

learning the lessons



The Chew Valley floods of 1968

The devastation that floods can cause and how you can prepare

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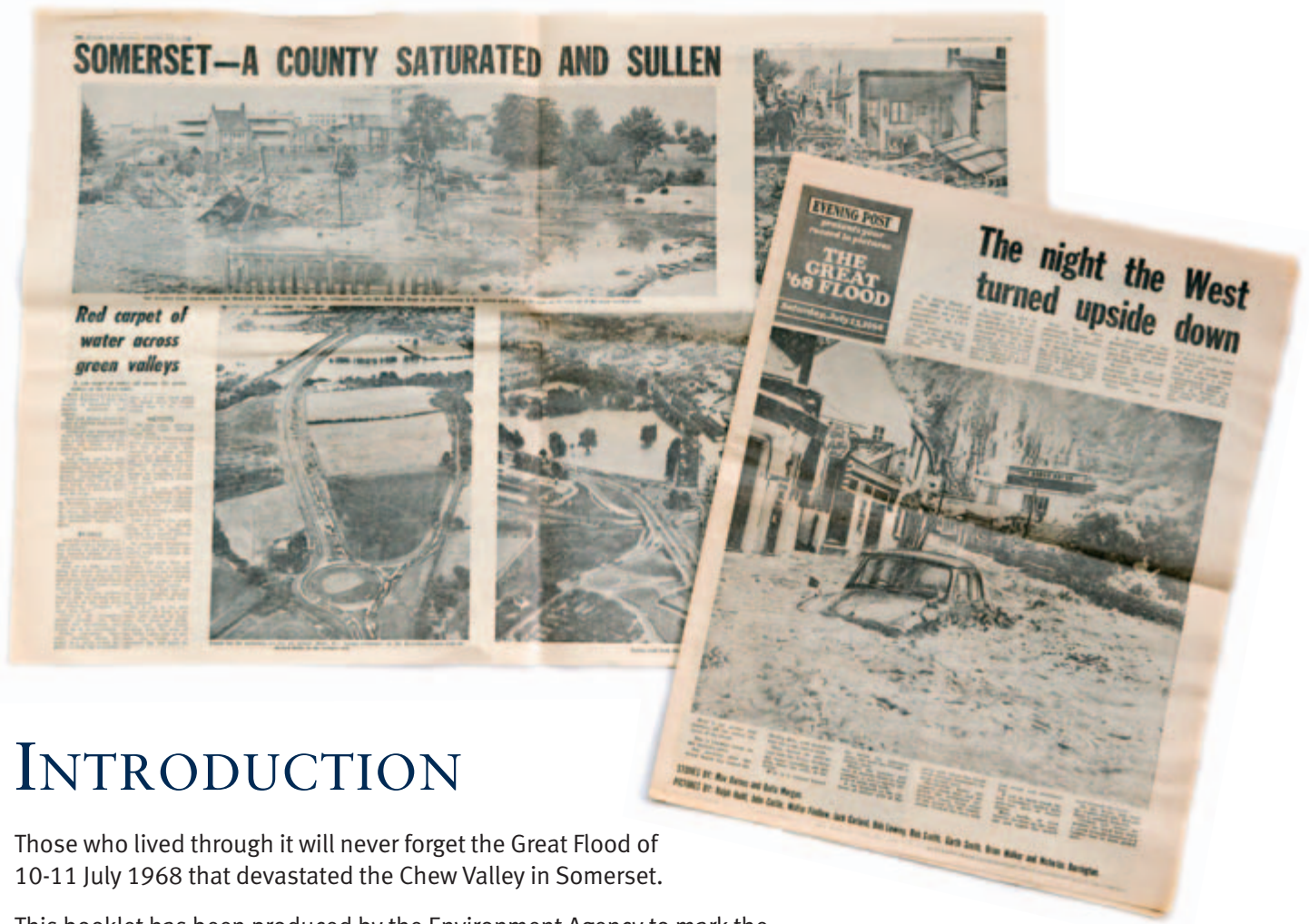
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INTRODUCTION

Those who lived through it will never forget the Great Flood of 10-11 July 1968 that devastated the Chew Valley in Somerset.

This booklet has been produced by the Environment Agency to mark the 40th anniversary of the disaster and to highlight the continuing risk of floods in many parts of the region.

Across the South West in the 1968 deluge that followed heavy thunderstorms, eight people died and thousands were driven from their homes.

Forty years on, memories in the Chew Valley are still vivid – particularly for those who witnessed the huge wall of floodwater that roared down the River Chew. Bridges and cars in its path were swept away, and along the valley almost 250 homes were flooded, some to a depth of three metres (10ft).

In one village a bridge carrying a busy holiday route was destroyed, severing the community in half. As the wall of water tore downstream, a car was swept off a bridge and three people inside drowned.

Rescuers had to use boats to save people from homes and vehicles. Schools and village halls were commandeered to house the evacuees.

Returning to their homes the next day, residents in the Chew Valley found scenes of utter devastation. Walls were caked in mud and slime, carpets, furniture and possessions ruined and gardens washed away.

As the floodwaters receded a massive clean-up began. Whole villages worked together to clear away the mud and repair damage while the Army installed temporary bridges.

Homes and businesses, roads and other infrastructure had to be rebuilt. The usually placid River Chew had left a trail of destruction that would take years – and millions of pounds – to repair.

**‘OUT OF THE
DEVASTATION AND
CHAOS GREW
FRIENDSHIP AND
UNDERSTANDING,
AND THE BEST SIDE
OF HUMAN
NATURE WAS
REVEALED.’**

Janet Walker, [Chew Magna](#)

WHAT CAUSED THE FLOODS

Record rainfall

On 10 July 1968, a storm swept in from the west and heavy rain fell in a wide band stretching from the Bristol Channel to Lincolnshire.

