

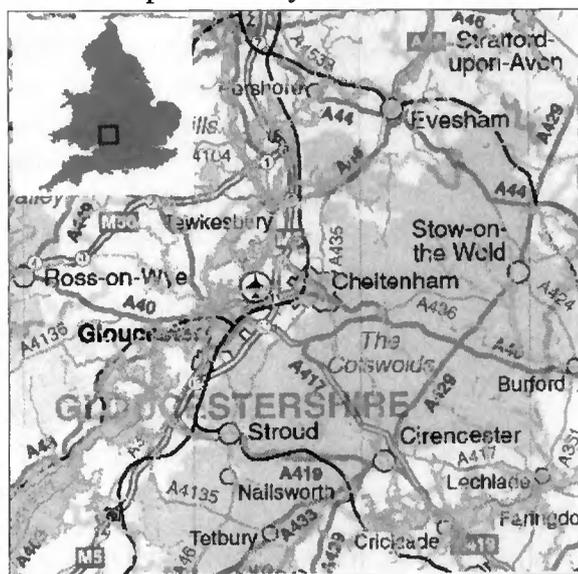
## **“Under Water”: Flooding in Cheltenham 1731 – 1993 by Mick Kippin**

### **Introduction**

Unlike the surrounding area of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham is not known for flooding; this map produced by the Department of the Environment shows that the floodplain barely reaches the Town. The river Chelt and Hatherley Brook hardly compare to the Rivers Severn or Avon! However, this doesn't mean to say that our Town doesn't flood - it does. The Chelt is a very short, steep river and it is prone to quick flooding.

In the hills above Dowdeswell about a dozen smaller streams feed into the Chelt. At this point the river corridor is some 5½ miles wide, but this soon narrows to a bottleneck of just 1½ miles as the river enters the built-up areas of Charlton Kings and Cheltenham, not widening out until it has left the Town. The river can react very quickly to heavy rainfall and flooding can occur within as little as two hours.

Since 1731 there have been at least fifteen occasions when Cheltenham has found itself at the mercy of a large volume of water, although not all of these events were caused simply by the river Chelt bursting its banks: June 1731, June 1830, July 1855, May 1862, August and October 1883, March 1889, May 1924, June 1931, March 1947, July 1968, May 1979, August 1981, August 1984, January 1992 and most recently January 1993. The floods of 1855 and 1979 can both be classified as “one in 100 year floods.” I have chosen just the most severe of these to concentrate on in this article.



The flood plain around Cheltenham.  
(Courtesy DEFRA)

### **June 1731 and June 26<sup>th</sup> 1830**

Unfortunately Cheltenham's local press does not go back far enough for us to read about these very early floods; nor are they mentioned in “The Gloucester Journal”. Even the historian John Goding seemed to be short on prime source material. Of June 1731 he says, “*Hailstones, the size of golf balls fell, killing livestock and causing £2000 of damage to property.*”

Luckily for Cheltenham the earliest instances of flooding caused considerably less damage than a similar event would do today. Much of the Town was still open field until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Goding's source for the 1830 flood would appear to be a comparison between 1830 and 1855, written in The Examiner after the Great Flood of 1855. “*The great storm and flood of 26<sup>th</sup> June 1830 was very similar to that of Thursday last, except that the waters then swept through fields instead of through streets. Where the Promenade now stands was then a piece of waste land or meadow.*”

### **July 14<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> 1855**

The flooding of July 1855 was without doubt the worst experienced by the Town in the 273 years since the earliest recorded flooding of 1731, and has ever since been called “The Great or Mountain Flood”. The bad weather started on July 14<sup>th</sup> when severe thunderstorms flooded a number of streets and houses. Newly laid sewers in Bath Road burst causing further damage to property. This spate of bad weather

came to a head on the 26<sup>th</sup>, when there was almost twenty-four hours of continual torrential rain. Early estimates of the damage to property put the cost at about £10,000.

The 1855 flood began, as it had in 1830, in the hills above Dowdeswell when the river Chelt became overfull and burst its banks. The water had been building up in the river all day of Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> July until about 5 o'clock in the afternoon when it just couldn't hold any more. According to the local press, *"a vast body of water rushed down the valley until it met Charlton Mill. Sweeping over the mill-dam, it carried away a portion of the bridge and then washed away about 10,000 square yards of a potato field."*

This tidal wave of water then swept through Charlton Kings and on into the Bath Road, Cambray, Rodney Terrace, the Promenade, Royal Crescent and St. George's Place. Jessop's Gardens were particularly badly affected. The gardens were inundated from two different directions. One stream broke through from St. George's Terrace in the east, while a second even more damaging torrent forced its way down from Bayshill in the south. The whole of the ground was soon under water and the usually exotic gardens were turned into *"a wilderness of water"*. The Chelt at this point had taken a completely new course, the usual channel being blocked by an accumulation of sand, sewage and other rubbish.

