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150th anniversary

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Great weather events: the 'Great Storm' of 1987

"And to the lady from Wales who rang to say she'd heard a hurricane was on the way, don't worry there isn't, but it will be extremely windy, particularly across the south". So said Michael Fish on the evening of 15 October 1987 and thus was born the most famous quote from TV weather forecasting. In the ensuing hours the most severe storm for nearly 300 years raged across the southern half of the country and although there is much argument about whether it should be called a 'hurricane', it was without doubt a very remarkable event.

At the storm's peak sustained wind speeds consistently exceeded 50 m.p.h. leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Conditions at sea were even more alarming; the Royal Sovereign lighthouse on the south coast recorded a mean wind speed of 75 knots (86 m.p.h.), faster than the motorway speed limit!

Gusts of 100 m.p.h. occurred around the coasts and 90 m.p.h. was exceeded well inland where 80 m.p.h. gusts were common, the strongest gust in the country was 106 knots (122 m.p.h.) at Gorleston in Suffolk.

An estimated 15 million trees were felled, blocking roads and bringing down power lines - hundreds of thousands of homes in England being without power for more than 24 hours. Buildings and vehicles were crushed by falling trees and at sea numerous small boats were wrecked or blown away, a ship capsized in Dover harbour, and a Channel ferry was driven ashore near Folkestone. In all, eighteen people lost their lives, but the toll would have been much worse had the storm arrived during daylight hours. Overall the cost of the damage ran into billions of pounds.

Clearly there was a need to look at our own performance and, although the Met Office had performed no worse than any of its European counterparts in forecasting the weather that extraordinary night, an internal enquiry led to changes intended to improve our ability to predict severe weather.

Better observational coverage of the atmosphere to the south and west of the UK was achieved by increasing the quality and quantity of marine weather observations from ships, aircraft, ocean buoys and satellite. Programmers looked closely at the computer models used in forecasting and made a number of changes.

At the end of all this the Met Office became better equipped to provide the country with early warning of severe weather and in January 1990 emphatic advice of the so called '[Burns' Day Storm](#)' was provided and the impact of that storm was significantly less.

[More from Education about the Great Storm of 1987](#)

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