The UK's heaviest rainfall that day was recorded at Chew Stoke: a total of 175mm (6.8in) – double the area's average rainfall for the whole of July.

It was in the Chew Valley that the South West's worst floods and destruction occurred. The storm there and over the surrounding hills was of an extremely high intensity. It was so unusual that the record rainfall at Chew Stoke has been cited in many rainfall studies since.

Torrential rainfall running off the hills and from already-waterlogged fields and built-up areas overwhelmed the River Chew. It caused severe flooding to communities all the way down to where it joins the River Avon at Keynsham.

The storm also brought floods to many other places across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Devon.

Particularly badly hit was the Somerset-East Devon border where rivers became raging torrents as they rushed to the sea – at Sidbury in Devon, an 85-year-old woman died when water flooded her home.

ONE BOY'S DIARY



Dapps Hill

A 16-year-old boy living close to the River Chew at Dapps Hill in Keynsham kept a diary. After a day of torrential rain, Richard Drower's entry for 11 July 1968 read:

At 0045 I was woken by a loud rumbling... I went to the window and could not believe my eyes. A wall of water was rushing towards the cottages.

I called my parents and we ran downstairs, rescued our cat and returned upstairs just before the front door burst open and the house was filled with four feet of water in as many seconds.

Across the road the water had already reached the first floor and people were breaking through attic roofs to escape.

The water then rose at a slower rate and reached its peak about 0200 when it was about seven feet deep in our home and three to four feet deep in the bedrooms of the cottages.

We were rescued from bedroom windows at 0500 as the water receded.

Despite the ugly events of that night, a few of us later commented on something quite beautiful that was observed just as the waters began to recede. The full moon appeared from behind broken cloud - to the north-east the faintly-coloured arc of a lunar rainbow could be seen.

The catchment



Catchment area

145 sq km (56 sq miles)

Highest point

Black Down on the Mendips, 305m (1,000ft) above sea level

Lowest point

Confluence with River Avon, 10m (33ft) above sea level

Rainfall

Annual average 988mm (39in), based on 1961-1990 data

River flows

Average 1.18 cubic metres (41 cubic feet) per second; extreme flows: more than 25m³ (882ft³)/sec

Water power

For centuries the Chew's waters powered dozens of mills

Flood history

Pensford's 14th century church was under 1.2m (4ft) of floodwater in 1888

Geology and soils

The River Chew rises at Chewton Mendip on the mainly limestone Mendip Hills. It flows north-eastwards for 27 kilometres (17 miles) to join the River Avon at Keynsham, halfway between Bath and Bristol.

Geology in the Chew Valley is mixed but is predominantly clays largely impervious to water – rainfall tends to run off, not sink in.

Most of the catchment – the area drained by the Chew and its tributaries – is rural. On 10 July 1968, soils in the area were already waterlogged after previous rain so could not absorb any more rainfall.

As the intense storm moved up the valley that night, the phenomenon of 'sheet run-off' occurred on many fields. These sheets of water at depths of 75-100mm (3-4in) washed branches, debris and even small trees into the river.

Added to bankside trees that had been washed away, all this debris blocked bridges and weirs, turning them into virtual dams and raising river levels even further.

RESERVOIR RUMOURS

In the 1968 floods it was rumoured that the dam at Chew Valley Lake was in danger of being overtopped. At 575 hectares (1,200 acres), the lake is the South West's largest reservoir and is also a haven for wildlife and popular with anglers.

The River Chew feeds the lake while its tributary the Winford Brook feeds the small Chew Magna Reservoir; both are owned by Bristol Water.

Although levels in the lake rose 0.45m (1.5ft) on 10 July, it didn't overflow. In fact it's estimated that the lake held back two-thirds as much water again as actually flowed down the valley. Without it the disaster would undoubtedly have been a lot worse.

Chew Magna Reservoir was already near capacity before the storm. While water did overtop its dam, this reservoir is also certain to have played some part in reducing flooding downstream.

WINFORD AND CHEW STOKE

Winford

Running through the centre of the village is the Winford Brook, a normally placid stream. But on the night of the 10-11 July 1968, it was fed by swollen tributaries and water pouring off the slopes of Dundry Hill. When the brook burst its banks in Winford it flooded nearby properties.

Then the village was hit by a flash flood. It's thought to have been caused by the collapse of debris dams that had built up around obstructions upstream, sending a sudden mass of water rushing down the brook.

Such was the force of the water that it threw a car across the High Street and into the front wall of Waterloo Villa, a cottage owned by Nellie Weaver. Water surged through her adjoining garage and caused the wall to collapse.

Other houses in the same road were flooded to a depth of over 1.5m (5ft), garden walls were knocked down and sections of road torn up.

Bernard Hopkins' boutique and hair salon were also badly flooded. 'Five feet of water poured through,' he told the Evening Post. 'Everything is ruined.'

Chew Stoke

It was in Chew Stoke that record rainfall occurred, with 172mm (6.8in) being recorded in only 18 hours on 10-11 July.

The village lies on the Chew Stoke Stream, a tributary of the River Chew. On the night of the Great Flood, the swollen stream burst its banks and the first place where floodwater collected was the centre of the village, the lowest point.

Unlike in previous floods when the water soon abated, the floodwaters continued to rise and rise. They swirled around the tops of the petrol pumps at the garage next to the stream and flowed through the Post Office. In some low-lying areas of the village, water quickly rose to the level of the upstairs windows. Residents unable to escape to higher ground took refuge in their bedrooms.

Arthur Young, who worked at the time at the garage run by Norman Brains, recalled the great height of the flood. 'The water was high so that a car floated over the top of the petrol pumps at the garage,' he said.