The flood was at its height between seven and eight o'clock in the evening, when the Promenade was a broad expanse of water from Imperial Square up almost to the Colonnade. Passage through the Promenade was impossible on foot as the water was almost waist high!

Even after the water left the Town centre there was still too much of it to simply drain away and the low lying land extending from Alstone into Arle, Staverton and even as far as Boddington was in places under water.

### May 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> 1862

Heavy rain on these two days again caused damage to property close to the river Chelt. The Sandford Park area was completely covered and the flooding spread to St. James' Square, where an obstruction in the river at the lower end of the square forced the river to overflow and find a new path. Mr Brydges' nursery suffered some £40 damage. Pittville Lake also overflowed and several fields in the Swindon Road area were under water. The Looker-On considered this to be the heaviest rainfall and flooding since that of 1855, although they did comment that, *"It is, doubtless, in great measure owing to the improvement which has taken place in our drainage, that so serious a result did not, in this instance, ensue."*

The problem of the obstructions caused by the four mills along the river Chelt was brought up for discussion at a Council meeting on June 3<sup>rd</sup> 1878. Councillor S. Onley, supported by Councillor A. Paul, stated the obvious when he said that someone must be at fault in connection with the floods and that it was the Council's responsibility to determine who and to correct it. He requested that the whole question of flood alleviation be referred to the Sewage and Drainage committee for a full report to be made to the Council.



An idyllic scene, the river Chelt flowing calmly through the Town.

(Anthony Thompson, ATP)

## October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1882

1882 was another bad year for flooding with property in the Town being affected in August and then again in October. On August 30<sup>th</sup> Mr Frederick T. Ewens of 18 Promenade Villas, wrote to the editor of the Cheltenham Examiner,

Sir,

“Can nothing be done by the members of the Town Council to prevent the periodical floods of water, which do so much damage and cause so much inconvenience to persons living in the centre of The Promenade?”

On Friday evening last [24<sup>th</sup> August] the bottom part of my premises was flooded with water, and my neighbours were all in a similar plight. This state of things has existed for many years, but I think it is time that this matter was looked into and some remedy found for a state of things which is not very creditable to a Town of this magnitude.”

On October 23<sup>rd</sup> the Town experienced another extremely heavy downpour, which after about three hours of continual rain turned to snow. Once again The Examiner compared this to the flood of 1855; “*Cheltenham has experienced nothing more serious than the overflow of the Chelt 27 years ago.*” The main reasons for the flooding were considered to be:

a) the size of the culvert where the river Chelt runs underground between Regent Street and The Promenade. This is only 15 feet wide and 3ft 9in high at its smallest and is totally inadequate to carry away the volume of water under these conditions,

b) The four mill-dams along the river’s course seriously impede the flow of water. The fall from Barrett’s Mill to the floodgates at Alstone Mill was just 6ft 5in, while it would be over 20 ft if the floodgates were removed.

In 1883 the Council began serious improvements to ease the flow of the river Chelt into the Town. In October of that year the Mayor “*turned the first sod*” in the construction of the Dowdeswell reservoir and the completed reservoir was officially opened three years later. This now provides somewhere for flood waters to go rather than simply pouring over the riverbanks and into the Town. If the reservoir had been there in 1855, the damage would not have been nearly as serious.

## March 9<sup>th</sup> 1889

The Looker-On reported, “*An alarming flood, the like of which has not been seen in Cheltenham for a considerable number of years, occurred this evening when the river Chelt overflowed its banks and volumes of water rushed along its course causing immense damage to property, more especially in the districts of St.Luke’s, the Promenade, Bayshill and St.James’ Square. At the time of going to press crowds were still witnessing the torrents of water, which were, happily, fast subsiding and rendering all possible assistance.*” The following Saturday (March 16<sup>th</sup>) the paper reported, “*the flood of the previous Saturday was a trifling affair compared to the floods in other parts of the Country.*” Taunton, Tamworth, Nuneaton, Leicester and Bristol were mentioned as having been particularly badly flooded.

