

# THE GREAT STORM

**20 years ago this month Michael Fish said: "A woman rang the BBC and said she heard that there was a hurricane on the way..."**

Just like the death of Kennedy it's one of those events when you can always remember what you were doing at the time.

It was the great storm of 1987 whose anniversary is this month.

It was the night – October 15th – when weather forecaster Michael Fish famously decreed it would be no more than 'very windy'.

By next morning the once-in-200 years event, with winds of over 100 mph, had flattened 15 million trees – 70% of them in privately owned woodlands. The amount of timber felled, packed onto 20 tonne lorries during that time would have spanned from Cambridge to Newcastle and back.

The storm killed 18 people and left insurance companies with a £1 billion plus headache. And it took the Forestry Commission two and a half years to clear it all up.

But what lessons were learnt?

Alan Betts, South East Regional Director of the Forestry Commission contends that they acted too quickly.

He explained, "We rushed in to replant instead of being more relaxed and understanding nature a bit more and its ability to restock woodlands."

He added, "About that time we were getting much more interested in native woodlands. There was a shift in British forestry away from exotic conifers towards much more use of native broadleaves. Because

of that a lot of people thought we ought to restock with valuable conifer and beech, but then the whole native woodlands thing swept the board. Nowadays 99% of what we do is about native woodlands. Nowadays we'd be thrilled to sit back and wait and see what nature could do."

But what could be done to reduce the damage if such a storm came again? Said Alan, "It's very difficult to design a wood for those conditions, and back then the soil was wet, there were still leaves on the trees, neither of which helped. The clear up was a pretty efficient operation and a lot of what we did we'd do again."

Norman Day was District Forester in Weald FD which covered all FC woods in Kent, East Sussex and half of West Sussex.

He said, "We went to bed knowing there was going to be a storm, but nothing unusual. By two in the morning we were wide awake listening to a rising gale tugging at the roof tiles; whipping up fence panels and our twelve foot greenhouse into debris, scattering it far and wide. The storm peaked at about five when tiles started to come off the roof.

By first light with the gale subsiding it was possible to get some idea of the devastation. There wasn't a property in our town which hadn't been affected, some not too badly with only a few tiles off, others



*On the night of October 16, 1987, some 15 million trees were blown down. 12 million were trees within forests, but 3 million or so were individual trees - from parks, gardens, and along the leafy avenues of South East England.*

with severe damage, roofs blown off, walls down, trees felled all over the place. A couple of miles away a man had died when a chimney stack crashed through the roof. We had no electricity or water (a large Horse chestnut had uprooted the main) but the telephone worked intermittently. I was able to contact various colleagues and their reports told a similar tale of damage and devastation. Travelling any distance was out of the question but we did manage to get teams together at various locations to make a start clearing roads and tracks, a process which was to last six weeks!

Over the next two and a half years we did nothing other than clear windblown woodlands. After the initial survey it was recognised that a major operation was needed to make any inroad into the problem. To put things in context the annual cut at Weald FD had been in the region of 25 to 30,000 cubic metres per annum; the estimate for the blown timber on the estate was 350,000 cubic metres. With the help of HQ, machinery was purchased, teams drawn together from

all over GB and put to work clearing the land and dispatching the timber. We worked double shifts for between 20 and 25 days at a time, then sent the men home for a week which gave us a chance to catch up on the paperwork.

It was fast, furious and relentless but, as is often the case on these occasions, we had an excellent team who pulled together and eventually won through. I can't believe twenty years have passed."

Norman recalled that until the storm the Forestry Commission in the area had relied almost totally on contractors, but so great was the job that contractors couldn't have coped with the amount of timber on the floor. The Commission in the area then had to (a) buy machinery and (b) bring down an existing team from the Lake District who used a Mini Bruunett to process the timber into lengths after chainsaw gangs had gone ahead of them severing the trees from the stump. They also bought two harvesters, one an Ösa, the other a Valmet.

Norman explained, "We found quite quickly that it was quite dif-



*Whilst the Commission had its hands full with the clean-up operation, 75% of the impact was on other woodland owners, from farmers and private estates, to larger organisations like the National Trust, and local authorities.*

For Alan Titchmarsh his first inkling that anything was wrong came when he noticed huge, eerie white luminous moons by the roadside as he drove home that night.

He explained, "They were the twelve foot high roots of beech that had been blown over and I was seeing their chalk covered roots. It was one of the lessons – we'd always assumed there were more drop roots than there actually were. Those beech for example, had spread horizontally."

He added, "At first it seemed like a complete tragedy. I saw grown men in tears in arboreta seeing their lifetime's work, and that of men before them, just swept away. But it gave lots of opportunity to replant because when a tree gets to be venerable nobody wants to take it down – even if it is in the wrong place. But nature did it for us in some cases."

Alan's 35 acres in Hampshire suffered along with the rest but the standard oaks were protected by cypress. Now, like others, he believes in filtering the wind rather than offering it a sail to be buffeted.

difficult to employ chainsawyers ahead of the processor because of the way the trees had been blown around. Not only was it difficult, it was dangerous because they were often working ten to fifteen feet above the ground."