Another resident, June Baker, used her Civil Defence training the next day to help people living in The Street. 'We got buckets of clear water and disinfectant and washed everybody's crockery and pots and pans because they were covered with dirt,' she said. 'The local doctor and vet came round with a hose and washed the mud off the furniture and walls.'



Scenes of devastation in Chew Stoke



Bridges collapse

Many eyewitnesses reported seeing a wall of water roaring down the valley and several even likened it to a tidal wave.

The wall of water is thought to have been caused by a bridge parapet on the Winford Brook suddenly collapsing under the enormous pressure of floodwater and debris. This released many tonnes of water downstream.

The sudden rush of water had a domino effect. It built up against the next bridge downstream until that too gave way, and thus the growing wave swept away one bridge or bridge parapet after another.

The design of the bridges with narrow arches and masonry parapets meant the arches quickly became blocked with trees and other debris. This built up a mass of water that was suddenly released as the parapet or entire bridge gave way.

The wall of water bore down the valley, damaging buildings, sweeping away cars, drowning livestock and flooding many homes and businesses.

At Pensford and Woollard road bridges were destroyed, as was the County Bridge at Keynsham when the wall of water reached there just before midnight.

It swept a car off a bridge at Bath Hill, Keynsham and three people inside died in the night's worst single loss of life. The sole survivor was rescued from a tree five hours later.

The normally staid annual report of Bristol Avon River Authority summed up events on the Chew: 'This river probably was the worst hit in the July flood and the amount of large trees which were brought down, shoals, damaged bridges and so on was almost unbelievable.'



Swept away: The A37 bridge at Pensford



CHEW MAGNA

What happened

Chew Magna's position in the valley was its undoing on the night of the Great Storm. It lies at the confluence of the River Chew and the Winford Brook, and thus caught the full effects of flooding from both.

As the two raging torrents met, the water was forced to back up along its course as it simply couldn't escape, resulting in both river and brook rising at a rapid rate.

Then as debris built up behind the bridges over the Winford Brook upstream, the parapets gave way, resulting in a domino effect. All the pent-up floodwater was suddenly released, forming a wave that grew in height as it rushed downstream to Chew Magna.

Some low-lying properties had already flooded when the wave hit the village but the onslaught of water brought devastation to many more.

The tally of flooded properties reached 88 – far more than any other community in the valley. A dozen properties suffered major damage and several had to be demolished.

Homes in Tunbridge Road, Dumpers Lane, Silver Street and Lower Batch were particularly badly hit, as well as the church hall, the village school and the fire station near Tun Bridge.

Along Silver Street, most buildings including the Queen's Arms were flooded to depths of up to 2.5m (8ft). The newly-completed Old People's Bungalows at Lower Batch were also badly affected.

Some residents were able to escape to higher ground but many trapped in their homes had to spend the night upstairs watching the devastation from their bedroom windows.

Not only were homes ruined but power supplies were wrecked and there were fears for public health as the floodwaters were thought likely to be contaminated with sewage.



Historic Tun Bridge at Chew Magna was the scene of devastating flooding

Villagers' stories

The mother

One resident, Mrs Molly Trotter, was at home in Dumpers Lane with her four children. She told the Western Daily Press: 'There was a crash and a huge wave tore through the house. In seconds I was up to my waist in it and all the lights went out.'

The family managed to get upstairs where they had to stay until the next morning when the waters had receded.

But their pet donkey, given to the children by their late father, was not so lucky. It was swept away and found drowned two days later.

Regulars at a village pub later raised funds and presented the family with a new young donkey.

The builder's family

Local builder Mr Cox and his wife and family were in their cottage next to the historic Tun Bridge when they found water seeping under the kitchen door.

The floodwaters rose so fast that they only had time to move a few possessions to safety before they had to escape upstairs with their dog.

But the water kept rising so Mr and Mrs Cox and their son and daughter, carrying the pet, went downstairs into chest-high water and out of the house. They used a wall to feel their way through the flood until they reached higher ground, where a neighbour took them in.

Sea of mud behind the Old People's Bungalows in Lower Batch, Chew Magna



The retired couple

A caravan swept away by the Winford Brook was driven by the force of the water into the wall of Brook Cottage, home of pensioners Ted and Winnie Clements.

As floodwater poured into their home, they smashed a hole in the ceiling and climbed into the roof space.

The next day their cries for help were heard by firemen and police who rescued them by boat as the floodwaters receded.

The teacher's daughter

As they drove home to Chew Magna, teacher Mrs Long and her husband were forced to a halt on the village outskirts by the floods. Concerned for the safety of their daughter Diana, they rang home and were reassured that all was well.

But while she was on the phone Diana opened the kitchen door to find almost a metre (3ft 3in) of water. She moved some valuables and the family's cats upstairs.

Then Mrs Long heard a tremendous crash down the phone. Diana was on the line again and said: 'I must go now – the front door has just burst open and water is up to my neck!'

She was almost swept off her feet but succeeded in reaching the stairs. As she sat soaked on the top step, Diana watched the water level climb ever higher – but it halted just short of the top step and began to recede.

The coal man

While rescuing others, fireman Bryan Clarke's own home was flooded to a depth of 0.6 metres (2ft) and his parents' home behind the school was 2.1m (7ft) under water.

The two lorries he used as a coal haulier were so badly flooded that it was three months before they were roadworthy.

Flood wreckage in North Chew Terrace, Chew Magna



*Silver Street in Chew Magna:
The dark line by the porch top
marks the water height*

The firemen's story

Chew Magna's retained firefighters were first called out to help rescue cattle trapped by flooding four miles away, but deep water at Chew Stoke forced them to turn back.

Later that evening they turned out again to flooding near Keynsham but their Land Rover got stuck in floodwaters near Chew Magna cricket field and they had to push it clear.

