

I remember the evening of the 30th December 1993..... very well.

It will be an evening that most of the residents of Barnham will remember; for 105 home owners it will hold pivotal significance. It was the night of the Great Flood of Barnham. I recall driving my three young children, David, Claire and Laura into the village as I had been alerted by my son that some of the roads had become impassable due to the heavy rain. In the village centre we joined a queue of traffic being turned around at the station by local scout leader, Jim Ifould who had assumed a position of traffic cop to prevent motorists plunging into the ever rising water at the lower end of the village centre. There were water flows in unusual places as the heavy rainwater overtopped the usual boundaries of the two main tributaries of the Barnham Rife.

When I arrived at the playground at Farnhurst Road, where the adjacent car park was already flooded, I met Chris Eldridge out walking the low parts of Barnham concerned that the excess water would reach his home at Rose Cottages. Close to the culvert at The Gooseberry Bush shop [since demolished] Rose Cottages are at the lowest point in the village; a water collection point for the whole of the Barnham Catchment and the entrance to the ancient culvert which takes water from the urban north side of the railway embankment through to the open fields on the south side. An hour later, Chris and his family of 2 adults and 4 children were making their way to our home leaving their home waist deep in dirty rife water mixed with sewage from the overburdened sewers. That night we accommodated 6 adults and 7 children!

We later heard that the cause of the flood was a tarpaulin jamming against the grill covering the culvert. Fire crews had been withdrawn from the scene when a number of containers were washed down stream. As they were uncertain of their contents the crews were stood down and that is when the tarpaulin came down stream and lodged against the vertical grill like a plug in a bath tub. The flood water then rose to several feet in minutes.

Many acts of kindness were given that night with neighbours sharing food, shelter and bed space and it did not stop there. Our friend and guide leader Liz Spencer gave up her home to the Eldridge family for 6 months and "camped out" in our living room.

The residents' association set up an emergency response in an empty office opposite the station and provided much needed welfare essentials. Skills were volunteered to make homes secure and even Lady Caroline Marshall, wife of the then local MP bailed in. Not only did she motivate her husband to get on the case, she took piles of residents' laundry and washed them in her home. We also know of a number of undisclosed acts of kindness. I recall her telling me sharply, "Please, call me Caroline – I only use my title when I need a hairdressing appointment!"

There was much work to do after the flood of December 1993 and Barnham Residents' Association played a vital role in the reparation. From welfare services to influencing local authority departments to make repairs and to work together to restore poorly maintained drainage systems.

Much of the clever work was provided by Barnham resident, Dr John Mason (now MBE). John is an astrophysicist and at the time advisor to sky TV on matters astronomical. When not presenting lectures in the Planetarium in Chichester, he was calculating why things went wrong on 30th December. A combination of excess rainfall in the weeks running up to Christmas, high water table, poor maintenance of underground pipes, poor design of the grill over the culvert entrance and the unexpected tarpaulin blocking the only means of draining

the village. Dr Mason also calculated the impact of rainfall over what he describes as the Barnham catchment area; that is the area surrounding Barnham – Walberton, Lake Lane etc - that drains down to and through the culvert and under the railway embankment. At a public meeting he described the volume of water passing through the culvert: if 1" of rain falls on the catchment. "It is the equivalent of a line of standard buckets full of water stretching from Barnham to Hong Kong!"

105 homes were seriously flooded during those few hours and it took many months to start getting things back to normal. Many people were traumatised by their experience and became hypervigilant when there was heavy rain fall. For them and many others life became divided into two - before and after the Great Flood of Barnham.

John Donabie November 2020