

Boscastle flood - the silver linings

In 'Ranger' Issue 65, Autumn 2002 I wrote about Boscastle, Cornwall and a community event to celebrate midsummer called 'Boz Looan'. Subsequently an entirely different event projected the picturesque village into the world's eye.

On 16 August 2004 the tail end of hurricane Alex brought warm moist tropical air to north Cornwall. This air condensed and fell as it reached the coast. The storm remained static over the river Valency catchment for c. 5 hours delivering at its peak 25mm of rain in 15 minutes. This small catchment (c.20 sq km) funnels down to the harbour of Boscastle, which lies in the centre of the village. It is estimated that the same amount of water flowing in the river Thames past the Houses of Parliament tried to flow through Boscastle via the river Valency, which in places is only 10m wide.

Small wonder there were media images of cars, trees and boulders being carried downstream. Due to the efforts of the rescue services there were no fatalities but about 1000 people were directly affected with over 70 properties flooded (five of which were demolished) and the surrounding countryside dramatically changed.

The event was classed as 'extreme' by Environment Agency with a 1 in 400 chance of the flood occurring in any one year in Boscastle – in simpler terms it was a 1 in 400 year flood.

The community pulling together

In the immediate aftermath, the response of the community was amazing. Neighbours helped each other, accommodating those with no home, or helping to clear debris from damaged buildings, or simply running errands for those with no transport.

Other offers of help rushed in from individuals, groups and organisations; many were local, some national and some even international. Houses and public halls became Aladdin's caves of donated items from clothing to food to tools to furniture and a village committee was set up to oversee and co-ordinate distribution. Another committee administered monetary donations, which reached over £400,000.

The issue of co-ordinating all the various service organisations and community groups gave rise to an umbrella body, called the Boscastle Regeneration Group (BRG) consisting of parish, district and county councils, National Trust, Environment Agency, South West Water, Western Power, BT, Police, Harbour Commission and Boscastle chamber of trade and commerce.

The BRG forms an important co-ordinating function and from this group many sub-groups tackle particular topics or issues.

Role of the National Trust

The National Trust is a major landowner in and around Boscastle, owning 317 acres of land including the harbour, river, access roads, bridge, 8 buildings and parts of the Valency valley. It was severely affected by the flood and recognised it had a part to play in the various aspects of the recovery and regeneration. Part of its response was to appoint a project officer to act as a co-ordinating link for individuals and organisations involved in the various work areas, from building renovation to community involvement, developing a flood alleviation scheme to grant applications.

Helping the Harbour

Part of Boscastle's appeal to residents and visitors is its distinctive style of architecture derived from stone and slate. The early quarries that supplied the original stone have longed since closed – and though working quarries were only a matter of miles away, the slate is different in colour and shape.

Recognising the importance of local stone in the built environment the National Trust organised three 'helping the harbour' days. The floodwaters deposited over 1000m³ of material including stone within the harbour (this being the first place the river widened, slowed and dropped some of its load). Some 200 people recovered over 200 tonnes of stone, which helped to rebuild or repair 15 properties. Amazingly some of the stone could be traced to its original building or wall hundreds of metres upstream.

In hindsight and without realising it, these days also fulfilled another function. People just wanted to 'do something' and feel they were helping the recovery process.

Wider countryside

The catchment is geologically young and in any year the river Valency would transport silt and gravel downstream but on the day of the flood c. 20 years worth of material moved in a few hours. Boulders up to 2 metres diameter bowled along, whole trees and footbridges were removed and the river broke out of bank (evulsed) and formed new channels.

For centuries man has been taming the river valley through straightening, claiming meadows and building weirs and leats (to supply the various mills in the village) but now the river is beginning to take on a more natural form with meanders, sloping banks and gravel deposits.

The National Trust owns a large part of the lower catchment and is looking at the opportunity to 'rewild' the valley. This could be achieved by allowing the river to meander, creating more of a variety of reaches, deposition areas and riffles.

Future plans

Since the flood event, the BRG have organised various community consultations through exhibitions, surveys, on-site meetings and guided tours. When all the work has been completed, (due to finish in 2008) people who live, work and visit the area should benefit from a more appropriately designed village.

For example there will be:

- A landscaped and reshaped public car park, away from the river to prevent cars being carried off by flood waters
- A traffic calming scheme within the village
- An improved visitor centre
- An upgraded youth hostel
- A new play area for children
- A flood alleviation scheme.

Perhaps there is a silver lining.....

The flood alleviation scheme is in recognition that floods have occurred previously (there were lesser events in 1950, 1958, 1963) and that given the shape and size of catchment there is the likelihood of another event. It aims to accommodate future flood flows through the village within the river channel. This is proving challenging as no one wishes to see a concrete culvert through the middle of this historic village. The Environment Agency (EA) and the National Trust are confident that with some imaginative lowering and widening of the river bed and using access roads as two stage flood channels, it should be possible to accommodate a 1 in 100 year flood event. Part of the flood alleviation scheme is to investigate the role of the wider countryside in a catchment management strategy. The National Trust and the EA both recognise the need to work with the river to allow it to develop naturally, so for example, meanders can allow any flood water to slow up and deposit any potentially damaging sediment/debris before it reaches the village.

In November 2005 the regeneration group was able to secure European funding from the Objective One Programme for £1m, which will help to grant aid the large scale, works and improvements over the next 2 years.

Boscastle's profile has been greatly increased in the world's eye, in a great part due to the media frenzy that built up so quickly after the event. Over the past 18 months Boscastle has 'enjoyed' an increased numbers of visitors (normally c.360,000 in a year but now up to 480,000 from April to October). For those dependent on tourism it's maybe another silver lining.....

.....and for the rest of the wider countryside a reminder that the only constant factor is change.

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