## May 31<sup>st</sup> 1924

The end of May 1924 saw an extended period of bad weather across the whole of the West Midlands. Cheltenham had to endure a deluge of rain overnight on Saturday May 31<sup>st</sup>, which continued throughout Sunday. The weekend’s storm meant that May 1924 was the wettest month since local meteorological records began to be kept in about 1866. The Chelt became seriously overfull and burst its banks on two separate occasions within a fortnight. Floodwater surged through gardens at the junction of Sandford Mill Road and Bath Road, the roads becoming impassable. The lake in Pittville Park began to overflow on Sunday morning, with water filling the subway from the Park under the Evesham Road.

## June 14<sup>th</sup> 1931

During the afternoon of Sunday June 14<sup>th</sup> Cheltenham was hit by a torrential downpour, almost one and a half inches of rain fell in little more than two hours. Neither the sewers nor the river Chelt were able to cope with the rush of water and much of the Sandford Park and Bath Road area was under a considerable depth of water. Harp Hill on the edge of the Battledown Estate was more like a cascade than a road.

## March 12<sup>th</sup> 1947

The flooding in 1947 was different from earlier floods in that it was not caused by torrential rainfall, but by thawing snow and ice. On January 29<sup>th</sup> Cheltenham recorded its lowest temperature since January 1940 (22 degrees of frost); Moreton in Marsh recorded the lowest temperature in the UK – 32 degrees of frost. The whole area had heavy snow falls for several days and on 5<sup>th</sup> March some 500 vehicles were stranded on the Andoversford – Northleach road in what were being reported as the worst ever blizzards in the Cotswolds. The following day only two roads out of Cheltenham were still open and all schools in the Town had been closed. By 8<sup>th</sup> March the temperature was rising and a thaw was imminent. Soon the rivers Severn and Avon had burst their banks and Evesham and Tewkesbury were badly flooded. Cheltenham did not suffer quite as badly, but the river Chelt had burst its banks in several places and the amount of water coming off of Leckhampton Hill caused several houses to flood. By 15<sup>th</sup> March *The Echo* reported that the Town was free from flooding.

## July 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> 1968

Overnight of the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> July almost three inches of rain fell on Cheltenham, this was the highest rainfall recorded since the 18<sup>th</sup> July 1930 when some 3½ inches fell. Many parts of the Town suffered, but Hatherley was particularly badly affected. About 9pm on the 10<sup>th</sup> the area of Alma Road near to the old railway bridge began to flood. The local drainage system was unable to cope with the storm water and it soon created a large pond at the edge of Dean Close school playing field. The water level continued to rise overnight and soon the gardens on the north side of Harrington Drive were inundated and a sizeable pool had formed in the road. Eventually some of this water made its way into an already overfull Hatherley Brook, but when the residents began to wake and look out of their windows, they were amazed to see dustbins afloat and their gardens awash! Luckily there was little serious damage done and the waters subsided within a few hours.

Within two years of this flood Cheltenham Borough Council began a major improvement scheme to replace the inadequate 19<sup>th</sup> Century culverts with a modern drainage system.

## May 30<sup>th</sup> 1979

On Wednesday May 30<sup>th</sup> almost two inches of rain fell on Cheltenham over a 24-hour period. To add to the resulting flooding problems the Fire Station found itself marooned in a lake of water and appliances had difficulty in getting out. By lunchtime the Police had received 120 distress calls. The Salvation Army's relief operations were also hampered when the Bath Road Citadel became another victim of the rising waters. The Council had to rehouse several families from the Bath Road area as the conditions in the area began to pose a serious health hazard.



A family struggling along Bath Street, May 1979.

The Town suffered a second torrential downpour on December 27<sup>th</sup> and the emergency services found themselves severely stretched dealing with flooded houses. Residents in the George Readings Way area of Hesters Way were especially angry at having to “mop up” for a second time in one year. The Deputy Mayor, Councillor Ken Hammond arranged for the supply of plastic bin liners to be used as sandbags to try and keep the water at bay.

## Conclusions

Following the floods of 1979, Cheltenham Borough Council began investigative work and carried out initial improvements along the course of the river Chelt. If a flood of a similar scale were to occur again it could be potentially devastating; it is estimated that some 600 properties are now at risk in the event of a flood similar to that of 1855. In 1995, the Chelt's status was upgraded to that of a *Main River* and responsibility for the river was handed over to the Environment Agency. It is this agency that is involved in developing a Chelt Flood Alleviation scheme, and much work has now been done replacing the small culverts that have, historically, created many problems. Floodwalls have been built where necessary and new flood storage areas created.

Hopefully - despite the many misgivings over work in and around the Cox's Meadow area - this Scheme should keep our Town dry.

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Ed. This article was written before the floods in July 2007!