The fire crew left the Land Rover in the village centre and joined forces with a police constable and sergeant. They began rescue operations in Silver Street where they feared Brook Cottage, where Ted and Winnie Clements were marooned in the roof space, could collapse under the force of the water.

They borrowed a boat and one rescuer first tried to take it across to the Old People's Bungalows which no-one had been able to reach.

But as it floated towards the Queen's Arms, the fierce current snatched the boat and smashed it against a wall so the attempt was abandoned, as was a second attempt.

Then firemen Ken Bond and Bryan Clarke climbed into the boat and edged their way over the bridge by the church hall. They tied a rope to a nearby pole and tried to float across to Brook Cottage but the boat was tossed about so violently that they had to return.

Winford Brook and Silver Street in Chew Magna



Next, the two firemen and police sergeant tried to reach the Clements on foot holding onto the rope. Ken Bond led the way but the current was so strong that his feet were swept from under him.

Eventually Mr Bond succeeded in reaching Brook Cottage by boat and climbed through the first-floor bedroom window. He found Mr and Mrs Clements in the roof space and helped them down and into the boat. They were taken to safety at Chew Court.

Then the fire crew loaded the boat on their Land Rover and took it to Dumpers Bridge, where they rowed through the housing development at Tunsbridge Close checking that residents were safe upstairs.

As the waters receded the firemen rowed back to the station. Daybreak found them hosing out two cottages near the school in Silver Street. They spent the rest of the day hosing out buildings and pumping floodwater from houses, the village school and church hall.

MAROONED

As the firemen rescued people their fire station itself was flooded. Fireman Alfie Clements, who had stayed behind to take further calls, was forced to climb on top of the fire tender to escape the water.

He answered the phone until it started to float about, then reported to his superiors in Weston-super-Mare that he was unable to take any more calls.

Alfie tried fishing to pass the time while sat on the tender – and managed to catch three tiddlers in a jam-jar.



Devastation at the back of the Queen's Arms, Chew Magna

Drama at the Queen's Arms

At the Queen's Arms close to the swollen Winford Brook, landlady Mrs Flower was busy serving drinks to the Over-60s Club in the skittle alley when she saw her pots and pans floating out of the kitchen door.

Water then began to flow into the skittle alley and as the players made for home, Mrs Flower and her family started carrying their possessions upstairs.

But before they could save much, Mr and Mrs Flower and their four sons were forced by the rising water to retreat upstairs.

Then they heard a cry for help from their next-door neighbour, William Ridge. While trying to move belongings upstairs in his cottage he had been swept out of the back door by the floodwater.

He was now up to his neck in water and clinging to the top of railings at the back of the pub.

The Flowers came to his rescue using a rope. While his father held one end, 16-year-old Alan Flower, a strong swimmer, grasped the other and dived from the bedroom window into the water.

Reaching Mr Ridge he fastened the rope around him and with his family pulling the rope, Alan supported the nearly-exhausted neighbour and the two of them managed to reach the pub window.

But the drama was not yet over for the family. As the floods receded a wall collapsed at the back of the pub and, fearing the entire building might collapse, the Flowers and Mr Ridge climbed down a ladder to safety.

Meanwhile Mrs Ridge was marooned all night in the cottage flooded to the level of the upstairs landing.

In the morning the Flowers found the Queen's Arms was a scene of complete devastation. Nearly everything had been swept out of the downstairs rooms and Mrs Flower's large deep freeze was found resting on top of a car.

Alan's bravery in rescuing his neighbour earned him a bronze medal from the Royal Humane Society, while Mr Ridge showed his appreciation by presenting him with a silver tankard.

COUNTRYSIDE LAID WASTE

Bristol Avon River Authority said in its annual report for 1968-69: *'Between Chew Magna and other centres of destruction, the countryside was laid waste, power supplies, telephones and communications were wrecked, farmland swamped, cars washed away and the inhabitants of the valley suffered in hardship to a degree that had never before been equalled by a flood of this scale in the area in living memory.'*

Deepest floods

In the whole of the Chew Valley, the most deeply flooded home was that of an elderly couple in Silver Street, Chew Magna.

As an incredible 5.5 metres (18ft) of water filled their home, Mr and Mrs Gunter had to perch on their bedroom windowsill.

At one point the water was up to their armpits and, not being agile enough to climb onto their roof, they were convinced they were going to drown.

Around 3am a police officer called out from the nearby churchyard to check they were safe and tell them that rescue was impossible. Only when the water level fell were they able to get to a relative's home to recover.

The Gunters were lucky not to lose their lives – they certainly lost everything else. The floodwaters washed away almost everything including the stairs.

The couple had to live in a caravan for nine months while their cottage was rebuilt. But it included a bathroom and hot and cold water for the first time, in place of the garden pump and tin bath they had used up until the flood.

In her A-level project on the event, Janet Walker of Chew Magna wrote: *'The Gunters do smile about some of their memories of the flood – seeing saucers on the roof, for instance – but for the most part it is something they wish to forget.'*

Rescue at the bungalows

One of the many heroes of the night was Charles Gill, resident warden of the Old Peoples' Bungalows at Lower Batch, Chew Magna, who carried several of the residents to safety through waist-high water.

The bungalows and three houses had been built just two years previously in an orchard next to the Winford Brook.

The warden's own home was nearest to the brook and recognising the danger from the rapidly-rising floodwater, Mr Gill began to rescue the residents amid the thunder and lightning.

His disabled next-door neighbour Mrs Cox was unaware of the danger, so Mr Gill lifted her up and waded through the water to safety. He then did the same for Mrs Withey in the adjoining bungalow.

Both elderly women lost almost everything in the flood, including personal mementoes and photographs as well as furniture and carpets.

