

Flooding in Barnham – 1993

I remember some things about that day quite clearly. Other things, like where my 4-year old daughter was, I have no recollection. I think that's the nature of memories relating to traumatic events.

It had been raining, really 'fat' rain as my daughter called it, for some days, but that morning I still went to work having checked the levels on the rife by the side of the Trading Post. I called Mum at lunchtime and she said everything was all fine. It obviously wasn't as 3 hours later I called again and she admitted there was a foot of water in their bungalow (in Dial Close, which virtually backs onto the Rife) but someone was coming to take them (my Dad as well, who'd had a mild stroke 2 weeks beforehand) to Churchill House, Goodacres, a residential home for the elderly across the road, and on higher ground.

I left work immediately only to discover by trial and error that every route was flooded so I took 3 hours to get back from Littlehampton to Barnham. In the sheeting rain and pitch dark, I tried every route, coastal, A29, backroads (REALLY bad idea) and finally got through Shripney although that was already sill-deep as I drove through. I called my sister from my house in Bognor where I'd at least had the sense to change into wellies and bring some coats and blankets. I collected her from her house in Eastergate and we headed towards Barnham, stopping short at the Railway Hotel. That was where the water started and went on like a strange urban lake as far as we could see down to the railway bridge and across up into Lake Lane. The good news, the water stopped just short of the turning into Goodacres where Mum, Dad and a number of other vulnerable residents were camped out, although at this stage that was an assumption as we'd had no confirmation from anyone either way. The landline to Mum and Dad's was no longer working, no-one was answering at Churchill House, there were no lights anywhere as there was a major power outage throughout the village.

There were a large number of people collecting at the edge of the water by the Hotel, some with cameras, video and normal. My sister and I were trying to stay calm but really not pulling off that look. I did eventually get through by phone to Churchill House and it was confirmed that Mum and Dad were there, but also that the plan was for the Fire Brigade to evacuate everyone back under the Railway Bridge to the Barnham Village Hall. They'd be carried in shifts in the Selsey Inshore inflatable lifeboat that had just arrived and was setting up on the water's edge near us.

My sister and I were pretty desperate, having stood around for 2 hours in the bone chilling damp and dark being unable to do anything. So, I shamelessly begged the chaps with the boat to take me over to Churchill House so I could check on my parents. I explained that my father had suffered a stroke recently and I was really concerned about them being moved to the Village Hall, particularly as I had a nice, dry house in Bognor for them, if at least one of them didn't need to go straight to hospital. Bless them, they said not only would they take me over, but if I could get my parents to the water's edge in about an hour, they'd bring us all back to the Hotel side. They spent the interim looking for any other stranded people around the edges of the new lagoon.

So at about 8.30pm off we set, two lifeboatmen and me, over the eerie, calm waters towards Lake Lane (oh the irony in that name). Luckily, I was able to warn about the now submerged hazards like traffic bollards, road signs, railings and so on, but we did catch a crab on the traffic

island on the turning under the bridge. Funny how things look completely different under water. Safely delivered at the edge of the lake by Goodacres I tramped up to Churchill House to find Mum and Dad. Still no lights, but a fireman posted by the door. I remember thinking briefly at the time how he got there. Did the fire brigade have a helicopter? Quickly back in the real soggy world, I explained the plan to get Mum and Dad out and went in to find them.

I wasn't prepared on any level for the devastation I saw.

The mostly elderly evacuees were sitting around in the semi dark of the residents' lounge, the gloom barely relieved by a few candles and torches. The shadows made their faces seem even bleaker but it was a sea of shock and bewilderment compounded by a pervading air of hopelessness. One of the most startling things was the complete lack of noise. No-one was talking in anything above a brief, quiet whisper, but generally no-one was talking at all.

One of my parents' neighbours was trying to use the payphone in the hall to call his son to let him know what had happened. He was partially sighted and more than a little distressed, so I dialed for him, explained the background to the son and left them talking. I still hadn't found Mum and Dad.

Actually, I had been looking right at them but didn't recognize the pale, drawn, frail couple in the chairs in front of me. They had a blanket over each of them hiding their less than appropriate jackets, under which I could see their wellies sticking out. It broke my heart. However, that wasn't going to get things sorted, so I sucked it up and did a cheery greeting. They both took quite a while to recognize me or to realize what I wanted them to do. Mum was all for staying put, Dad didn't seem to understand what I was saying at all. I knew I was on a time limit to get them out to the water's edge for a lift back, so that added to the stress. Finally, when I explained that they would be moving anyway, to the village hall, or they could come home with me to a nice warm dry house with a comfy bed and food, they very slowly started to move. I asked where their belongings were, I knew they had brought some emergency items with them. This turned out to be one small plastic bag of random clothing, the cat in a basket and the cockatiel in a cage. That kind of sums up our family priorities really and it was the first time I'd smiled for a long while.

Painstakingly slowly, I walked my parents out to the edge of the water to await the return of the boat. My father was moving so slowly and kept asking where he was and where we were going. Mum said nothing, just looked bewildered. It was still very cold and damp while we waited for our lift and I worried that Dad would collapse before they came. I remember the relief I felt when the little boat pattered into sight and the lovely boatmen helped Mum, Dad and the Zoo into their seats. They smiled at the menagerie, but we actually added to the load when, on a final sweep, we picked up another man with his cocker spaniel. Considering what had been going on that day, this didn't even seem strange.

By the time we landed back outside the Barnham Hotel, it was gone 10.30pm. My sister was relieved to see us (no mobile phones for updates of course) as she had no idea what had been going on and I'd been gone a couple of hours. Dad had perked up considerably during the impromptu boat ride but Mum was still very quiet. I left them with my sister and was about to leave to get the car, when Dad said "um... is the pub open?" Let it not be said I couldn't take a hint and I already knew that in true Dunkirk spirit (excuse the pun) our intrepid Landlord had managed to get some kind of service going, despite no electricity. We trooped into a cozy

candlelit bar to a rousing chorus of cheers and a much deserved “one for the road” and possibly one for the boat too.

My parents subsequently lived with me for 3 months whilst their bungalow was dried and cleaned. They effectively lost everything as there was in excess of 4 feet of water (with a smattering of diesel and sewage) running through the close albeit for less than 24 hours. Even their wardrobes had floated and tipped, so anything put on the top was also lost. Hard to believe this was caused by several yards of plastic packing blocking the culvert under the road, preventing the run off from being carried away, but a sobering reminder how unpredictable and dangerous weather and water can be.

K T LANIGAN

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