rescue of the miners, there has been virtually no commentary on the social and economic conditions that created the disaster in the first place.

Those within the national and local political establishment who have professed concern at the tragedy, including Prime Minister David Cameron, Welsh First Minister Carwyn Jones, Secretary of State for Wales Cheryl Gillan, and Neath MP Peter Hain, have yet to say anything about why such a disaster may have occurred in the first place.

Carwyn Jones said, "We thought in south Wales that the days of mining accidents were behind us, but we were wrong". Hain told the media the disaster "has been a stab right through the heart of these local communities. There's a long tradition of mining here but nobody expected the tragedies of past generations would come today."

One of these past tragedies was the Senghenydd colliery disaster in Wales, when 439 miners were killed following a gas explosion in October 1913. This was the worst accident in British mining history. Following the nationalisation of the coal industry after the World War Two, mining in the UK became much safer with far fewer deaths.

However, with the destruction of the formerly nationalised British Coal and the expansion of a far smaller, private mining industry in the UK, fatality ratios have increased sharply. Since 2006, seven people have been killed in mining accidents in the UK, according to Health and Safety Executive statistics.

Questions must be raised about what safety precautions, if any, were in operation at the mine. According to Thomas of the NUM, mining in the area had recently become a profitable venture. In an interview with the BBC, Thomas pointed to the

rise in the price of coal and the quality of the anthracite in the local area leading to a "resurgence of interest" by the industry.

Following the 1984 miners' strike, safety conditions deteriorated rapidly in the mining industry as the private sector took over. In a *Guardian* article published in 1994, Seumas Milne documented the perilous existence of Welsh miners and their families after privatisation. He wrote, "On Friday nights in the Welsh valleys, miners go from pub to pub hunting for their employers to claim unpaid wages. Pay cheques bounce, mining companies close and re-open under other names, men are sacked for being union members or refusing to work on Christmas Day.

"In some pits, miners get no basic minimum and are only paid by the tub of coal produced. Underground, they stand in streams of water, hacking at the face with picks and shovels. Wooden roof props, phased out in publicly owned mines 40 years ago, are standard.

"Pit ponies haul rusting carloads of anthracite back and forth from the face. On the surface, there are no showers. The coal owners are back with a vengeance. This is private mining in 1994: the promised future of the British coal industry. ...

"Last year, the fatal accident rate in privately owned mines was 23 times that in British Coal collieries." Milne noted that this rate worsened considerably within the space of 12 months. The previous year the death rate had been a still very high seven times that of the nationalised British Coal.

South Wales was once one of the central mining regions in the UK. Tens of thousands of the miners in South Wales were once members of the National Mineworkers Union. After the defeat of the 1984-85 strike, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost nationally as British Coal was ransacked by private investors and small operators. This process has resulted in a situation today in which only a few coal miners are employed, all working in private operations.

In 2009, the 25th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike was marked, with the NUM reduced to just 4,000 members. Today less than 1,700 miners are members of the union.



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