Mr Gill went on to move other occupants of the bungalows to safety but a few refused to leave, believing they would not be flooded. They ended up spending the night stood in their kitchen sinks up to their knees in water.

Two young men, Peter Cox and Geoff Tucker, had called to visit their football team coach Hector Cornelius at his home in Lower Batch. All three went to the aid of the elderly residents and helped them to higher ground.

Mr Cornelius' wife Christine started to move belongings upstairs. 'Suddenly there was a terrific pressure of water and the windows of one bungalow smashed,' she said. 'The television, chairs and furniture floated from the bungalow. Cars were also floating.

'My husband told me to take my daughter from upstairs to higher ground so I donned my swimming costume and took her out through the lounge window,' said Mrs Cornelius.

Peter Cox climbed onto the roof of one bungalow and threw a rope to the occupant below. With people on dry land holding the other end of the rope, the elderly resident was helped to safety.

Not only were most of the residents' bungalows flooded but also the warden found his own home in ruins – he'd been unable to save anything of his own.



Silver Street at Chew Magna: floodwater reached the top of the ground floor windows of the house on the left

Garden of fish

In just 10 minutes about 1.5 metres (5ft) of water flooded the home of the Newman family in Tunbridge Lane, Chew Magna.

Mr Newman managed to take his two small boys to safety at a neighbour's home. He was lucky not to be swept away when his garden wall collapsed under the weight of floodwater.

The next morning the garden was a pond with fish swimming around the rose bed. Almost everything on the ground floor was ruined including books worth £200 – a lot of money 40 years ago.

It took the family as much as a year to recover from the flood. Among numerous possessions lost were family photos and the children's christening gifts.

THE OFFICIAL REPORT

A report about the Chew Valley floods by the district's Chief Public Health Inspector and Surveyor, Mr FC Powell, said:

Householders were badly shaken and the filth in their houses and the damage to their household effects had to be seen to be believed.

In some houses there was virtually nothing salvageable on the ground floor.

The streets and roads in the path of the floods were littered with silt, stone, furniture and indescribable debris.

Communications were difficult to say the least, mains water supply was suspect, highway drains were choked, all sewerage systems out of action, and food contaminated in shops.

PENSFORD

Battered village

Just above Pensford the Chew Valley narrows and on the night of the flood this had the effect of funnelling the swollen river into a more confined space, increasing the force of the flow. Water pouring off surrounding hills added to the flood.

Two old bridges stood in the village centre – a smaller one in Church Street and a larger one carrying the A37 Bristol to Wells road.

As the river level rose the small arches on both bridges became blocked with debris, as happened earlier at Chew Magna upstream. The blocked bridges forced the level ever higher until water began to flow across the roads and into homes in Church Street.

The debris dam against the A37 bridge grew bigger as trees and even a car were washed down into it. The river rose rapidly until it covered the tops of the bridges – and kept on rising.

Such was the depth of water that cottages in The Barton, seven metres (23ft) above the river, were flooded. A total of 40 people had to be rescued in the village.

The force of the water burst open the door of Kenneth Gill's shoe shop in Church Street near the smaller bridge and swept away hundreds of pairs of new shoes.

The parish church was flooded to a depth of 2.4 metres (8ft) while the village school downstream of the A37 was flooded to a depth of 0.9m (3ft), and at least three cars were swept away.

All roads into the village were clogged with vehicles abandoned by their owners after being swamped. A bus and an ambulance were used as temporary shelters by stranded drivers and pedestrians unable to reach their homes.



Old and new bridges in Pensford

ALL ROADS INTO THE
VILLAGE WERE CLOGGED
WITH VEHICLES
ABANDONED BY THEIR
OWNERS AFTER BEING
SWAMPED...



Remains of Bridge House, Pensford



Devastation at Pensford with the temporary A37 bridge in the background

Wreckage in Church Street, Pensford



Rescue in Church Street, Pensford

In Church Street, Ivor Perry and his wife were first driven to take refuge upstairs, then as the floods rose they had to climb into the rafters to spend an uncomfortable night.

The Duke of Edinburgh visited the village four days later and met the couple. Mr Perry said: 'We showed Prince Philip how we sheltered in the loft as water poured through our bedroom.'

A neighbour, 72-year-old Percy Perrett, was trapped in waist-deep water. He was rescued in the early hours of the morning when police were checking who had been rescued and found that Mr Perrett was missing. His son forced his way into his father's house to save him.

Severed in two

Battered by debris and under the pressure of so much water, the old stonework on the Wells Road bridge began to crumble.

This bridge didn't just link the two halves of Pensford – it also carried the A37, one of the South West's main holiday routes before the M5 was built.

Two policemen were the last people to cross the bridge just before water rose over the road and only a short time before the bridge collapsed.

What finally broke the bridge around 1am was probably the battering it received from a large tree swept down by the flood. It could have been one of the trees felled a few days previously in the valley a few miles above Pensford.

This battering proved too much for the weakened and eroded bridge. The main span collapsed into the swirling river, leaving a chasm 15 metres (50ft) across. Freed from restraint, the impounded floods raced downstream in a wall of water that wreaked more havoc at Keynsham.

In the days following the flood, Army engineers installed a temporary Bailey bridge at Pensford as a top priority, given the route's importance to villagers and holidaymakers alike.

A field squadron of 125 soldiers worked round the clock to complete the Bailey bridge.

The floods so weakened the structure of Pensford's disused railway viaduct that it had to be closed to the public.

(2) - EVENING POST, SATURDAY, JULY 12 1948

VICTIMS QUEUE FOR THE SOS AID

Disaster fund 'for daily needs'

The flood victims of Bristol lined up today for a share in the fund the city is using for the emergency.

At Lockwell Road School and Fabson Street School—the two emergency headquarters in Bedminster—people crowding in with requests for aid.

