

Britain: Oxford residents tell of flood's impact

Our correspondent
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The clean-up operation has begun in the historic university city of Oxford, badly affected by the recent floods. At their height, flood waters in Oxford exceeded the levels of the "Great flood" of 1947. The University's 38 sites remained unaffected, but students built a sandbag wall around the music college and waited with reserves in case these defences were breached.

According to the Environment Agency, in total 900 homes and businesses in the county of Oxfordshire, alongside the river Thames, have suffered flood damage. As the River Thames and its tributaries burst their banks, the first to be hit were 250 residents from the Osney area of Oxford. Road and rail connections were cut off. Emergency services saved the electricity supply for 5,000 homes, pumping out water from a substation in Ferry Hinksey Road. Power to hospitals was rerouted via other substations.

The Association of British Insurers estimates that the city alone faces a clean-up bill of almost £10 million. Early estimates for flood damage to the county rise to £34 million when a further 650 flooded homes are taken into account. In terms of the economic impact on the region, Frank Nigriello, chairman of the Oxfordshire Economic Partnership, said, "I know from reports that we have had across the county that the flooding will have a disastrous effect on our operations and the economy, particularly in sectors such as farming—where there may not be insured."

The planned £29 million extension to Oxford University's numerous libraries, expected to house 7.8 million books, has been temporarily suspended due to the severe flooding. When the Thames burst its banks, it flooded Osney Mead, close by the proposed site for one of Britain's most important collection of books.

According to the *Financial Times*, the University wants to overhaul its ageing libraries, which are struggling to house 11 million volumes spread over 40 different libraries. A report to the local council stated, "All are well

over capacity already, with conditions at the New Bodleian being so poor for the storage of material that it fails to meet the required British Standard with the university library service generally at risk of losing its status as an 'approved depository' for special collections, and for the privilege of receiving future collections on behalf of the nation."

Despite the floods, it is reported that the University wants to press ahead with the Osney Mead site.

Duke Street was one of a cluster flooded on July 24. Tributaries that feed the Thames run nearby. An emergency shelter was set up at Oxford United Football Club's Kassam Stadium. A number of the private boxes have been used to provide temporary sleeping areas for the elderly and families.

Local resident Itsham Saeed said, "I live with my Nan who is 70 years old, and she has lived here since 1964. Last Saturday afternoon, the police came down to warn us that they were going to lift the floodgates and the lock in order to relieve the pressure to stop the water going in to Oxford city centre.

"On Sunday, they were telling everyone to get out. Workers from PC World gave out sandbags and trolleys to help people get their belongings out. People were fighting for sandbags. Only on Monday did the Environment Agency deliver sandbags, and there was real panic to get hold of these.

"The council has promised us a big meeting in September to look at what to do next time.

"My Nan is devastated. We have had to put all the furniture into the back. On Sunday, when we got the pumps at the end of the street, we thought the water had gone down. It kept down on Monday, but by Tuesday the water came back. Everyone was shocked.

Mrs. Mukhtar said, "It has been terrible for people living here. This is the first time the street has flooded like this since I moved here. I want to stay in the area, but

what can you do, Mark?”

On the other side of the street, Mark Wadley explained, “The water came up to the skirting board, and I’ve had to throw out carpets and other things. We’re lucky that we are insured and can make a claim. In the future, the insurers may not pay out.

“These houses were built around 1896, and the flood plain starts at the end of the road and heads south. We got loads of warning, and the Environment Agency was active in setting up the pumps. Our biggest concern is the building of Marlborough Court. Since this was built in 2000, there have been three floods in this street—in the last seven years!

“I can’t attribute it to those buildings, but they are built up on a rise, so it is like a small bank at the end creating a dam. Previously, there were just trees.

“I have been discussing with the neighbours that there is not enough surveying being carried out.

“The timing of the announcement on building on flood plains is poor after Sheffield and Hull. The government has to take stock of what has happened. [Prime Minister Gordon] Brown has been hammered on the amount of money to be spent, but they have not changed what they are going to give to compensate people and or spend on flood defences.

“We don’t want to see rates and water rates go up to pay for the flood defences. They shouldn’t put new buildings on flood plains. They have to take into account where the water goes.”

Mary, a 69-year-old retired health worker, is a volunteer flood warden for the area. She said, “This house was built in 1873, and I am the third generation of my family to live here. The water came up six inches in the kitchen.

“This is unprecedented weather conditions, and the one thing that has aggravated the situation is that they are building on a flood plain. Previously, the road ended and there were fields. The new flats are built in such a way that the water has to come down here.

“It has never flooded in here before. My Gran lived here in 1947 during the catastrophic winter conditions, but we never had the floods. In 1947, we didn’t get the floods in. In 2003, the water was lapping at the bottom step. We thought we’d get away with it.

“The stress of waiting for it to happen is worse than when the water came. It came in so quickly. I’m a flood warden, so I make sure the street knows how to sign up for the alerts if such a situation arises. People get an automated message if there is a flood warning. The first warning we got was the life-threatening one.

“In the past, if you got the preliminary warning, it didn’t come to anything.

“The police came down and told people to evacuate but gave no assistance to remove the furniture. Their advice is to switch off all power. It was a huge advantage that this happened in summer and not winter. The elderly people on the street don’t want to move. My first priority was the elderly.”

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* met two workers from the environmental agency and asked them to explain why properties were allowed to be built on flood plains. They explained that the regulations on this have been tightened up, but these were for guidance only and not binding.

John Kelly, the County Emergency Planning Officer for Oxfordshire, said, “Since last Friday, we have evacuated 100 people to a school in Oxford and possibly 500 from Abingdon. I made the decision to move the more elderly people here to the Holiday Express Inn and the more able-bodied into the Kassam Football Stadium.

“The Red Cross, Women’s Royal Voluntary Service, Women’s Institute and the Samaritans have all helped. I look after emergency situations and delegate things to the city council for longer-term care.

“I told my council I would get the best care package I could provide and that money was no object. I have three families here who are falling in between the city council and insurers.

“This centre will be closed down, and we will be going into the recovery phase. It’s important we have the same standard of care across Oxfordshire. Witney was cut off so they set up their own centre.”



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