

ADRIFT IN THE DEATHLY HOLLOW



After two months of torrential downpours, Britain seems mesmerised by the floods that have swept the country. As the final Harry Potter novel hits the streets at the same time the rivers do, it is as though Lord Voldemort himself had decided to create chaos across the landscape of Muggle England.

All Ministers seem able to say, with conviction, is that 'lessons will be learned'. The question is, which ones?

At the moment 150,000 people in Gloucester are learning to queue for water. Severn Trent Water have announced there will be no tap water supply for the next two weeks, until their water purification and pumping plants are rescued from the floods.

The Environment Agency (and the Ministry of Defence) have learned that their mobile flood defence barriers aren't much use when stuck on lorries, which are themselves marooned in the floods. Energy companies have learned that their sub-stations don't work well under water. Milkmen have learned that their milk floats don't. And the National Audit Office has learned that less than half of Britain's cities have drainage and flood protection systems in decent working order. Who needs Voldemort when we can do this to ourselves?

Ministers may well accept that this is more connected to climate change than magic. They may well accept Britain has 4.3 million people living in flood risk areas; that a third of the area earmarked for new housing development is on flood plain land; that some £240 billion in housing and economic assets are vulnerable to flooding...but that doesn't mean anything will change.

When the floods began in Yorkshire I made a suggestion, at Prime Ministers Question Time, that developers should be made liable for flood damage during the first 20 years of a property's life. The press were really interested, the construction industry less so.

It was as though I had hit the industry with the 'Imperius' curse. First stunned, then indignant, they insisted that this would be monumentally unfair and economically ruinous. It would make UK house building unaffordable... as though the £4 billion of flood damage somehow was affordable.

We live in a culture in which developers and the construction industry are allowed to plunder the present, leaving everyone else to pay for tomorrow's mess. Look at who pays at the moment.

Displaced families all pay – through insurance schemes and out of their wages. The uninsured pay for the goods they can afford to replace. Local authorities, the Environment Agency and the Government will also pay their share...which ultimately means that taxpayers pay. Next year, when insurance premiums rise, all policy holders will pay extra. In fact, everyone seems to pay...apart from the one group who built the houses in floodable areas, pocketed the money, and then pushed off.

The Association of British Insurers have reported that storm and flood damage in the UK had doubled (to over £6 billion) over the 1998-2003 period. Their fear is that if London is hit, the flood damage could cost £40 billion. Development plans for the Thames Gateway – where 91% of new homes are planned for the floodplain – only add to the sense of impending gloom.

The central issue, however, is not how we pay the bills for the turbulent upheavals that climate change is bringing. Rather, it is to ask what we have to change to avoid the damage in the first place. We need a minor revolution in the relationship between government and the built environment; a revolution that seeks to intervene in ways that British governments have long forgotten how to do.

In Harry Potter's world, if you wanted to begin from somewhere else you would use a Portkey – an artefact bestowed with magical powers that whisks you to another land. In our world, it just involves making comparisons with other parts of Europe.

Britain sits on a wonderful legacy of Victorian over-engineering of our drains and sewers. Unfortunately, we also sit on a backlog of under-investment in their repair and renewal. This massively increases the risks of raw sewage discharges in torrential downpours and floods.

By all accounts, Margaret Thatcher's privatisation of the water industry was based less on ideology and more on the pragmatic fear of how much it would cost to renew the infrastructure of water supplies and drains. Any thoughts that the private sector would do the job for her were soon scuppered by executives who pocketed profits for themselves and shareholders, and by their companies who were unable to pass the cost of constructing drains on to their customers.

The encroachment of new house building simply added pressure on to an already fragile drainage and sewerage infrastructure. Faced with similar problems, Europe has taken a much more interventionist approach to planning powers and obligations.

In four of the main German regions they have set much tougher planning laws. You cannot get a planning application looked at if the proposal doesn't include reservoir facilities in its foundations. The logic is simple: if you are going to remove soak-away land you have to replace its water holding capacity on site.

Local authorities can also specify that rainwater harvesting and recycling must be incorporated as design features for all new buildings. It is a provision as relevant to drought as to flood.

The Dutch are doing things on an even larger scale. Some 60% of their land is below sea level. They face the combined threat of encroachment from the sea and of flooding from any of the three major European rivers that run through the Delta of their country.

Already, the Dutch have the highest standard of flood protection in the world. Some €13 billion has been invested in raising and strengthening the dykes over the last decade. But above a certain height dykes become a problem not the solution.

A new strategy – 'living with water' has been formulated. It will reallocate 1.2 million acres of dry land

as flooding zones. Rivers will be widened and new standards set for housing that has to be 'flood compatible'. From Tewkesbury to Sheffield, Hull to Oxford, there are displaced families who would feel that the Dutch experiments are a dream world somewhere between Heaven and Hogwarts.

In the IJburg district of Amsterdam they have built floating houses. Not far away, on the flood plain of Maasbommel, the Dutch are building a mixture of permanently floating and amphibious homes. Anchored to mooring piles rather than fixed into foundations, the concrete-based homes rise and fall with flood water levels. Wiring and sewage is ducted through the mooring piles. In the latest versions, changes in water-level are even used to generate electricity to make the houses energy self-sufficient. Go, Harry, go.

This is a far cry from sheltering in community centres or the upper floors of flood torn homes around Britain. What may seem fanciful to us is regarded by the Dutch as a future that has to accommodate the 'hydrometropolis' – major housing areas that partly float and may be surrounded by water.

This is another world from the 'lessons being learned' in Britain. So far, there are no suggestions that Ministers will now allow local authorities to set tough conditions for building on flood plain land; conditions to require energy generation, rainwater harvesting or flood-compatibility features to be obligatory design requirements.

Ministers show no signs of wanting to bring water back into public ownership, nor make drainage replacement a duty that comes before dividend payments, nor include house builders in the flood liability chain.

Over 100,000 households, displaced by floods, may wonder whether the lessons being learned by government are all the wrong ones for the world in which we must now live. To allow the market to distort the future as it has distorted the present is to have learnt nothing. Even in the Deathly Hallows this would be glaringly obvious.

Harry Potter may not be the only one needing a return to Hogwarts.