



Storms and tides

“And now the storm-blast came, and he was tyrannous and strong: He struck with his over-taking wings and chased us south.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Weston-super-Mare sits on the Bristol Channel and has the second highest tidal range in the world - a huge 15 metres (the highest is the Bay of Fundy in Canada). The nearby low lying Somerset levels were under water until 600 years ago, and our coast has often suffered from harsh floods and devastating weather.

In January 1607 a great flood struck along the channel, killing hundreds of people and countless animals.



A drawing showing the devastation caused by the flood of 1607

The Great Storm of 7 December 1703 caused major flooding in the West Country. A windstorm drove a major surge up the channel, flooding villages along the Somerset coast and the city centre of Bristol. 80 people died along with thousands of sheep and cattle. One ship was found 15 miles inland near Glastonbury.

Something like 400 windmills were destroyed, which caused wide-scale hunger for the poor. Many people lost their jobs.

At Wells, Bishop Richard Kidder and his wife were killed when palace chimneystacks fell on them as they slept in their bed.

On 10 September 1903 the ‘Great Gale’ ripped apart Weston’s sea wall. Both piers were damaged and boats were seen floating in the roads. F Cannicott remembered “a boat floating down West Street jamming itself into the opening of a pub...two horses pulled the boat out and back to the sea-front”. Kiosks and shelters were swept away and basements were flooded. Electric tramlines fused, creating a dramatic light show. One driver was hospitalised with severe shock and a Mr Edgar simply “disappeared”. The audience attending a show at Knightstone Theatre was stranded on the island overnight.

10 July 1968 was a day of torrential rain. More than five inches of rain fell in some areas of Somerset in a single day. Streams and rivers burst their banks. The Mercury reported how an elderly man in Blackford refused to leave his cottage and was swept away and drowned in the floods that battered the area.



Flooding in Congresbury, 1968 © Weston Mercury

Cheddar was badly affected. A raging torrent swept down Cheddar Gorge and out of the caves. In many places in the area people were marooned in their houses and motorists stranded on flooded roads.



Water pouring down Cheddar Gorge, 1968 © Weston Mercury

“Hundreds of telephones were affected by the storm, and many lines put out of action either through lightning or storm water.” Police warned people over loudhailers to boil all water before using it. One resident was interviewed by the Mercury. He said he had to climb up the cliffs to escape 1,000 tons of rock and sludge pouring through the gorge.

Weston’s rail lines were shut off due to the extent of the floods, while power failures hit the southern end of town. A week later, on 19 July, the Mercury followed up with tales of heroism in the face of adversity.

Among the casualties were 25,000 chicks, which were wiped out by two feet of water rushing onto farmland in Cheddar.

13 December 1981 brought the worst floods in living memory, causing havoc in and around Weston and Burnham. High and wild winds crashed tons of water into rivers, already swollen from melting snow. Defences along the Somerset coast were breached, as a storm surged up the Severn Estuary. Many families were forced out of their houses.

As homes flooded with water up to six metres high, local boats helped to evacuate trapped people. On the seafront, the storm and floods destroyed much of the Marine Lake promenade.

In Uphill the sea defences were breached, and flooding badly affected daily life. It is recorded that 12,500 acres of land were submerged under floodwater which reached the M5 motorway.

Damage to the Somerset coastline between Clevedon and Porlock cost millions, prompting a programme of sea defence repair work. The National Farmers Union reported 2,500 sheep, cattle and pigs and 22,000 chickens drowned. Fortunately no human lives were lost.



Floodwaters in Uphill, 1981 © Weston Mercury

Please don’t let these tales of disaster put you off visiting again. Weston–super-Mare is actually one of the sunniest places in Britain!