Not only people who are not insured against floods and who are penniless in need of cash are being helped.

The Corporation aim to give the money—the fund stands at several thousand pounds—to the victims within 24 hours of being asked.

Mr H. H. Stone, the city estates surveyor and valuer, said the money handed out by the Corporation was intended for 'the daily needs—bread, a little, cheap food—things like that.'

Queries

The two headquarters in the schools are stacked high with piles of clothing and clothes for people whose own possessions were washed away.

All the authorities...





*A car swept away at Pensford –
in the background is the temporary Bailey bridge*

Shop wrecked

As midnight came, properties all down Church Street were flooded, including the Rising Sun pub where the bar was awash. The parapet of the small bridge in Church Street was pushed over by the force of the torrent.

Next to the bridge stood Bridge House where erosion by the fast-flowing waters caused the whole front of the building to collapse into the road around 4am. Luckily the owner Charles Flower and his family were in another part of the 500-year-old house and escaped unhurt.

The flood also wrecked Mr Flower's butcher's shop opposite and ruined hundreds of pounds worth of meat.



*Lewis and Pat
Batten with flood
marker on their
house in Church
Street, Pensford*



VILLAGES DOWNSTREAM

Charlie Duckett leads the band over Woollard's temporary bridge

Woollard, Compton Dando and Chewton Keynsham lie on the River Chew downstream of Pensford.

It was through these small villages that the waters raced after the collapse of the A37 bridge.

Almost miraculously, Compton Dando and Chewton Keynsham escaped without severe damage.

But the same could not be said for Woollard. As the 'tidal wave' raced through, it tore the parapets from the bridge and flooded homes to a depth of more than two metres (6ft 6in), leaving devastation in its wake.

Woollard

In his bungalow at Woollard, retired local miner Charlie Duckett was forced to scramble into the loft as floodwaters rose inside his home.

He spent a terrifying night clinging to the rafters in a narrow gap between the swirling muddy waters and his roof.

Around 5am the next day a team of former Civil Defence volunteers from Keynsham had begun trying to rescue 73-year-old Mr Duckett when a helicopter arrived.

They directed the helicopter crew to the bungalow that was still surrounded by fast-flowing water. A crew member was lowered and Mr Duckett winched to safety.

Next to Mr Duckett's bungalow the medieval bridge over the River Chew was washed away. A week later he was guest of honour when Army engineers from Scotland opened a Bailey bridge as temporary replacement.

Villagers cheered as he cut a ribbon and drank a toast to the new bridge from a silver bowl of whisky. Then Mr Duckett led a pipe band in full ceremonial dress across it.

He said afterwards: *'It's a lovely bridge. Mind you, it was time that we had a new one – the other one was getting a bit old.'*

Compton Dando

The bridge at Compton Dando withstood the onslaught that had demolished those upstream at Woollard and Pensford.

But the local pub and village hall were both submerged to a depth of about 0.9 metres (3ft). Most homes escaped flooding as they were on higher ground.

MEMORABLE VISIT

Helen and William Burnham had flown in from California the evening of the storm to visit Helen's parents at Mill House in Woollard. Helen's grandparents were also staying in the house.

Two hours after going to bed, the visitors were woken by shouts that there was floodwater in the house. As everybody took refuge on the landing, water surged into the ground floor to a depth of two metres (6ft 6in).

Helen and William spent much of their six-week holiday helping clear mud and slime from Mill House.

KEYNSHAM

Triple tragedy

Keynsham is where the River Chew joins the River Avon, and the town bore the brunt of the wall of water that swept down the Chew around 1am.

It washed away parked cars and the centuries-old County Bridge was destroyed. Floodwater up to 4.2m (14ft) deep poured into properties in low-lying areas of the town.

It was at Keynsham that the night's worst tragedy happened. Eyewitnesses described seeing the 'tidal wave' wash a car with four people inside off the Bath Hill bridge.

The only survivor was Charles Kaye who survived by clinging to a tree for more than five hours. He was saved by Sgt Frank Gorman of the RAF Regiment from Colerne, Wiltshire.

Six RAF men in a rubber dinghy roped to helpers reached the survivor but no sooner had they got Mr Kaye on board than it capsized, throwing them all into the rushing water.

The RAF men were all wearing life jackets and as they bobbed up to the surface it was with relief that the helpers saw that one of them had a firm grip on Mr Kaye. The current was so strong that all of the men were rapidly washed downstream but luckily were able to scramble ashore.

ROOFTOP RESCUE

Fire crews commandeered a rowing boat to rescue people trapped in their homes at Dapps Hill in Keynsham.

One of those rescued was 16-year-old Richard Drower whose diary was quoted at the start of this booklet.

As water poured into the family home, Richard rushed upstairs but as it rose higher he was forced to scramble through the attic onto the roof, where he spent most of the night until a fire crew rescued him.



Aftermath at Keynsham

Mr Kaye's mother, father and fiancée – Miss Alexandra Giles from Marksbury – all drowned.

During Mr Kaye's ordeal, attempts to rescue him were made by Keynsham's part-time firemen, the police and local volunteers.



FURTHER AFIELD



Flooding in Ashton, Bristol



East Street in Bedminster, Bristol

Bristol

Floodwater coming down the River Avon met the high tide at Bristol and low-lying areas in the west of the city were badly affected by flooding.

Bedminster and Ashton were particularly hit with some homes flooded to a depth of 1.5 metres (5ft). At Southmead police borrowed a boat to rescue flooded residents.

A man who went to the aid of a young couple trapped by the floods in Parson Street was swept away to his death. George Bowden plunged into the floodwater and although a strong swimmer, he was carried away.

Passengers on a nearby bus formed a human chain to rescue the couple. Mr Bowden's body was later found near Hartcliffe fire station.

