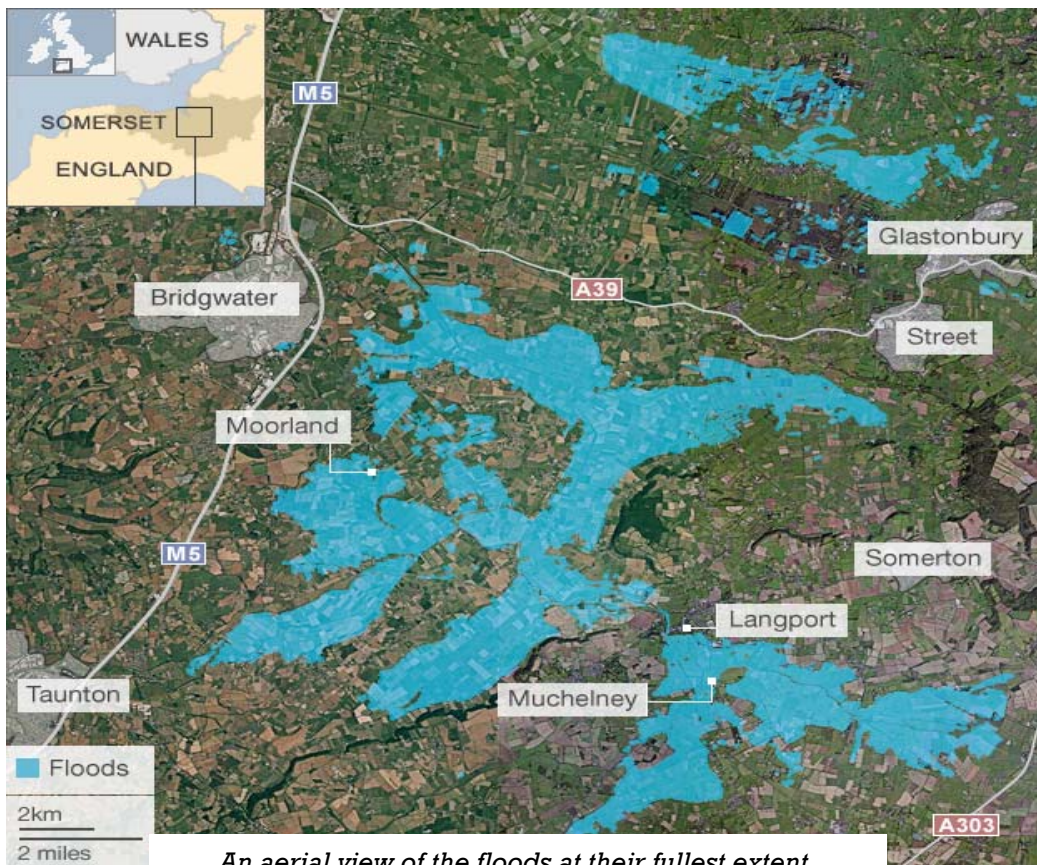


The Great Flood, 2014.

It was all my fault, you can blame me. On the twelfth of November I emailed my fishing buddy Pat and told him that if it didn't start raining soon then the lakes we usually fish in, which at the time were perilously low, would be dry by the spring. It started raining the day after and didn't stop until the first week in March!

We live on the Somerset Levels, or as they are known locally The Moors. This area of land, between Yeovil and Bridgewater, forms the flood plain for the River Parrott and large areas sit only a few feet above sea level. The inhabitants have for generations been fighting to keep the water off this low lying marshland, either from intrusion by the sea or by flooding from the rivers. Battles have been fought over it; the Battle of Sedgemoor was one of the final and deciding skirmishes of the Monmouth Rebellion, and the Isle of Athelney is the place where, it is said, Alfred burned the cakes.

The River Parrett rises in the north Dorset hills and flows at a goodly pace slowing to walking pace by the time it meanders past the villages of Thorney and Muchelney (an old English term for great island). Here it is joined by the Rivers Isle and Yeo. Its route then takes it to Burrowbridge and the River Tone and then on in a very sedate manner to the Bristol Channel beyond. The river is tidal between the sea and Langport and this natural effect has a huge bearing on the flow of water. At times, either side of high water, the river flow reverses bringing water back up the channel. As the tides change and the current in the river become slack the silt that has been carried from the catchment is deposited on the river bed, slowly filling up the channel. Up until the 1990's the River was managed by the local Levels Drainage Board and men and machines kept the channel clean. The Drainage Board was at that time subsumed by the Environment Agency and all dredging was stopped and the men and machines discarded. 'You'll regret doin' this. In 20 years' time the place will be awash with water if you don't keep the channel clean', were the mutterings of the dredgers as they switched off their diggers for the last time. Oh how right they were.



An aerial view of the floods at their fullest extent.

The Moors are used by the Environment Agency to store water during periods of high rainfall. A series of pumps is then used to raise the flood back into the river when the river levels permit. The winter flooding has been happening for years and is extremely important in maintaining the biodiversity of the area but the management of the water is a very complicated and delicate operation requiring great skill, teamwork, communication and, above all, experience to ensure that the water is kept at the correct level. After years of underinvestment these skills have been denuded along with a degree of pumping capacity. This year when it started raining and the river levels rose some of these skills and pump capacity were shown to be lacking.

