

Families evacuated as lake bursts its banks

THUNDERSTORMS and monsoon-like floods brought a wave of destruction to the district on Thursday evening, swamping unsuspecting villages and drivers.

Areas that had enjoyed a heatwave for days were lashed with torrential rain as houses and cars were half-submerged and thousands of homes blacked-out by lightning.

Thirty Aldermaston families had to be evacuated when a huge ornamental lake burst its banks, unleashing million of gallons of water into the heart of the village.

Hailstones

The residents, who had earlier staved off a downpour of hailstones "as large as golf-balls", froze as the torrent rolled through the main street, drenching their homes and gardens with up to four feet of water.

Police blocked off all roads, and a 20-strong team of firemen battled throughout the night to pump out the deluge, which fast turned the streets into rivers.

Fire divisional officer John Harrington, who was in charge of the operation, said there had been fears during the night that more rain was on its way.

The torrent rushed forth from an 11-acre man-made lake at Aldermaston Court, owned by Blue Circle plc, and knocked down an eight-foot wall in the village.

Mr Peter Howes, of The Street, was a witness.

"I have never seen anything like it in my life. It just came down in one big torrent, which was so powerful it ripped up the tarmac road and sent walls crashing down," said Mr Howes.

Bricks sent flying

"Bricks were flying everywhere and cars were being washed down the road. Insurance claims are going to run into hundreds of thousands of pounds," he added.

The worst hit homes were in The Street and Church Lane.



Repairing the damage.

Resident Mr Simon Maw, who is trying to sell his house, said "It all happened so fast. A lot of the houses border the road and the ground floors were completely drenched — some with several feet of water."

AWE Aldermaston tried to block the flow as it cascaded through the grounds, but the force of the two million gallons proved too strong.

Police frogmen searched the entire village looking for casualties. No-one was hurt, although many residents narrowly escaped injury as the wall collapsed.

Treated for shock

A 91-year-old woman had to be carried from her home by stretcher and treated for shock by ambulancemen at the scene.

She was later taken to the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, and spent the night recovering in a local old people's home.

Electricity supplies was cut and remained off for most of the following day as the massive mop-up began.

One local farmer arrived with his tractor, carting in sandbags to barricade off homes and stop water seeping in.

Evacuated residents bedded down for the night in the village hall, at Blue Manor Hotel or at the local pub, the Hinds Head.

Landlord Mr Martin Bartlett and wife, Jan, raced round to block up the front of the pub with planks.

The couple had hoped to unveil a new £30,000 restaurant on Saturday night.

Mrs Bartlett said "We have had up to four feet in the cellar, but the bar is at a higher level and seems to have escaped. Our main fear was for the restaurant.

"We have served up refreshments and drinks all night, and, apart from the fact the Best is off, we've carried on.

Fire Station was inundated with calls and Hampshire fire brigade received 54 call-outs up until midnight.

In Tadley the local police got

cold feet when the station flooded with four inches of water.

REPORT:
SARAH BARKER

Lucky escape

In nearby Beenham, a teenager narrowly escaped drowning when he fell into the swollen river Bourne.

Mark Beamond, of Back Lane, slipped into the river and was knocked out. "He got caught in a current, knocked his head and became unconscious," said his mother, Mrs

Barbara Beamond.

Luckily 15-year-old Andrew Selwood saw his hand above the water and jumped in to the fast flowing river and pulled his unconscious friend to safety. "Mark is not too bad now," said Mrs Beamond. "It's mostly shock that has made him unwell."

Self-help

"The whole village has had to rally round to fend for itself, and all the men were out there helping. The feeling in the village is that Blue Circle has a lot to answer for," she added.

Mrs Fay Vanstone, of Meadow Cottages, saw the kitchen of her 400-year-old home fill with sewage and water.

"It was nearly waist high — all greasy and horrible. It really had to be seen to be believed," she said.

Newbury District Council is hoping to house many of the homeless in bed and breakfast accommodation or vacant council homes.

Disaster fund

Former Aldermaston resident, Mrs Christine Whyte, is urging for a disaster fund to be set up.

Council workers have been clearing up the village all weekend to minimise the risk of disease from flooded sewers and drains.

Chief executive Mr Paul McMahon said "We are putting in as many personnel as we can, and are investigating all possible sources of help."

The freak weather wreaked havoc all around the district. The switchboard at Reading