

THE GREAT FLOOD

It was the day when Folly Hill — or what seemed to be large chunks of it — ended up in the centre of Faringdon. It was the day when London Street became a river, cellars turned into lakes, and carpets and furniture floated in drenched and muddied living rooms.

It is a day that Faringdon will tell their grandchildren about. The day that up to five-and-a-half inches of rain fell in a horrendous thunderstorm of tropical proportions, the streets turned into torrents, and hundreds of tonnes of sand came swirling down from the hill which provides Faringdon's famous landmark.

At the same time, main roads into Faringdon from Lechlade and Radcot were under two feet and more of water, and eventually closed to motorists; cars were being abandoned as motorists trying to take short cuts ran into even fiercer floods, and as fast as police diverted motorists off the flooded Wantage-Faringdon road, so other country roads became impassable; Longcot was one of the worst-hit of the villages, and fish were reported swimming through Uffington's main street as water poured down from the downs and streams burst their banks.

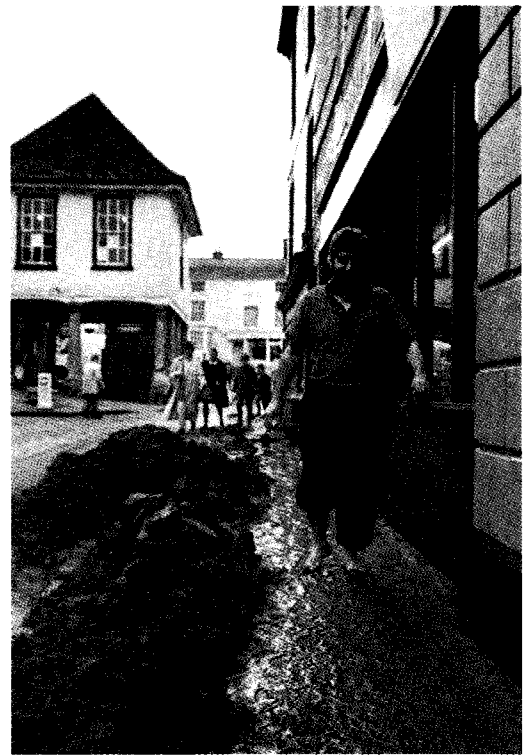
Electricity and telephone communications were cut off all over the area, and a number of trees were split and felled by lightning strikes. Back-up firecrews were drafted in from other parts of

Oxfordshire as 60 hard-pressed officers and fire-fighters from Abingdon, Bampton, Witney and Eynsham, as well as Faringdon, answered more than 250 calls, and attended probably three times as many actual incidents. In many cases, there was little they could practically do, as drains were overflowing, and there was no dry place left to pump the water to.

Hundreds more shopkeepers, publicans and householders had to struggle as best they could to sweep, bale and mop up the floodwater from their premises without the aid of pumping equipment or other professional help. In one first-floor

flat, tenants won a brave battle against sagging ceilings as they baled bucketful after bucketful of water after rain poured into their roof space.

But it was in Faringdon town centre that television cameras moved in to record scenes that long-established residents said had never been seen before on such a scale. People living along London Street, and those with



Photos: (Above) Barefoot in the sand; (left) a flooded garden in Butts Close; (below) sweeping out floodwater from Magpies, at the old passenger station

pubs and shops in the Market Place and Cornmarket, watched in disbelief and horror as the roads to be turned into first a river, then a torrent of mud, as the sandy surface of Folly Hill was carried by the force of the water down footpaths, gullies and field furrows and into the town itself. The force of the mudslide forced a breach through the retaining wall on the corner of Stanford Road and London Road to meet another river of sand pouring down from Jesper's Hill. A lake of water building up behind the high wall of houses at the bottom of the hill suddenly burst out of its confines, and poured like Niagara down the main Folly footpath, cascading into Stanford Road as a whitewater rapid.

The centre of town turned into a giant mudbath, as sand, silt and stones piled up at the bottom of the hill, much of it dumped outside the front of the Bell Hotel — where the licensees, Mr and Mrs Bourton, were already faced with two feet of floodwater in one of the bars, as well as a flooded cellar. Also slewed helplessly outside the Bell was a car which had met the force of the wave of mud head-on as it was driven through the 'Narrows' and skidded to a halt across the entrance to Southampton Street..

