

# Sobering lesson of Great Flood of destruction

The 'Great Flood' of 1912 was the worst natural disaster inflicted on Norwich in 400 years. But how did it occur and could history repeat itself? A century on, **Steve Snelling** looks back to the calamitous summer when hours of torrential rain turned a city into an island.

**T**he weirdly bulging corner shop wall was the first clue to the unworldly scale of a disaster almost beyond comprehension. To one woman, it had the terrifying aspect of a supernatural force gouging and tearing at the very fabric of earthly life.

As torrential rain whipped by howling winds coursed through the narrow terraced streets, she watched in astonishment the strange swelling disfigurement before dashing out into the deluge.

By then, the back wall had already crumbled into rain-lashed ruin. What remained of the building was tilted as though it had been an almighty shove by some unseen hand.

Looking round, she saw that one side of a neighbouring house had collapsed. Moments later, the front gave way, leaving its sole, petrified occupant marooned on an upstairs landing suddenly exposed to the elements.

Not far away, in the same stricken terrace, great, jagged cracks crept up the walls of next-door houses. In no time, they, too, had taken on a drunken slope.

Even the ground was unsafe. Just beyond the row of tortured homes the road had collapsed into a gaping pit several feet deep. Pavements crumpled, kerbs twisted and a little further along, earthquake-style ruptures ran like open wounds along the street.

The extraordinary scene in Churchill Road, Norwich, on the afternoon of Monday, August 26, 1912, was merely one manifestation of the most calamitous and devastating natural disaster to hit the city in almost 400 years.

Known simply as the Great Flood, the rain-induced inundation was part of a county-wide catastrophe that swept mercilessly across 1,800 square miles of Norfolk and north Suffolk, crippling

the region's agriculture and industry, washing away bridges and all means of communication and rendering thousands homeless.

Nowhere was the destruction and disruption greater than in Norwich which, for a time, was virtually cut-off from the outside world and where around 15,000 people were forced to flee or had to be rescued from their flooded homes.

Here, people spoke of a "Niagara torrent" of water surging and swirling through the heart of the city, of low-lying roads turned into raging rivers and of a flood of near biblical proportions that rendered Norwich virtually an island lapped and partially submerged by a vast inland sea.

So, how did it all come about and, a century on, what is the likelihood of history ever repeating itself with such fearful consequences for the city and its citizens?

The answer to the first question is simple enough. Nature, in the form of a relentless and unprecedented storm of rain, was to blame. From somewhere between 3 and 4am on August 26 and 9am the following day, around 7½ inches of rain

swamped the city in the heaviest recorded deluge. Across the county, it was estimated that a staggering 150,242,000,000 gallons of water, or the equivalent of roughly twice the contents of Lake Windermere, fell in a continuous downpour, accompanied by winds that reached gale-force speeds of 50mph.

Unusual meteorological circumstances were at play. High pressure systems had built to the north and south of the country, with depressions sandwiched between that swept across a central belt. After a fine Sunday, the barometer fell sharply and, in the early hours, the rain began falling and the winds, light at first, gradually picked up until, by the afternoon, the deluge was said to resemble "a driving snow blizzard".

By then, the rain, which peaked at

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Brundall with eight inches in a savage 48 hours, was falling at the rate of an inch an hour across Norwich.

The impact was almost immediate. According to a subsequent inquiry, "there was scarcely a building that did not suffer some damage from the rain..."

Flooding quickly followed in the densely-populated low-lying parts of the city centre. Though swollen by the fierce rain, the River Wensum would take a while to break its banks in Norwich. The initial trouble came from the welter of debris and silt swept downriver to render sewers and drains useless.

"So furious was the rush of Monday's down-pourings that streets were scoured in all directions," noted one contemporary account, "and the surface drains were quite inadequate to the task of carrying off the huge volume of water. In consequence many streets caved in with disastrous results to numbers of dwelling-houses."

Flood sluices at the New Mills had been ordered open early on the Monday morning, but this merely delayed rather than prevented the inevitable.

The real trouble was building to the north-west of the city where huge amounts of water built up near Fakenham to swell

the narrow channel of the Wensum as it flowed in a steadily increasing torrent towards an already beleaguered Norwich.

Along the way, fallen trees and haycocks were swept off the meadows and into the rising river to collect as natural dams around bridges along the way. The effect was devastating. Steve Western, a forecaster at the UEA-based WeatherQuest, believes that such obstructions would have held the water up until the force of water reached a point where it burst through.

"Instead of a steady pouring of water along the river, it would have suddenly rushed through," he says. "It would have come through these dams in a series of surges and made it worse."

The immensity of the impending disaster became clear by noon on Tuesday when the river began rapidly to overflow its banks, carrying destruction far and wide. Three hours later, water levels in Norwich had reached the high water mark of the last "great flood" just 34 years earlier. But they didn't stop there. The swirling waters continued to rise dangerously.

District after district, street after street, were swamped as the Wensum widened into a lake to engulf the lowest parts of the city. "A more heart-breaking scene







At the height of the raging flood-tide, the entire front of the building's two lower storeys had been torn away, threatening the remainder of the works, with its tall tower and chimneys, with destruction.

