

Edward Platt

How floods divided Britain

Place names matter in Britain, for they encode unexpected connections. When I arrived in the Somerset village of Thorney in January 2014 to find it under four feet of water, I was fascinated by the way its name tied it to the place that many of its inhabitants blamed for the floods that had engulfed their homes.

Westminster – the seat of government and the home of the Environment Agency, the quasi-independent body responsible for managing flooding – was originally called Thorney, for, like Thorney, Somerset, it began life as an island in the marshy fringes of a river.

I thought of Thorney, Somerset and Thorney, Westminster as twin towns of a kind, for one was subject to decisions made in the other – though by the time the winter was over, the inhabitants of the village and its neighbours would reverse the pattern, by forcing those at the centre to accept their view on the causes of the flood.

There were other resentments directed at the other, urban Thorney: people were tired of being told by Londoners that they shouldn't live on flood plains, since much of London is on a flood plain as well. Yet even the Thames Barrier, which is deployed with increasing regularity to protect central London, cannot stop flooding upstream. The residents of the Somerset Levels complained that nothing much was done until the Thames had burst its banks in Surrey, Windsor and Berkshire, home to Eton, where the then prime minister, and the current one, went to school.

Most people recognised that living beside water carries risks – some did not regret their choice even after they had been flooded. Yet many saw floods as a man-made disaster rather than a natural one, caused by the neglect or mismanagement of the office-bound bureaucrats who rarely visit the places they oversee.

In the Somerset Levels, they believed that the rivers that drift sluggishly towards

the sea had been further slowed by the Environment Agency's failure to dredge them. That wasn't an accident: the contemporary consensus maintains it is better to let rivers braid and meander in the way they used to, and to plant trees and create natural dams to trap water high up the catchment, than to rush the water downstream to flood other places.

Yet the anger in the Levels became too intense to ignore. In February 2014, then communities secretary Eric Pickles apologised for listening to the "experts" at the Environment Agency, in a remark that anticipated the tenor of the 2016 Brexit referendum debate. Shortly afterwards, the government said the rivers would be dredged after all. Whether their analysis was right or not, the residents of the Levels had won a significant victory.

In other places, people felt that local knowledge was ignored, or their interests sacrificed to those of wealthy landowners. In the Calder Valley, Yorkshire, people believed that moorland burning on a grouse shooting estate above Hebden Bridge aggravated the floods that have struck their towns six times in the past 20 years – a case vividly made in *Rain*, Mary and Bryan Talbot's graphic novel, which was written between the flood in Hebden Bridge on Boxing Day 2015 and the one on 9 February this year.

Planning decisions are frequently criticised as well: more than 11,000 houses are planned in England in areas of high flood risk in the seven regions of England hit by storms Ciara and Dennis in the past month, and the Environment Agency has told developers to think carefully about where they build. Yet even places that were traditionally regarded as safe may not be so anymore: the outskirts of the Gloucestershire town of Tewkesbury often flood in the winter, but its famous abbey is usually beyond the water's reach.

"The monks knew where to build," the vicar of Tewkesbury said to me when

I visited the town during one of its regular winter floods. Yet the abbey's location did not help it on 22 July 2007, when it flooded for the second time in its 900-year history.

Other calculations are changing too: one academic said to me that the much-quoted statistics that a place will only be flooded by a one-in-50- or a one-in-100-year storm are "non-stationary" – meaning they may change in the time span, exposing the experts to more anger and ridicule when supposedly rare events recur sooner than they are supposed to.

Yet even the best possible assessment of the accelerating risks may not alleviate the pressure on the congested south-east. People are drawn to it for the best of reasons: nearly half the new jobs created in England in the past decade were in the region, despite only being home to a third of the population, the think tank IPPR North recently established. Houses have to go somewhere – and often the flood plains are the only places left.

Reversing the trend will not be easy, though the Johnson government has said it intends to try. Danny Kruger, the MP for Devizes, said in the 21 February issue of the *New Statesman* that the government would "deepen our democracy by the empowerment of places; [and] investment in economic and social infrastructure... so that success doesn't always look like getting to London and never going back".

It is an admirable aim, and the frequency and destructiveness of future floods will be a good test of whether they achieve it. Reviving marginal places, to lessen the pull of the south-east, may be the first step in reducing the toll that flooding exacts when the storms return there. But it will also require major investment in flood defences across the country – and a willingness to let local people participate in their design. ● *Edward Platt's "The Great Flood: Travels Through a Sodden Landscape" is published by Picador*