As shopkeepers began sweeping mud and water out to the pavements, and rescuing stock on lower shelves, highways department lorries and street-cleaning teams moved in swiftly. Faringdonians not themselves involved with baling out and mopping up, stood unbelieving as bulldozers and diggers piled up tonnes of sand and mud, which were taken away in about a dozen lorryloads ("I hope they are not going to put it back on the hill," declared one wag).





Traffic struggles through the Faringdon mud

TAKING TO THE BOATS



The flooding was extraordinary in both its intensity and its speed

- Measuring equipment at the Rothamsted agricultural research outstation at Coleshill recorded an incredible 90mm of rainfall in just two five-minute sessions on that Wednesday morning. That is around 3½ inches.

- At one time, it would have been less likely, even in such heavy rainfall, for the sandy topsoil of Folly Hill to be washed down into the town. The trees once grown by Tucker's Nursery on the slopes of the hill acted as an 'anchor'. Now, there is only the immature sweetcorn crop to stop the slide.

- Contrary to some rumours, the reservoir on top of Folly Hill did not contribute to the flood. It is a

sealed unit, taking water pumped up from Buscot.

- Thames Water are being pressed to enlarge the stream which runs under the Radcot Road, where it is solely responsible for draining 2,500 acres of farmland in the bowl of land between Eaton Hastings and Faringdon.

- Water flooded the newly-refurbished courts of Faringdon Tennis Club in Southampton Street (picture below), and ruined the new carpets in the clubhouse. Ironically, the refurbishment had originally been made necessary because of disruption caused by the laying of an outfall sewer across the courts by Thames Water.

The effect of the flooding on villages such as Stanford in the Vale and Longcot that lie beneath the downs was extraordinary in both its intensity and the speed with which it overwhelmed fields, homes, gardens and streets. Farmers who mustered all available help to move their sheep out of harm's way, talked of seeing a wave of water literally pouring down from the hillsides.

Uffington was completely cut off by floodwater, which surged in a chalky tidal wave from the heights of the White Horse and quickly overflowed the streams which surround the village.

One man, Martin Welland, took the opportunity to canoe around the streets of the village (he is pictured here, outside his cottage at Stockholm Farm). And at the other end of the village, Ivor Richings and his family had to move cattle and calves up on to higher ground as they were trapped in their barn by a rising tide of water. Then the family started trying to salvage furniture and fittings from the flooded farmhouse itself.

One of the other worst-hit buildings was The Craven guesthouse, where guests were shepherded to the first floor as water rose to more than two feet. Guests due to leave for home (in one case, back to the United States) had their cars towed out of the flooded street by tractor. As the *Folly* went to press, the guest house was still closed and a total of eight industrial heaters and five humidifiers were working non-stop, according to proprietor Mrs Carol Wadsworth.

One of the most extraordinary sights of the day was to see exotic fish swimming down Uffington's main street — having been swept from somebody's flooded pond. And cars were being abandoned in floodwater up to their steering wheels.

As with many of their neighbours, and in houses throughout the area, both in town and village, the Richings' home was still echoing two weeks later to the steady hum of dehumidifiers and heaters: furniture and belongings stacked up in piles as floors slowly dried out. And like hundreds of other householders in a dozen different communities, they looked on gloomily as luxury kitchen units crumbled in front of their eyes from the waterlogging.



More water transport!



Everyone had stories to tell....

There was the mother and her children on their way to school, marooned in the centre of a flooded Park Road — where they were rescued by staff from N.B. Moore Cars. There was the young lady in London Street who hid her head under the clothes against the noise of the thunderous storm — only to be summoned downstairs by the frantic mewing of her cat, which she discovered perched on a stool as water swirled all around it. There was the householder who watched glumly as pumps began work on her flooded garden: "That used to be my pond; there are a hundred fish in there somewhere," she said. And there were those who told of seeing a lightning strike on the Folly Tower — spectacularly but safely drawn down to earth by the lightning conductor. A coachload of frightened children on their way to school in Faringdon was marooned as floods swept across the Lechlade Road at Buscot.