Nearby malting stores belonging to Bullard & Sons brewery were also extensively damaged and, on the opposite side of the river, one of the buildings forming the Harmer factory complex collapsed.

The flotsam and jetsam of destruction was everywhere apparent along the course of the torrent. According to one account, "the debris of yards and factories higher up the stream came down in an unending succession - butchers' blocks, dog kennels, garden pailings, bakers' troughs, brewers' tubs and corks and barrels without number".

Amid so much carnage, however, there were also tales of great courage. Boatman William Marrison, from Fox and Goose Yard, was credited with saving least 100 people from their flooded homes during 12 hours of non-stop rescue. Former city MP Louis Tillett waded through water up to his neck, helping to carry nurses to a pregnant woman trapped in her house. And Henry Abel, a council workman, risked his life to save ancient Bishop Bridge from destruction: lowering himself on to bucking timber hammering against the centuries-old stone piers and attaching ropes in order to drag the wood clear.

But the greatest of all the heroes of the 'great flood' was also one of the disaster's most tragic victims. George Brody, a 46-year-old fish porter from Saw Mills Yard, was last seen alive on the Tuesday evening,

**Scenes of devastation: The walls of the Norwich Mercury works are damaged by the flood waters (main picture).**

**Above, top: Prince of Wales Road is flooded.**

**Above left: Children play as the water subsides in Barn Road.**

**Above right: Midwife Alice Matthews arrives by boat at a house in Midland Street.**

**Inset, left: Grim tidings: The headlines sum up the scale of the natural disaster which engulfed Norwich and the surrounding area a century ago.**

rescuing women and children from their homes. At some point, in the midst of his selfless effort, he was thought to have lost his footing and been swept away. His body was found the following day, floating in the floodwater, near Bullard's wharf.

He was one of three people in Norwich to die as a result of the flood - the youngest being a five-month old baby swept from his mother's arms - and it was only by a miracle that the death toll was not any higher.

There was no such escape for hundreds of valuable canaries which were lost to the rising water - with some particularly valuable strains being virtually wiped out.

Gradually, however, the water levels fell. Then came relief and the final reckoning. The city was left in a "deplorable state" with the bill for repairs topping £100,000. A disaster fund drew worldwide support, including donations from the King and Queen, and around 2,500 people were found temporary shelter while many more received emergency supplies of food to sustain them in the days that followed.

So much for the disaster of 1912. In the years since, flood walls have been raised, drains improved and the capacity of the sluices at the New Mills increased. At the same time, much of the housing that suffered the worst of the flooding a hundred years ago has long since vanished in the name of slum clearance. But does that mean a calamity on the scale of the 'Great Flood' will not happen again?

After all, there has been nothing remotely approaching it in the century since despite the fact that records as far back as the 16th century show that at

least twice in every 100 years up until 1912 exceptionally heavy rain has caused the Wensum to overflow its narrow winding channel through Norwich and flood the districts of Heigham, Westwick and Coslany.

Such evidence might appear to suggest the city is no longer vulnerable to similar freaks of nature. But not so, according to Steve Western of WeatherQuest. Asked if comparable downpours could wreak havoc all over again, his answer was unequivocal. "Oh God, yes," he says. "No doubt about that at all. That amount of rain any time of the year is going to cause a problem."

In fact, there are reasons to fear that recent developments could even make a potential disaster even worse. For balanced against the improved defences against flooding is the loss of so many flood plains. "We have had a lot more building on flood plains," says Steve, "stupid things like roads, car parks and industrial warehouses and all that means is that rain that might have simply landed on fields and either run off or soaked in, is poured straight into watercourses."

In other words, the right, or should that be wrong, set of circumstances, river levels would rise quicker and bring a flood tide running faster into Norwich. Little wonder then that Steve Western believes the misery of 1912 could one day be inflicted all over again.

"Could we have it again?" he says, repeating my earlier question. "Well, the answer is - yes!"

**Our 1912 Great Flood series continues on Monday.**

than that which presented itself could scarcely be imagined," one account stated. "Looking out from the upstairs windows could be seen the grief-stricken faces of men and women, while everywhere was the piteous wailing of children.

"The downstairs rooms of hundreds of homes were full of water almost to the ceiling, and hundreds of carts were busily engaged in taking women and children from the upstairs rooms and conveying them to one or the other of the refuges which were thrown open."

Through its serpentine course through the city, the Wensum overflowed its banks to form a huge lagoon, 730yds wide in the Heigham area and 410yds wide around Carrow.

As well as partially swallowing, almost 4,000 houses, around 400 shops and pubs were flooded along with 33 churches, chapels and schools and 57 factories. In The Close, the water lapped the cloisters and for a time the Cathedral itself was thought to be in danger.

In one of the most iconic images of the 1912 flood, a photographer captured the torrent roaring beneath St George's Bridge against a backdrop of the tottering ruins of the Norwich Mercury printing works.