The Wills tobacco factory was put out of action by floods one metre (3ft 3in) deep and hundred of tonnes of spoiled cigarettes had to be dumped. Police had to be called in to stop people removing the cigarettes from the tip as there were fears the tobacco was contaminated with sewage.

Power

Five electricity sub-stations in Bristol were flooded, leaving many thousands of people still without power 24 hours after the storm hit. Phone exchanges were also knocked out and an estimated 18,000 phones cut off.

Buses

Almost a quarter of Bristol's bus fleet was put out of action by the flooding, with more than 80 vehicles trapped in the largest depot at Winterstoke Road while others in service had to be abandoned in the city.

Railways

The city was cut off by rail after a landslip at Chippenham severed the main line to London. The line to Weston-super-Mare was badly hit when two bridges collapsed and another landslip blocked the Flax Bourton cutting.

Bath

Low-lying parts of Bath were flooded and the Lower Bristol Road was under almost a metre (3ft 3in) of water.

After the River Avon overtopped its banks in the city centre, surrounding roads were submerged and closed to vehicles, bringing traffic chaos.

Fourteen electricity sub-stations were flooded and thousands of homes were left without power.

Water pouring off Lansdown, a hill to the north of Bath, flooded the suburb of Weston. Residents had little warning as water flooded their homes to a depth of one metre (3ft 3in) and pavements were torn up by the force of the torrent.

Cheddar

On the other side of the Mendip Hills, the torrent flowing down the usually dry Cheddar Gorge caused much damage in the village. Cars were swept away and the famous caves were flooded for the first time in living memory.

In the Cave Man restaurant, the doors burst open and a five-foot wave of water tore into the building. A dozen diners and staff had to clamber on tables to escape the torrent.

Further down the Gorge, dozens of shops and homes were flooded and next morning the torrent was still a metre (3ft 3in) deep.

Blackford

Five miles south of Cheddar, 74-year-old Ernest Duckett died when his cottage at Blackford near Wedmore, was swamped with floodwater almost two metres (6ft 6in) deep. Twenty-year-old Michael Collins tried unsuccessfully to save Mr Duckett and at the inquest was praised by the coroner for his courage.

AFTERMATH

As daylight revealed the extent of the disaster, friends and neighbours rallied round to help each other. In villages along the Chew Valley, a massive community recovery effort got under way helped by the emergency services, local authorities and military personnel.

Some villagers cleared houses of debris and mud while others took home piles of soiled clothes, blankets and furnishings to wash.

In her A-level project on the flood, Janet Walker wrote: *'There was that wonderful spirit of co-operation, cheerfulness and compassion which misfortune brings to a community.'*

After the mud had been cleared from the houses, they had to be thoroughly disinfected. Then airmen from RAF Colerne used hot-air blowers to dry them out.

Electricity and water board gangs worked round the clock restoring supplies to affected areas, while workmen from Clutton Rural District Council removed piles of debris and ruined furnishings.

Immediately after the disaster a flood relief fund for the affected areas of North Somerset was set up, based at Keynsham. The Government contributed £10,000 and another £12,000 came through local authorities and public donations. The money was used to buy food and clothing, replace furniture and repair buildings.

Three badly-damaged cottages had to be demolished while local builders carried out emergency repairs to other homes.

But it would be many months before all the residents were able to return to their homes, and in some cases it was a year before their lives were back to normal.

Local hero

The Somerset Guardian reported after the flood: *One of the real heroes at Chew Magna was Councillor Mrs Betty Pitt. Shortly after the disaster she arranged for the family caravan to be transported to a convenient spot in the flood-stricken area of her village.*

There she organised a voluntary relief effort and was soon surrounded by willing volunteers who all played a vital part in bringing some order where chaos reigned.

A party of women served teas and refreshments from the caravan, supplying more than 2,000 cups of tea in a week as well as mounds of sandwiches and gallons of soup.

Royal visitor

Four days after the flood, the Duke of Edinburgh flew in a helicopter over the affected areas and later toured Keynsham and Pensford to see the devastation.

At Pensford he was shown the Army's Bailey bridge and the village's Rising Sun pub, where he was pleased to see that landlord Les Tippins had opened a temporary bar in an upstairs room.

'This is the most important part of any village,' said the Duke.



PROTECTING COMMUNITIES

Since 1968 much has been done to reduce flood risk in the Chew Valley by parish councils, local authorities, highways authorities and the Environment Agency, as well as landowners and others.

Watercourses were deepened and widened and the replacement bridges were designed to reduce flood risk. The A37 bridge at Pensford, for example, was built with a wide concrete span and railings instead of stone parapets.

The Environment Agency works to reduce the risk of flooding to communities in the Chew Valley and throughout England and Wales.

We are responsible for managing flood risk on main rivers including the River Chew. We also work with local authorities, highways authorities and other organisations to help reduce flood risk.

We design, construct and maintain a wide range of flood defences, from river walls and sluices to barriers and natural defences.

We also have a vital role in warning people about the risk of flooding. At the time of the 1968 floods there was no river modelling or flood mapping to help people prepare and raise awareness of flood risk. We have since developed sophisticated mapping and modelling techniques to show our best estimates of the extent of flooding. The Flood Map on our website www.environment-agency.gov.uk shows areas at risk of flooding from rivers and the sea.

We spray the River Chew with herbicide each summer to keep down weed and help river flow – access problems on many sections make it impossible to cut weeds with a mechanical flail.

The spraying starts at the head of main river and continues all the way down, although Dumpers Lane in Chew Magna is flailed.

We inspect bridges and culverts weekly and clear blockages from them if they pose a flood risk. We also respond when members of the public report fallen trees, blockages, etc.



