



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Looking to the natural landscape is the key to protecting communities against flooding – something the Environment Agency would do well to heed, says Jules

As many now know to great personal and financial cost, last December was the wettest on record. Here on the Welsh Borders we know a thing or two about flooding, as those who live within striking distance of the River Severn will testify. These devastating events are becoming ever more common, yet our national response still lacks surety.

In the aftermath of these disasters, the great and the good line up to express their solidarity with the devastated communities. And amidst the clamour yet more cash is demanded in the vain hope that the more we spend the greater our chance of persuading the gods of the natural world not to do it all again.

Our old home was, as I discovered quite by chance, on a flood plain. Or at least it was officially, following the great deluge of July 2007. Following on from weeks of then record rainfall, the government asked the Environment Agency (EA) to reassess which areas might be most at risk. Understaffed and feeling the pressure from above, the team in Wales asked their sophisticated mapping software to redraw the flood contours by proposing a greater depth of water in relevant rivers. The first draft of this new flood map for our small village of Llanddewi Brefi put the church, famously built in the 6th century on a sizable mound, under water. If this had indeed happened, most of the county would also have succumbed. The second draft redressed this issue but, as the EA team that came out to meet me to discuss their findings revealed, they didn't actually have any accurate rainfall data for our area. Nonetheless, based upon a similar site in Cumbria, their evaluation supported a scenario whereby a huge amount of rain would fall in the bowl-shaped valley above the village that covers several square kilometres. Water would cascade down already saturated mountain sides and streams into the River Brefi, and then race down to a right-angled turn in its course in the centre of the village. Water would back up and, unable to get through the choke point, would overspill the banks upstream, coursing down streets and inundating swathes of the village.

This had never happened in living memory, nor indeed had it ever been recorded. It was, apparently, a one-in-a-thousand-year event. Even so, the fact it hadn't occurred perplexed the EA because, given their complex model, they couldn't understand why not.

The reason to those who lived and farmed here was clear. Much of the surrounding upland and the principle valley that led to it from the Cambrian Mountains was covered in thick peaty bog. Over 20

years, I'd seen some incessant periods of rainfall, yet the river had never burst its banks. The bogs had done their job of holding huge amounts of water and managing its orderly release into the brooks and waterfalls that fed the river. In questioning their forecast's reliability, I invited the EA team to see the upland for themselves but they declined; they were too busy and had to get back to the office. Given there were apparently only six of them covering Wales, I sympathised with their task, but regretted their decision not to fully understand the landscape.

We're lucky their predictions have yet to be proven, even if they're based on a site over 200 miles to the north, but luckier still that these upland bogs have not been drained as so many have over the years.

Over the last few weeks, I've been encouraged by a broader conversation that seems to be developing about how we might manage water flow and how, where applicable, we might gather it upstream, rather than relying on higher flood barriers adjacent to population centres. Certainly one mitigating measure the EA suggested for us was an earthen bank, perhaps only two or three metres high, stretching across the flood plain to the valley sides further upstream, with a concrete jaw either side of the river. This would capture a deluge and stem its onward flow such that the existing water course could cope. The problem was that in planning for a once-in-one-thousand year event, few I spoke to took the threat seriously enough to want to invest in such a scheme, for the reason that not only had it never happened, it was hard to imagine how it ever could. Nonetheless, it was a simple idea that made sense.

My worry, shared by many I've spoken to, is that once it dries up and we move toward summer, much of the debate will be forgotten and the pledges now so ardent to invest in flood prevention may be quietly moved to the back burner. Nonetheless, I was heartened to learn during this crisis that we do now have a floods minister: the talented Rory Stewart MP, whose constituency in Cumbria has been so badly affected. Doubtless this summer we'll face a converse crisis of drought, and there'll be a clamour for action.

In truth, what I suspect we need is a minister not just for floods but a minister for water, a brief that should address a new assessment of national water management for every eventuality. Water is one of our nation's great resources, freely falling as it does for much of the year. But in living both with and without it, it's sure to cost us all a fortune. Surely now at last, we should start planning for the future. ♣

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

You can follow Jules on Twitter @thejuleshudson, or visit his website at www.juleshudson.com