

1998 storm, written by Hazel Hall.

Maundy Thursday. 9<sup>th</sup> April 1998.

What an incredible weekend it has been, beginning with Thursday night. We left to go shopping at Sainsburys, Banbury, at 7pm thinking it was just another wet miserable night. At Deddington traffic lights we got nose to tail with traffic right through to Sainsburys. Rumours were rife with flooding at Gaydon - as we travelled back home you could see non-moving nose to tail traffic on the motorway as far as the eye could see.

Good Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> April.

Friday we woke to floods the like I have never seen. Taking a walk down onto Long Bridge the pole registered 13ft on the Rousham side of the bridge but further along when we crossed to look over the other side it was an amazing 2ft higher and about 18" from the top of the parapet. It was already pouring through Turnpike Cottage and by evening had covered the 14ft mark which meant Cuttle Mill, Turnpike Cottage, Station House and Heyford Mill were now well flooded and the road closed.

North Aston had fared no better. The road in one place had already been a seething mass of foam which was impossible to ford and the mill house totally surrounded. By evening this had risen to a point necessitating the closure of the road. So now we were cut off at Heyford, North Aston and the Rock of Gibraltar.

Saturday, 11<sup>th</sup> April

Saturday saw things much better – it had evened out and the road to Lower Heyford was clear but battle scarred.

I saw one thing I have never seen before. A lad sat in his canoe on top of the parapet whilst his mate launched him into the flood water- he had a ball and was last seen paddling back to Tackley – easy as the flow of the current did all the hard work. Where we had watched water squirt through the bridge walls the mortar was all flaking away and the road cracked and holey. The fence in front of Turnpike Cottage was broken and washed askew and the ground flattened with the force of the water.

Station House had thrown all their carpets outside and must have been heaving a sigh of relief that the water was just lapping at the side of the hedgerow 18" away.

The poor old canal was in a sick and sorry state. The water had subsided quite a lot but the path along to the narrow boats between Heyford Station and The Cleeves was waterlogged.

Easter Sunday we took a quick ride into Banbury and as we went through Deddington it started to snow. Pound stretchers was closed so we came back and went through North Aston. The water was still up round Mill House and you had to drive carefully as the road was still flooded and water still pouring across the

meadow. We went down to have a look at Heyford Mill - that had had the doors stoved in with the weight of the water (rather amazing as I would have thought the volume far greater on Turnpike Cottage). The canal path was still badly flooded in places. Who should come along but Basil and his family from a sightseeing trip - as we were talking it started to snow like hell again so we all headed home. Sunday saw a cold but sunny day with more snow at 1.30. The floods are still well in evidence but gradually declining, I don't think we shall see the end of them until the end of the week.

This morning they are saying the Peterborough area is on red alert and could have its problems for a few days.

Although we have seen flooding many times this is the first time in all my 67 years I have seen the like.

1947 was the next bad flood for Cherwell Valley but a lot of the water along the bridge was because Big Green burst its banks and the water ran up between the bridge walls. I have never seen it that deep with snow again. I got stranded in Kidlington at Auntie Vera's. Uncle Frank was stationed at the Police House on Gosford Road at the time. Ivy was in the Churchill Hospital after a serious hysterectomy. The snow had paralyzed the bus service so I caught a train next day. Only to find on reaching Heyford you had to walk through a single track with snow shoulder high either side of you. Quite a winter that one.

Sadly I never kept my diaries up to my regret. Who would have realized the world would have changed so much during the course of my lifetime with so many interesting unrecorded incidents like Hale-Bopp and the various stars and things. Incredible!

Just when you think you have seen it all you find yourself in the middle of a snow storm. Thankfully it went as soon as it landed.

16<sup>th</sup> April

I really had to look at the calendar twice to make sure the date was correct. I got up this morning to a steady snow and already everywhere is white. If it breaks I will try and get a photograph. At this rate the valley is going to stay flooded for a long time. Whoever made the foolhardy decision to release the water was very stupid. Fortunately, with the change of farming there don't appear to have been any cattle grazing. I hate to think what could have been - it truly doesn't bear thinking of - usually there have been a very large flock of sheep in Dormers.

Friday

The floods are on a high again and to within a whisper of the fence in Dormer's field. The river and canal are right up on bursting. It's going to take weeks before we are back to normal.

THURSDAY AM: Water levels rise 11 inches in four hours; floodgate opened on canal at Cropredy, north Banbury

THURSDAY PM: Five more gates - at five-mile intervals along the canal - opened between Banbury and Oxford one after the other; Banbury struck by floods

FRIDAY: All private weirs opened on River Cherwell - at King's Sutton, Clifton, North Aston, Somerton, Lower Heyford, Enslow, Kidlington, Flights Mill and King's Mill

FRIDAY NIGHT: Kidlington struck by floods

FRIDAY 10PM: It is forecast Oxford to be flooded within hours

SATURDAY EARLY HOURS: Oxford gets the all-clear as storm subsides

SUNDAY: Big clean-up begins

**IT was like a scene from a disaster movie. Weathermen gave no indication of the scale of the deluge which was to strike Oxfordshire during 48 hours of the worst floods seen for generations.**

Families valiantly struggled to protect their homes as the torrent turned streets into rivers and left people wading waist deep in water.

British Waterways spokesman Simon Ainley summed up residents' feelings of shock when he said: "It was like being caught in a disaster movie, without having a copy of the script."

The race against time started on Wednesday following severe storms in the Midlands which led to swollen waterways. The tidal wave of water rushed southwards towards Oxfordshire. Engineers reacted by opening a flood gate on the Oxford Canal at Claydon, north of Banbury.

The gates were opened slightly to let water through - but they could not cope with the volume and caused localised flooding.

The following day the water level rose by 11 inches in four hours. A second canal flood gate at Cropredy, also north of Banbury, was then opened, followed by a further five every five miles between Banbury and Oxford.

By Friday, residents in Banbury were being forced from their homes as the tidal wave of flooding swept south as the River Cherwell and the Oxford Canal burst their banks. By this time most privately-owned weirs had been opened on the river to stop water levels rising even further - but worse was to come.

Kidlington was next.

By Friday night, part of the village was submerged as firefighters and emergency services fought a vain battle to stop even more water rushing into homes.

Hundreds of people were forced from their homes and police mounted extra patrols in evacuated areas to guard against looters.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Peter MacGregor said firefighters waded to and from homes to rescue pensioners and small children.

He described the scene: "The canal and the river both burst their banks at the same time.

"We knew it was going to hit likely predicted areas, but in my view it was a natural phenomenon."

ACO MacGregor said the torrent was just a few hours from hitting Oxford city centre - but thankfully the rain subsided.

But flooded-out villagers at Kidlington are demanding a public inquiry into the way the situation was handled.