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Trust

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The Trent
Flood of 2000;
A Perspective Ten Years On.

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Information.

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Introduction.

Trent and flood are synonymous; the river has an apparent dislike of keeping within the designated confines of its mapped course. It has always wandered across the wide valley floor, at times inundating large areas in water, at others, cutting new channels that required resurveying.

It is a wanderer; its streams and tributaries are equally irksome, they flood and cut off isolated communities, whose attentions had been concentrating on the main river and its growing mass of water that can rise several feet in a day. These side streams did not rise so vigorously but soon would cover roads, sneaking from the ditches that had swiftly and unnoticeably filled by drainage from the fields or roads, and the no longer burbling brook's over spill.

It is a strange feeling sitting watching the television news at ten o'clock in the evening, having put your waders upstairs and checked that all books, and anything else that can be lifted out of harms way are stowed safely.

In the morning the river is still flowing; higher than halfway up the downstairs' windows but it is still behind the flood bank built in response to the flood of 1947. The nearby stream is now filling the field by the house, sheds are islands, pheasants roosting on their roofs; two others are sitting on the kitchen roof, soon to be joined by ten more, two moor hens and a dabchick also become resident.

There is a feeling; a mix of frustration and exhilaration, 'if this is going to happen, God, get on with it! The neighbours are all of a dither.'

One family made up of three generations sat the flood out caused some concerns. The oldest generation were much traumatised and both died within three years, the other neighbours died, in a not too extended time frame. Of the former household, after the flood and deaths, the remaining generations moved away.

The next night the water appears to be stable, it may not flood, no mention on the BBC at nine o'clock. Before bed put ones head outside to see if all is

well, there is a strange silence, yes the river is passing at near head height but, like a huge black slug, soundless. The only sound is the pheasants on the roof grumbling or dreaming.

Five in the morning and a cup of tea, down the stairs, eyes not quite open, where is the bottom stair? Not where it was last night; it is now bumping against the cooker. The flood is here; up stairs again on with the waders, put the kettle on; all electrics are working-had all the plugs put three feet off the ground good idea-that-the river is still flowing at head height. The Fleet is in the house not the Trent. The neighbours are at the door needing candles that they have mislaid at home; give them some and a cup of tea; water rising now about a foot inside the kitchen. A field mouse swims in towards the stairs and makes a slipshod landing but scrambles up the stair runner and bounds upstairs I don't wonder where. This all goes on as if in some kind of vortex. One is prepared to cope for ourselves; but our neighbours? The telephone rings: it is the family up the lane, 'are you flooded?' is their enquiry, 'have you any spare milk, can you bring some after dawn?' Of course.

The water keeps rising and is now flooding over the flood bank; going outside to look at what there is to see. All there is, is water from one horizon to the other for all 360 degrees. It is quite awe inspiring. The pheasants need feeding and the boat needs to be prepared.

This short document includes an eyewitness account of the flood at Collingham in Nottinghamshire, that occurred in December 2000 and lasting two weeks. It is, as a flood, rather a minor affair compared with the floods that have been affecting millions of people in the Indus region of Pakistan (Late August and September 2010). Neither flood has killed many people; but stress and disease will take their toll. Both have many parallels, though the scales are magnified in the subcontinent.

The eyewitness account will be referred to throughout the paper where it is thought able to illustrate the reality of such an event.

Recent History.

As has already been said the River Trent floods regularly, though it cannot be forecast as a monsoon inundation can be prepared for. If it happens, it happens and all men for themselves, no women and children first.

The wall of North Collingham church, facing Trent Lane (or, as maps have it; Carlton Ferry Lane) has marker stones let into its structure, recording heights and dates of various notable flood events. These go back as far as the February 1795, when one such flood was so severe that the river gave up its course for a while and flowed through a low piece of ground, between Newark and Stapleford, into the River Witham and retook its old route (pre-ice age) to the sea at Boston on the Wash. The flood caused much upset in Lincoln en-route. This state of affairs only lasted a matter of days but it gave rise to the recording of the event on that church wall for posterity. Notable water levels continue to be so recorded.

The floods that allowed the building of flood defences along much of the lower Trent including at Collingham took place during March 1947 and were preceded in February 1946 by large scale flooding. These allowed the opportunity to avoid several short inundations that were partly fluvial and in part tidal at locations such as the pub, the Jolly Bargeman, or the Wharf at Collingham. This building was used to being flooded several times each year but as there were no banks to restrict water flow the events were transitory, as was the trade of the bargees.