Clearing silt from the River Chew near Tun Bridge, Chew Magna

MANAGING FLOOD RISK

We have produced a draft Catchment Flood Management Plan for the Bristol Avon area including the River Chew.

This plan takes a comprehensive approach to flood management so we can keep more people safe from flooding.

It has policies and guidance that will help us and our partners decide the best way to manage flood risk over the next 100 years. Climate change, urban development and land use management all have a big influence on these decisions.

To obtain a summary of the plan, contact Ken Tatem - email ken.tatem@environment-agency.gov.uk or call 08708 506 506.

THE FLOOD WARNING SERVICE

The Environment Agency monitors weather reports, river and tide levels 24 hours a day and uses this information to forecast flooding.

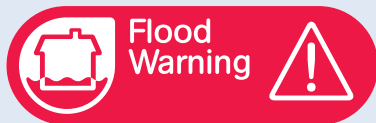
A free flood warning service (Floodline Warnings Direct) is available in areas at risk of flooding from rivers and the sea. If flooding is expected we issue flood warnings directly to the public, local authorities, emergency services and the media for public broadcast, using a set of easily recognisable codes.

Each of the four codes indicates the level of danger associated with the warning. It is extremely important that you understand the flood warning codes and know what to do if they are issued.

Floodline Warnings Direct gives you an advance warning of expected flooding in your area by telephone, mobile, fax, pager, SMS text or e-mail. Not all areas at risk of flooding are covered by the service. To find out if flood warnings are available in your area, and to sign up to the service, call Floodline on **0845 988 1188***.



Flooding of low-lying land and roads is expected. Be aware, be prepared, watch out.



Flooding of homes and businesses is expected. Act now!



Severe flooding is expected. There is extreme danger to life and property. Act now!



Flood Watches or Warnings are no longer in force for this area.

* BT calls cost up to 4p/min plus 6p set-up fee from your home. Others providers and mobiles vary.

SIMPLE STEPS TO PREPARE FOR FLOODING

The following actions will help you to be prepared in advance:

- check your buildings and contents insurance policy to ensure you have adequate flood cover;
- keep a list of useful numbers to hand – your council, emergency services, insurance company, Floodline and your family and neighbours;
- know where and how to turn off your gas, electricity and water mains supplies;
- prepare a flood kit of essential items – include copies of your home insurance documents, a torch with spare batteries (or a wind-up torch), a wind-up or battery radio (find out the frequency of your local radio station), blankets and warm clothing, waterproofs, rubber gloves, bottled water and non-perishable food items, a first aid kit and prescription medication;
- prepare a personal Emergency Flood Plan and keep it somewhere safe – **there's a Flood Plan on the next two pages**;
- store valuable and sentimental personal items upstairs or in as high a place as possible;
- at work - check there is a business Emergency Flood Plan. Taking action to prepare in advance for flooding will keep your business afloat if the worst happens;
- have some sandbags or flood protection equipment prepared to block doorways and airbricks which will help stop floodwater entering your property.

For more information on how to prepare for flooding please call Floodline on 0845 988 1188. Or you can log on to www.environment-agency.gov.uk/flood

STAYING SAFE DURING A FLOOD

The events of 10-11 July 1968 show all too vividly that floods can kill.

Stay safe:

- do not try to walk or drive through floodwater. 15 cm of fast flowing water could knock you off your feet and 60 cm could wash your car away;
- do not walk along piers, sea walls or quaysides during flood events. Large waves may push you over and you may be swept away;
- beware of large waves crashing onshore as they may contain rocks and debris which could cause injury;
- do not park vehicles near the edge of quays or harbours during a flood event. Hazardous conditions during high tide may make it difficult to see where the edge is. Floodwater can also damage your vehicle;
- floodwater can hide hazards - manholes covers may come off during a flood and there maybe other hazards you can not see.



Flood plan

Name

Be prepared for flooding. Act now

Which flood warnings are you registered to receive?

River:

Quickdial no:

Reach:

| General contact list | Company name | Contact name | Telephone |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Floodline | Environment Agency | | 0845 988 1188 |
| Electricity provider | | | |
| Gas provider | | | |
| Water company | | | |
| Telephone provider | | | |
| Insurance company and policy number | | | |
| Local council | | | |
| Local radio station | | | |
| Travel/weather info | | | |

Key locations

| Service cut-off | Description of location |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Electricity | |
| Gas | |
| Water | |

Who can help?

| Relationship | Name | Contact details | How they can help? |
|---------------------|------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Relative | | | |
| Friend or neighbour | | | |



What can I do NOW?

Be prepared for flooding. Act now

Put important documents out of flood risk and protect in polythene Look at the best way of stopping floodwater entering your property Find out where you can get sandbags Identify what you would need to take with you if you had to leave your home

Check your insurance covers you for flooding Make a flood plan and prepare a flood kit Identify who can help you Understand the flood warning codes

What can you do when you receive a flood warning?

Actions

Location

Home

- Move furniture and electrical items upstairs
- Put flood boards, polythene and sandbags in place
- Make a list now of what you can move upstairs or away from the risk
- Turn off electricity, water and gas supplies
- Roll up carpets and rugs
- Unless you have time to remove them hang curtains over rods
- Move sentimental items to safety
- Put important documents in polythene bags and move to safety

Garden and outside

- Move your car out of the flood risk area
- Move any large or loose items or weigh them down

Business

- Move important documents, computers and stock
- Alert staff and request their help
- Farmers move animals and livestock to safety

Evacuation - Prepare a flood kit in advance

- Inform your family or friends that you may need to leave your home
- Get your flood kit together and include a torch, warm and waterproof clothing, water, food, medication, toys for children and pets, rubber gloves and wellingtons

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|-------------------------------|--|
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| Arthur Young | Photographs and information |

**Would you like to find out more about us,
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