

The Great Flood

Sunday the 21st of October 2001 will be remembered in Hempstead for many years to come. Not for it being the day after the village clean up and lunch, but for the 'Great Flood of Hempstead'. It was, though, a memorable weekend all said and done. Gullies and drains were cleaned on the Saturday only to be called into service on the Sunday. Flooding could have been worse in some areas if the work had not taken place!

I had heard a patter of raindrops at about 4am and looking out as dawn broke wondered why there was a pool of water on the lawn where pools don't normally stand. This was followed by a phone call inviting me to investigate the loss of topsoil from one of the fields into the road. Springing into action I was immediately confronted by a lake of water surrounding my 4x4 in the yard. Serious rainfall had obviously occurred overnight and required investigation. The empty wheelbarrow was now full and overflowing and the rain was still falling! Leaving the yard my first thought was for Daffers down at Sellands. I hadn't travelled very far before I could see that this time sand bags were not going to be a lot of good. The ditches were full and overflowing and it is a wonder her house had not been washed away in the torrent. Water was already over the doorstep and the tide was still rising! I suspected further problems in my travels and so alerted the Daffers flood defence team who took over womanfully. I continued on my way to Anso Road where I was to view the roadful of soil. This had fast become a torrent of water and had already seen off the paperman who had decided that discretion was the better part of valour and had abandoned his deliveries! This I found out from Tony Eyles who had failed in his attempt to acquire sand bags from a departing fire brigade. Subsequently his house was engulfed in the raging waters that deposited so much silt into every nook and cranny, leaving Tony just another statistic. There seemed to be no point in attempting a trip along the road, so I retraced my footsteps in an effort to check the livestock. Thankfully all were well if a little hungry. Those that were inside didn't know what all the fuss was about and those that were out had taken to higher ground.

Returning to the village the scale of the disaster became self evident. Most roads in and out of the village posed questions, some more than others. Cars were abandoned, some waterlogged, some not. Lunch dates were quickly rearranged, and contingency plans in the event of continuing rainfall were hastily made. The prime



thoughts though were for the householders most affected by the rising waters but little could be done. The damage had been suffered and it was just a matter of waiting to clear up. A few drains were unblocked to ease the situation but there was nowhere for the water to go.

Pilgrims had plied their way through the waves to St Andrew's Church and waited in vain for the 9.30am service. The Ark was loaded but there was no sign of Noah. Hempstead was not the only recipient of sudden rainfall and there were similar problems affecting Radwinter.

By now the water had backed up all the way from Anso Gallows, with the flow continuous from Folly Hollow (adjacent to Folly Hall). Here the hollow was level full, with the rise and fall being gauged by the wing mirror of an abandoned Sierra half way up the hill. This meant of course that Robin at Brookside was perilously close to being swamped. However a gang of willing helpers baling out the front room for three hours supplied with Ellie's timely arrival with coffee, together with two submersible pumps and a generator, managed to keep the damage to a minimum. We thought help had arrived when the fire brigade found Hempstead and stopped outside an obviously deserving cause. 'Westridge'? one of them asked as they all bundled off their engine, putting on their hats as they did so. 'Brookside' we replied. 'Wrong house, sorry.' Off hats, on engine and away they went! They did return a couple of hours later, though. They were obviously under pressure as their prime piece of flood defence apparatus was a stirrup pump off a museum wall. Fortunately things were relatively under control by this time and their lack of equipment was scarcely noticed.

Sandbags? We did catch a glimpse of some but we couldn't have them. They were on route to Great Chesterford to their Village Hall. The council would have been better leaving them in Hempstead for the good they did there!

Throughout the afternoon would be travellers would stop to enquire the best way to Steeple Bumpstead or Finchingfield. As there seemed to be a four foot wall of water between us and them the recommendation was not to try! Refugees were sheltered for the night and continued their journey the following day. Some intrepid travellers waded through the floodwaters and then secured lifts either to higher ground or home. Some just did not make it to their destination or back. I wonder whether those four lads from Huddersfield got home safely!

My lasting memories of the day were the look of despair on faces as their homes were about to be flooded, the look of relief when the waters subsided without rising those last few inches and the Chairman of the Parish Council having no more success than Neptune whilst brandishing his trident at a drain.

Fortunately it is not often that we have 79mm of rain in 24 hours, but when we do it certainly concentrates the mind. Will it happen again? Sometime. But as no one can remember it quite as bad as this, maybe not for a long time. Who can tell?

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