There were leaking roofs and flooded floors in public places such as the health centre and the library. Bank staff swept out floodwater before customers could move in. Almost no-one and nowhere escaped either leaks or floods: premises at the extreme ends of the town were hit, including the Leisure Centre and Sudbury House Hotel. Flooding was at its worst in the homes of Goodlake Avenue and Southampton Street, while even high spots such as the Cromwell

Pictured right, postwoman Val Higgs prepares to wade through flooded Westbrook and Willes Close, in Faringdon. This, the picture at the bottom of the opposite page, and the photo of the flooded tennis courts were all taken by Anne Luker



Centre in Highworth Road were washed out. Faringdon House itself was among the casualties. The infants school was closed, and only a third of the pupils turned up at the junior school. Planned events were cancelled, as Faringdon put its back into the big clean-up, so that business could carry on as usual.

The size of the task varied from premises to premises. Dozens of householders who had watched the tidal wave turn London Street into a yellow river, started to put ruined carpets out for the dustman, dump or salvage furniture, and sweep water and mud out of their front doors; while residents in virtually every corner of the town contemplated at best ruined gardens turned into lakes, and cars with water running through them from one side to

the other, and at worst their home swamped and possessions ruined. Some had to be temporarily rehoused, while others moved in with friends. Manhole covers were lifted by the swell of water, which fountained from the overworked drains, and some householders in the Bromsgrove area had to cope with sewage as well as rainwater.

In some business premises, the water was only inches deep, but still devastating to valuable and vulnerable stock such as that at Mandy Moore's curtain shop (sharing the same street entrance as Allen and Harris, the estate agents, which amazingly escaped unscathed). Water poured through Carter's supermarket, and the mudslide invaded Dillon's the newsagents, along with many of the other town centre shops. At Magpies, the architectural antiques centre in the old passenger station, antique furniture was floating around in several feet of water; the proprietor, Graham Benton, and helpers wore waders as they desperately swept and baled thousands of gallons from the showrooms.

Water poured across Park Road, linking flooded homes in Marlborough Gardens and Butts Road estate with waterlogged factory premises on the industrial estate — with many people so busy with their own problems, they were unaware of the landslide drama unfolding a few hundred yards away

in the town centre, until they saw it on television that night.

While a pub as high up from the town centre as the Eagle, in Coxwell Street, had its restaurant so badly flooded that it was expected to be closed for four weeks, the Crown Hotel, in the Market Place, thought it had escaped lightly — until later that evening, when the underground stream that splits the centre of the town suddenly rose through the floorboards. Their restaurant, too, had to be closed.

As the great clean-up carried on, local brokers had already mobilised insurance assessors to bring rapid assistance to their customers. As the full import of the disaster became obvious, the total in insurance bills was set to run into millions — ranging from those needing structural or major building renovation down to those claiming for carpets, furniture, electrical appliances and ruined freezer contents. But there was a wartime spirit and plenty of good humour, too, amidst the scenes of devastation. In London Street, and every other street community, neighbours were busy helping each other, and checking on homes left empty by early-morning commuters. And the enterprising management of the Crown had even dug out a dinghy from somewhere, offering its services as a 'water taxi'.

● Photo left: Help for Mr Alan Yates with his flooded home on the corner of Park Road and Butts Close.



Work on dam prevented greater Buscot disaster

One of the worst-hit areas during the 'great flood' was the National Trust village of Buscot. But if the same rains had fallen more than three years ago, then there could have been major disaster or even tragedy on the scale of the more recent flooding in Wales.

For in 1990 the National Trust invested heavily in a new 'spillway' to replace the old brick affair which protects the dammed-up lake in Buscot Park.

As it was, culverts were unable to cope with the overflow of water from the lake in the face of such a huge rainfall, and floodwater built up behind a secondary 'dam' — the big wooden gates at Middle Lodge. The force of water finally burst the locks of the gates, and that was when floods surged across Lechlade Road, stopping traffic and devastating the village itself on the other side of the road.

But had the old spillway not been replaced three years ago, said estate manager Richard Morris, instead of just the excess water on the surface of the lake pouring out, it might have been most of the contents of the lake...

