

BY THE 'FLEET' (NOT IN IT)!

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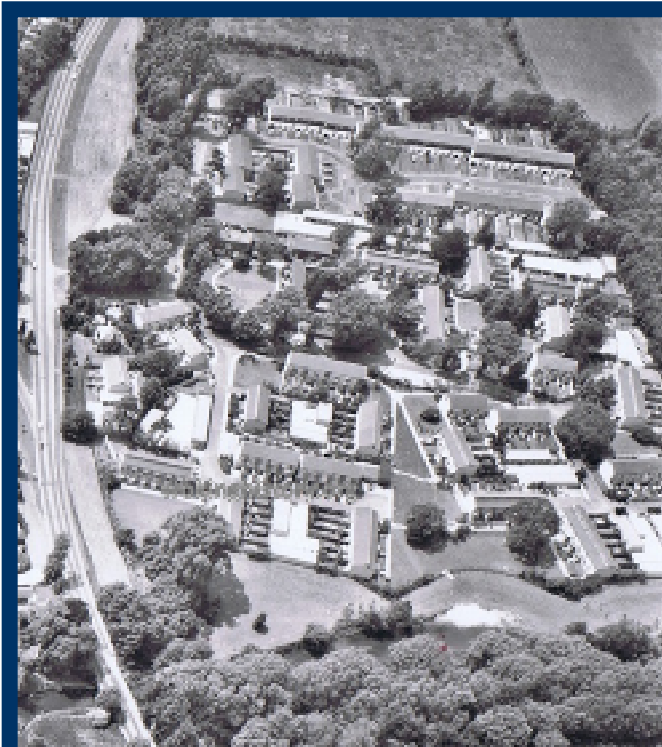


In Saxon times the word 'fleet' (like the name 'Wey') meant a 'river', so that in the 8th century, when Byfleet was first recorded, the name simply meant the area was 'by the river'. The village was not called 'Infleet' or 'Underfleet', although as we saw last week in this column, for much of the Wey Valley in September 1968 either of those names would have been more appropriate.

The floods of 1968 appear to have taken everyone in this area by surprise – despite the heavy rain coinciding with a high spring tide being forecast. Few people were warned of the impending doom as in many cases the authorities failed to communicate there was a problem until it was too late.

The police, it seems, required the help of the Surrey Advertiser to keep on top of the situation with the Chief Constable of Surrey, Mr Peter Matthews, airlifted over Byfleet and Weybridge courtesy of a helicopter hired by the firm originally to distribute its newspapers.

'Mr Matthews' the local press reported 'was able to see just where the trouble was building up in the Byfleet area, and his verdict when back at police headquarters in Guildford was that they had a lot of work on their hands'.



As the Surrey Advertiser surveyed the scene in their helicopter, the Chief Constable joined them to view the devastation.

That was also the view of countless families in Byfleet as the same newspaper reported 'homeless families clutching essential belongings trickled from the Weymede Estate and the Binfield Road areas of Byfleet to the village and church halls after a sea of muddy water drove them from their homes.'

'People living in the 149-house Weymede Estate woke on Tuesday to find their ground floors under nine-inches of water' and on the Manor Farm Estate by about 8.30 p.m. 'water was four foot deep in living rooms and those who could removed electrical equipment into the bedrooms'.

The Floods of September 1968 meant some on the newly built 'Span Development' by Plough Bridge had to be moved to safety in the village centre.

In the 1840's the landlord of the Plough public house by Plough Bridge was so fed-up with being flooded that he moved the licence to a new building on higher land...

'The recently redecorated Plough Inn at Plough Corner had a foot of water in it on Tuesday' and 'the elderly residents of Clock House - were moved to safety after flood water began to encroach on the building on Monday night'.

Ironically the Plough public house had originally been situated by Plough Bridge, but in 1840, following several floods, the landlord had moved the establishment to higher ground in the High Road, next to the village's brewery.

Back in 1968 the fire brigade did all they could, but they too were the victim of the floods when one engine sent from Woking to Esher to help pump out a property 'got stuck in floods at Byfleet and had to be towed out and returned to Woking station by a fire brigade towing vehicle'.

On Tuesday evening apparently police and Army frogmen tried to examine the foundations of Plough Bridge where spectators had earlier viewed masonry falling off the bridge', but strong currents forced them to abandon the search. And at Brooklands the old race-track bridge had partially collapsed, severing the water main and ironically cutting off supplies of fresh water!

By Wednesday, when the waters had started to recede, the Woking district Manager of the South Eastern Electricity Board, sent out his special 'electricity board information vans' to 'begin their mercy work in conjunction with teams of electricians'. 'It was intended' he said 'to test all house installations' before electricity was restored.



...but in 1968 even that was evidently not high enough.



All of this led some to call for a public inquiry into the floods, especially when it was noted that the River Thames downstream of Weybridge had somehow managed to not burst its bank!

Some suspected that the Thames Conservancy had closed the sluice at Weybridge to prevent flooding there, forcing the water to back up the Wey, flooding Byfleet, Pyrford and Old Woking as a result, whilst others (like the water bailiff for Byfleet & Pyrford) suspected that the real cause of the problem was that 'the floods were due to a mistake in opening the sluice gates at Guildford'.

Whatever the cause, local residents were assured by Woking Council that in future there would be adequate warning of any potential floods - an statement that was probably greeted with as much scepticism as any assurance from Woking Council deserved (then or now).

The elderly residents of The Clock House had to be moved as the waters rose on Monday.