To complement the harvesters they had 4 Lokomo forwarders.

Staff were recruited from all over the UK and worked the machinery in double shifts spanning up to 20 hours a day for 20 day stretches before a week's break at home.

Meanwhile the contractors also acquired new machinery.

Norman recalled that one contractor, Nash Brothers, bought a Valmet and one contractor, Peter Cornish even built his own processor which he mounted on an old Army lorry.

Pauline Buchanan-Black, director general of the Tree Council, contends there were no general lessons because different areas and different trees required different remedies. But it had provided information – such as the fact that rules on root spread had to be revised. For example trees within a wood had less room for their roots to spread and became more vulnerable than those on woodland edges which had more room.

One benefit of the storm was the creation of a national Tree Wardens scheme, which now has 7,500 volunteer members. To mark the anniversary there will be a series of

events, the biggest of which will be a Tree Wardens' conference at Kew.

Mike Calnan, head of Gardens and Parks for the National Trust, said the storm taught people not to put all their eggs in a basket of aged, less flexible specimens but to have a wider age range of trees.

It was also realised that shelter belts facing the wind needed gaps which the wind could run through rather than going up and over, creating damaging eddies. It was the oscillating effect of the wind on the night that rocked trees, loosening their roots in wet ground.

Added to this was the fact that the trees were all still in full leaf, presenting a perfect sail to catch the wind.

Just after the storm Mike took a helicopter ride over the North Downs. He said, "It looked like Hiroshima and it was all in one eye-ful. I've never seen anything like it before or since."

Now he thinks the Trust was mistaken to rush in to clear the damage before the houses and gardens opened in the spring. Heavy machinery compacted the ground and that damage had to be remedied with soil-loosening blasts of compressed air. He admitted, "Like any gardener we wanted ours to look their best, but had we just made them safe and taken our time we'd have got a lot of support for what was a gargantuan task."

The Wildlife Trusts also learned



*Much of the worst damage occurred in the timber forests, where conifer plantations did not have the root system to stand up to the extreme winds.*

not to go for the quick fix.

John Everitt, Head of Conservation explained, "Maybe it was the effect of TV makeover shows, but now we're looking at longer time scales, up to fifty years rather than five."

He added, "We're allowing natural regeneration rather than replanting, working with natural processes rather than against them, and nowadays we're working in landscape scale, joining up our reserves where we can."

David Fursdon, head of the Country Landowners & Business Association, lost dozens of trees on his 80 acres of Devon woodland. He'd planted larch and Scots pine on a 50 year time scale but the damage and the cost of clearing up a jumbled mess meant a cash loss. He agrees that thinning plantations would help mitigate damage.

He recalled, "If you fell then you have one route and one stack, but this was a complete shambles and was very expensive to tidy up."

Previously thinning hadn't been viable because there was no market for that wood, but with the current

interest in renewable energy that could change.

But there had been benefits, like a sprouting of previously suppressed flora and the creation of new vistas.

And for some people the gale was the wind of change.

Bob Ogle was editor of the Sevenoaks Chronicle and, having taken pictures from an aircraft the next day, he thought they might make the basis for a book. When no publisher wanted it he published it himself and in one week sold all 5,000 copies.

Eventually sales reached 245,000, he was in the best sellers top 10 for eight months – and if it hadn't been for Rosemary Conley's Hip and Thigh Diet he'd have reached number one.

He gave up the day job and twenty years on he's written 32 books, broadcasts on BBC Radio Kent and has raised over £100,000 for, amongst other things woodland and cultivation appeals.

Even storm clouds have a silver lining... *Graham Mole*



*One of the key challenges was what to do with all the timber from the windblown trees. It is estimated there were nearly 4 million cubic metres of windblown timber from the storm.*

Even now you can still buy furniture made from trees felled by the storm.

Furniture makers Senior and Carmichael in Surrey bagged 25 trees from the storm and have been using them ever since to create hurricane chairs, now around £1,990 plus VAT. "We use seven species of wood and they're very knotty and full of character", explained Charlie Wheeler-Carmichael.

Recently they produced his and hers desks for the Marquess and Marchioness of Bath using walnut toppled by the storm in nearby Clandon Park. But it could be 'buy now while stocks last'. Charlie explained, "We haven't got a lot of stock left."

For PC Steve Woodward it was the most frightening night of his life. He was on duty that night at Southsea in Hampshire. At one point a hundred year old oak tree simply soared up into the air in front of him.

"Just like a Saturn 5 rocket," he said.

It was a night when he helped rescue people from smashed buildings, faced a blizzard of pebbles, from the nearby beach, that flew like bullets and peppered the side of his patrol car. One couple lost the side of their house and were clinging on to a windowsill when the chimney fell into the room taking their double bed downstairs with it.

There were looters on the streets and half way through the night he got a call to say his house was falling apart.

A colleague coming to work next day reported he'd been overtaken on the way – by a catamaran.

Writing on the Hants police history website he said, "I have faced many things in my life as a Police Officer – many of them life threatening or dangerous – but I have always felt in control of those situations until tonight. I can honestly say that I have never been so frightened in my life, because I was powerless to stop it."