Once the flood banks had been constructed (1950), the river here about behaved, locked behind its constricting banks; this did not last. In 1954 there was a spate of tidal surges that breached the new defences between Cromwell and Laneham and took a week to dissipate; the water was held back by the defences from rejoining the river, as the tides receded.

Again in February 1977 after much snow and ice the river flooded the area for a period of ten days; again the flood bank proved a hindrance to the waters return to the river as the flood abated.

The winters thereafter were punctuated by rises and falls of river levels; at times a Whitaker's oil barge, heading for the oil depot at Colwick, would pass the bedroom window with its bridge looking down on the bedroom window; at others it would be hidden below the vast flood bank. The yo-yoing of water height within the confines of the flood bank become quite hypnotic; the regular checks, placing markers on the bank to judge the speed of rise. Oddly one never checked the speed of falls. On the far bank the river will have inundated all the Trent valley as far as the eye could see, at least as far as the A1. On the bank that mattered there would still be a good leeway before the thought of flood would concern you.

Flood Scene, Collingham Wharf, 2000.

Reality.

The water that first day kept rising until about four in the afternoon, then one realised that there was a current moving through the house; the direction changed every few hours: the tide, the lunar force.

That day one had already met the current that swept along the flooded lane and fields: rowing from the stern and punting with a ten foot pole loosing the hedgerows, getting snagged by long snakes of barbed wire held afloat by huge slicks of reed and leaf litter. On foot the lane was less than a mile and a half, by water and with the detours made inevitable by the conditions, it was more like three and a half. At times the oar could not gain on the flow and the water was too deep to punt. At times you realised you were standing in the middle of a gravel working, being driven by the river towards the next overgrown hawthorn hedge, beneath you a small boat and 15 or 20 metres of water. One becomes quite lonely in those situations.

The Environment Agency, just before we were cut off from the village delivered a hundred empty sacks with the helpful advice that they could be filled from the quarry at the bottom of the field, the fact that the workings were full of water had not registered with them till that point; they returned a half hour later with some filled; these had been intended for the library, around five metres higher than we were.

Sand bags do not repel or really make much of a barrier to flood water; they may, in a flash flood, but day after day they do nothing but filter the water as it enters and flows through a building.

It was with this first day that the tide was noticed; although the river streamed north rubbish noticeably flowed in the opposite direction. One drowned harvest mouse would float through the kitchen one way twice a day and similarly the opposite direction twice. After the flood had receded there was no sign of that mouse.

As the first night of being inundated the neighbours waded round, I had brought them milk bread and other bits and pieces that day from the village as I had for the other neighbours and those up the lane: they needed comfort. The postman met me with all the mail in the church yard; he did every day bar Sundays, at 10. It was good to have goals to aim at. The neighbours had been on our phone during the day trying to borrow boats which they

managed to do. I wished they had not. Anyway the neighbours in boots, miserable and cold their gas bottles had run out. Our central heating worked, and did right through, radiators higher than usual on the downstairs walls, their first third was still submerged. The insects congregated round them like a scum on the wall, oddly they moved as if with the tide. Warmed the neighbours: gave them whiskey and water; went home.

The next day as light came up two idiots on jet skies shot down stream cheering and jeering, we all hoped they got home safely. The new boaters needed to collect their craft; two trips between 8am and 1pm; was tired out after the first, decided to order an outboard engine; the only chandler who would deliver sold only electric units, so on my second, return trip, the outboard's maiden voyage, the battery ran out of power halfway home. Rowed and punted back; at times dragging the boat along the tops of the hedges; so as not to be washed off course too much.

The next two days took on an air of routine activity, the neighbours' two boats and ours in convoy; the out board, fully charged could just get to the village towing one; the other was better powered, but, showing human nature, shot on ahead. All went on, water rose, fell and rose again, the sluices in Nottingham had been opened to relieve the city's flood defences.

The insurance company was very pleasant on the telephone and said that they would visit and arrange help to clean up. The next day they phoned and said that they could not get to us, I explained that it would be sometime before they could and so it was: two weeks and everything by then was clean and drying out.