By Christmas eve the Moors were flooded and carrying their normal winter levels. But it kept on raining and this time we had the perfect storm of very high tides exaggerated by strong westerly winds pushing water back up the river from the sea. Combine this with strong down stream flows from heavy rain inland and where the two meet the river overflows and bingo, it floods. The rivers are aided in their drainage efforts by manmade drains or Rhynes which carry water towards the pumping stations. The rivers and some of the rhynes are designed to spill water into designated areas at times when they are full, one side being lower than the other. Following the abnormally high rainfall at Christmas and into the New Year the rivers and some of the rhynes did spill water onto the Moors as the volume of flow in the River Parrett exceeded the capacity of the river.

As I look out of my upstairs office window I can see a five bar gate out on West Moor, just west of the village of Thorney. We can judge the height of the normal winter floods by how many rungs of the gate are missing. One rung gone means about 18 inches of water across an area of about 800 acres, occasionally two go adrift but never all five. By Christmas Eve we couldn't even see the gate post that the gate hung on and it didn't come back into view until the first week of March. This suggested that there was about eight feet of water across the Moor. The village of Muchelney was marooned and remained so for the next 63 days and Thorney village was flooded to a depth of about two and half feet invading a dozen houses.

There is nothing like a natural disaster to bring communities together and that is exactly what the floods did here. As soon as it became obvious that Muchelney would be marooned villagers moved their cars out onto dry land, or the mainland as it became known.

A very rural bus service, tractors and trailers mainly, began to operate for commuters to



The Local 'Flood Bus' in Thorney

cross the floods and get to their cars for their daily commute to work, school or shops. The same service took them back home again at the end of the day.

St Peter and St Pauls the local church on the 'island' of Muchelney was once part of Muchelney Abbey and dates back to the middle ages. It became the village hub during their 63 day island existence.

Inevitably there are some good stories to be told. The English have a strong tradition of laughing in the face of adversity and so it was this year. Many of the flood affected dwellings had to have porta loos positioned so that 'normal' life could continue as much as

possible. One little girl came home from school to her flood affected home with a question posed by her teacher. 'Daddy we are doing a project about the olden days and we have to ask you if you have ever lived in a house with no inside toilet?' 'Not until about two weeks ago', was the terse reply.

Necessity is the mother of invention and at times like this some 'out of the box' thinking is required; 'Blue sky thinking' doesn't seem appropriate for this occasion! A farmer friend of ours from a village nearby has 500 head of beef cattle in yards not 50 fifty paces from his house. By the beginning of January his house and yard were both under about a foot of water. By mid-month the water had receded a bit and he was able to begin the process of cleaning up his home. Heavy rain again in early Feb threatened to re-inundate the house so using all his farming logic he put all the plugs in the sinks and bath and turned on the cold taps. If he was going to be flooded again he would rather it was with tap water and not slurry. It worked and although his house flooded it was with clean water this time.

The Prime Minister seeing an opportunity came the following week and promised that the Government would pay 'whatever it takes to stop the floods happening again.' Few took him seriously but since then the dredging has started.

Perhaps our most prestigious visitor was Prince Charles. Ironically his visit had been pencilled in some time ago to check on the recovery from the floods in November 2012. As always a Royal visitor boosts moral and it did on this occasion.



Prince Charles on board the 'Royal Low Loader'

We had TV crews and radio programs recorded from the village. Some friends were interviewed by Al Jazeera and the Washington Post sent a reporter. Perhaps the most amusing was a visit from BBC 5 Live who interviewed an ex Naval Officer neighbour of ours who sees the world as it really is:



Aerial view of Muchelney at the height of the floods

Radio 5 “Who do you blame for the floods?”

Tony “Well most of us in the village blame the weather”

Microphone immediately snaps off.

Radio 5 “ No No No, you have to blame someone, we need blame. Whose fault is it? You have to point the finger”

Tony decided that his time was more precious and moved off to feed his ducks which by this time had taken up residence in his swimming pool, which was actually now part of his vegetable patch or at least where he thought his veg patch was last time he saw it three weeks ago.

The Moors are essentially a livestock area, with excellent summer grazing. So when flood waters rose to heights never experienced before, farm buildings winter housing for the areas’ livestock, were affected. This led to several hundreds of cattle having to be evacuated to dryer land. Facebook and Twitter are not names you would immediately associate with farming, but both these media played a vital role in the re-housing and feeding of the stock. Fodder and bedding came from all over the country to the Sedgemoor Market centre at Bridgewater for distribution across the area.



The fodder and bedding collection centre at Bridgewater’s Sedgemoor Market

After fifty days and fifty nights, and the importation of six very large pumps from Holland, the waters began to subside leaving behind the mess and detritus that has become an all too familiar sight. There is very rarely a simple



answer to a complicated problem, and there isn’t in this case either. The Moors need to flood, and in time of climate change will need to flood perhaps more often, but how can property be protected? A case of lateral thinking is needed, in bucket loads.