In any case, it was bad enough. Middle Lodge itself was flooded up to four or five feet, and in the village, 20 of the 22 homes were flooded to some extent. The National Trust supplied every householder with a special 'wet' vacuum cleaner, and hired 42 dehumidifiers, and brought in their own pumping equipment where necessary.

● The hydrological engineer called in by the National Trust to check the dam of the lake calculated that the circumstances of the flooding were a one-in-260-year occurrence.



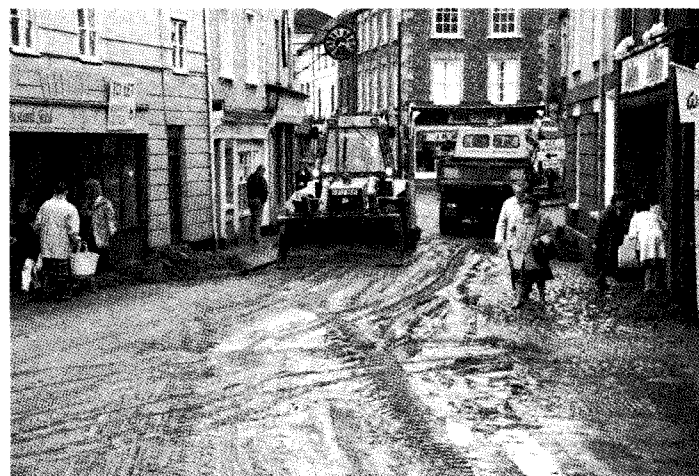
Lightning strikes Wood!

One of the most dramatic stories in a day of drama was the one told by Alan Wood, of Bromsgrove, Faringdon. His wife, Kath, was getting dressed in the bedroom when the house 'appeared to light up', and she felt a warmth run down her back. Then she and her husband smelled burning, and Alan went down to find the telephone sockets were off the wall, "a charred mess — just blown off".

But worse was to come. For the lightning strike on the telephone lines had also hit the mains electrical system, blowing every appliance that was plugged in — TV, video, Hi-Fi, fax machine, telephone answering machine, water softener, and even a polleniser.

As the couple surveyed the electrical carnage, the rest of the drama was unfolding outside. For the water was rising in the garden, where it was soon waist-deep. The Woods piled blankets in the doorway to try and stem the flood, but water still poured through the house, lifting floor coverings and stripping off skirting boards.

On the outskirts of Faringdon, a grandmother told how she found



her 9-month-old grandson floating about in his pushchair in her living room. Mrs Pargeter, of Dove Lodge on the Radcot Road, was on the telephone in another room when the floodwater began to swirl around her feet. She rushed into the living room, to find young Charles giggling as he was washed along. "He thought it was hilarious, particularly when he saw my sewing-box

float by," said Mrs Pargeter, who spent the next two hours sitting marooned on the dining room table clinging to her young charge and trying to keep him amused.

Mrs Pargeter and her husband Don had to spend the night at a friend's house. But she has nothing but praise for the manner and speed in which her insurance brokers, Booker Clark of Faringdon, responded. They were in constant touch throughout the day, paying three personal visits, and an assessor from the London and Edinburgh Insurance Company arrived that same afternoon.

Another victim who was anxious to pay tribute to his insurance company, in this case the Commercial Union, was Mr Ted Preece of Buscot, where flooding was among the worst in the area. Water flooded into the house up to 16 inches deep, ruining carpets, furniture and electrical appliances. He was visited by an assessor within 50 minutes of his

calling the office at Headington, in Oxford, and the company expressed "natural and honest concern" at the situation.

This was in contrast with the experience of some other claimants in different parts of the Faringdon area — from those who were merely asked to submit claim forms, and were still waiting to hear two weeks later, to one example where a householder was told that brand new carpets would be OK again if cleaned, and another who was told that even vinyl records would be playable again after drying out. In another case, it was reported that an insurance company had suggested that a waterlogged sack of potatoes would be alright to cook when dried... Some of those who suffered discovered too late that their policies did not cover them for 'Acts of God', and consequently received nothing.

(Also, see letter on page 20 of this issue)



Photos: Top, the last traffic to battle through before the Radcot Road was closed by police; above right, the big-clear up in Faringdon town centre; left, floodwater surges into a manhole in Westbrook, Faringdon