The wildlife showed perplexity, mice and moles sitting in the tops of hedges, sparrow hawks not knowing where to dine next. A fox and two hares sitting on an island of sand, by the quarry, for the duration, kept themselves to themselves.

The speedy boating members of our small community started to go to the village in the dark, powerful lamps on their bow; the second night our telephone rang; they had hit something and had sunk halfway back. Useful things, mobile phones. Could we help? It was dark, blowing, cold and late on in the evening, Inspector Frost or some such light entertainment was filling the TV screen in our sitting room; put the battery in the boat and set off, cutting across the hedges trying to judge where wire might stop our

forward momentum; I could not take the other battery, two passengers, any more onboard with a blustery wind the extra weight and we would sink. It took half an hour to get to them hanging onto each other perched on a hedge top; rather as pheasants were near by. Wedged the boat with the pole against the hedge and urged them to scramble in, the sweet smell of beer wafted round them.

photograph

Not good gardening weather, Collingham Wharf, 2000.

After a few minutes only the engine ceased, so with pole and oar; the use of hedge tops got them to their door; they were sad they had lost their shopping when they sank. Went home and returned with a nightcap for them both.

Salvaged their boat the next morning and mended their engine on the understanding that they had no more nocturnal adventures.

The daily routine of shopping in the morning, office in the afternoon, community rest area in the evenings, never ran out of beer or whiskey the whole time. Never ran out of food for the birds on the roof either, they became quite tame knocking at the window upstairs for food.

When after eight days the water began retreating it was not flowing over the flood bank; its flow over the landscape slowed and the tide ceased. We were still under two feet of water, but the mood changes and the others living by us are now impatient, they even ask me to get them rescued, the patriarch of one of the families has spoken to the press on the phone; notoriety beckoned.

It takes another two days before the houses are free of water. Another six and the car can come home. The house is aired and a feeling of satisfaction as the lime plaster has not left the walls, the only real sadness is finding the 'waterproof' chests where the LP record collection was stored has been ruined. They were not insured, the nice insurance man tells me after quibbling over the value of a refrigerator, that had been saved from the flood.

The others who have survived this interesting period are complaining; saying that more should have been done and they were uninsured; nothing I can do, but point out that they are alive: sadly though for not much longer, how one could kick oneself for such banality.

Ten years on the events fade into the background, never forgotten but as other events take place in individual lives the past dims, particularly the more troublesome.

Two days after the flood had left our lives snow lay on the ground.

The Long View.

Ten years on, and no more, bad floods in this area of Nottinghamshire, the worst UK fluvial flooding has been in Cumbria particularly in Cockermouth, the Lower Severn and parts of the West Country; there has been sewage floods in Yorkshire and in other parts of the country. This year (2010) there has been a major, monsoon-fed, flood in Pakistan. The world heard the scream of the NGOs, and the whimper of innumerable victims. The press covered the crisis for six days, until, the news changed to cricket scandals and international footballers' peccadillos.

The flood in the Indus flood plain is an annual event; some monsoons are worse than others, they benefit, as well as disrupt life. The alluvium that is deposited across huge areas of the flood plain has made it the sub-continent's major cereal producing area; the rains prevent famine. The aid agencies need the disaster angle for the media to take up the call for help; this tops up the larger charities coffers for the region affected. The NGO is big business and the disaster is better than paying an advertising agency to make it up.

The population appears on the newsreels to be resigned to their fate; of course they are, it is, as I have written, an annual event, and expected. In this country, where life is ordered and routines are based round 'civilised' life styles of television or the pub, anything that alters the daily ebb and flow of the ordinary or mundane is intolerable.

A minor incident as that of 2000 had catastrophic physiological effects on many in the UK. The getting on with life, just, does not work. There are reasons for this, the World Wide Web being one: a network for wingers, the spiritually lame or insecure. Another is that the population believes that society is a safety net, and the nanny state exists; in reality, it does not.

In 2007 minor floods occurred in a few areas of the East Midlands; the victims could claim compensation from central government to help. This is a new departure of the State, before, insurance companies would compensate. Today the insurers will not accept the business of flood plain property. The press release announcing this departure from the norm went live the day before the deadline for application.

In Conclusion.

The fact is that if you live near a river, enjoy its tranquillity, protect its quality and treat it as you would your children, remember that one day it may certainly turn up on your doorstep and invite itself in.

It will not stay long.

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