

The Great Storm of October 1987

By Mike Trippitt

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In the early hours of 16th October 1987 winds reaching 115 miles an hour wreaked havoc on East Anglia and Southern England. 18 people died, 15 million trees were uprooted and Michael Fish stood accused of getting the weather forecast wrong.

The night before, former BBC National Weatherman Jim Bacon, now 67, returned to his home near Norwich in a torrential downpour, but by 1.00am the rain had stopped.

"I stood outside the back door and I thought this is odd," says Jim. "It didn't feel right. There was a clear, starry sky and it was phenomenally warm, 17 or 18 degrees. In October I would expect cold and near frost. In all my life, I have never known weather to feel as weird as that. I went to bed thinking this is not going to be good."

Within a short time an extra tropical cyclone, or deep depression, that the Met Office had predicted would travel south of the UK across France and Spain, brought hurricane force winds to our region and the south of England. Powers cables and trees were brought down, caravans, sheds and outbuildings destroyed. Boats sank and light aircraft blown over.

In Cambridgeshire, including villages around St Ives, roads were blocked, power supplies broken and many people could not get to work.

Further south, Sevenoaks in Kent was particularly badly hit. Six of its seven famous 1902 oak trees were destroyed. Around the town one million oak, beech and ash trees, their branches still in full leaf, the ground around them saturated by rain, came crashing down.

St Ives residents Norman and Joan Easter lived in Sevenoaks at the time. They had never known winds like it.

Joan says: "During the night the children were so frightened by the sound of the wind that they pulled their beds onto the landing to keep away from their bedroom windows."

The next morning it was like nothing Norman had seen before.

There was total devastation of the whole area," he says. "Roads were impassable and all trees in our garden had fallen. There was no power, no buses and no trains. Everything shut down. It was a couple of days before we could get out of our lane."

Weather forecasting accuracy has improved enormously in 30 years. Increases in computer processing power combined with the greater availability of weather data gives meteorologists a much clearer picture of present conditions, and a much greater chance of predicting future weather correctly.

Fifty years ago the forecasters could only predict the weather accurately one day at a time. Information that took several hours to gather 30 years ago is now available in 15 minutes. A two-week forecast today is as reliable as a 4-day forecast in 1987.

We British continue our love-hate relationship with the weather. We have an insatiable appetite to talk about it, and sometimes, it would seem, to blame the weathermen for it.

Maybe in the next 30 years we will come to congratulate the Met Office on the frequency with which it correctly forecasts the weather, rather than criticise it on the odd occasion that it fails.

As one forecaster put it recently: "No-one remembers when we get it right. They only remember when we get it wrong."