

## **THE STORM OF 15-16 OCTOBER 1987: A personal experience**

The night of 15 October was much like many other nights and my wife Sue and I retired to bed around 11.30pm to settle down to a peaceful night's sleep. Baby Sam had been asleep since about 7.30pm and we did not expect him to wake again until 7am next morning.

Our house in Addlestone, north-west Surrey, stands on the edge of open land with views to the south and east. Our garden contains several mature trees including two willows and two oaks among others. Just inside our next door neighbour's garden, and near both of our houses, stood a 150-year-old cedar tree about 35 metres high with two main trunks.

About 2am we were awoken by the noise of strong winds whistling around the house. As the winds got stronger twigs and small branches started to clatter against the windows and on to the roof. We lay awake trying to get to sleep again but the noises seemed to get louder. The strong winds came in waves with relatively calm periods in between and this aspect was particularly disturbing. In one stronger gust a loud crack prompted me to get up and peer out of the window. A large bough from one of the willows had broken off. The sight which one could discern was awesome with the trees, which were still in full leaf, lashing around with great violence. It was reminiscent of films of hurricanes with the palm trees whipping about.

We gave up trying to get to sleep and I made a cup of tea. We sat drinking the tea downstairs in our living room and with the curtains open watched the twigs and branches cascade on to the garden illuminated by a street light. Up to a point one feels that your own home is the safest place to be but I had never seen any storm like this and I was beginning to feel uneasy. I considered moving the car from the front drive but the thought of going out into the wind, rain and flying debris dissuaded me.

I telephoned the Noble Denton Weather Services' forecast office and asked the forecaster what was going on. The description of the synoptic situation was interesting from an academic point of view but following another loud crash I put the phone down rather hurriedly.

Another particularly strong gust started up, there was a huge rumbling crash and a rushing noise. The house shook, the ceiling cracked and

outside masonry was falling. We realised that the cedar tree had fallen and rushed upstairs to where baby Sam had been asleep. There was a gaping hole in the wall of his bedroom and the ceiling light was blowing in the wind. Luckily Sam was still there in his cot with only a few pieces of plaster and brick on him. He was crying lustily, which was reassuring, and Sue plucked him from the cot. We rushed downstairs and out of the front door, pausing only to rescue the cat, my pipe and tobacco. Outside we had to clamber through a morass of branches and foliage to where a neighbour was holding a torch and we gratefully accepted their hospitality.

When the fire services arrived their floodlights revealed the extent of the damage (see cover picture). Half of one bedroom had disappeared, the whole of the front of the house had been knocked about two inches sideways leaving an ugly crack diagonally from top to bottom. The roof was severely damaged and the chimney had fallen into next door's garage. The other trunk of the cedar had embedded itself in our neighbour's roof but she had been able to clamber out as well. Two garages were completely demolished and five cars squashed.

We were permitted to rescue one or two belongings but because the structure was potentially dangerous nobody was allowed into the house until a survey had been carried out. The following morning friends and neighbours rallied round and we managed to clear away many of the smaller branches. Because of the widespread disruption it was difficult to contact insurers and other bodies that you are meant to contact in these situations. However by the end of the day wheels were in motion and a few days later with the aid of mobile cranes, a mechanical digger, several chain-saws and half a dozen lorries the site had been cleared leaving a very forlorn looking house.

We had to find alternative accommodation and moved all our furniture into storage and ourselves into a rented house. The final bill for the damage to three houses, three garages, five cars and associated expenses will probably be around £100000. We hope to return to our considerably rebuilt house about March which will be five months after the storm occurred. We are looking forward to restocking our garden and renewing the acquaintance of all our wonderful neighbours.

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MARCH 1988  
Vol. 43 No. 3

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