

2399 Flood of June 1910
THE WHEATLEY FLOOD OF 9TH JUNE 1910

Information from various sources by Andrew Crane, sent to Margaret Rosenthal, accompanied by a letter dated 6 March 1982.

The severe thunderstorm in the Wheatley District on 9th June 1910 was one of many rainstorms which occurred in Britain during that week.

Four days earlier, on 5th June, over two and a half inches of rain was recorded in three places as a band of thunderstorms stretched from Ireland, through central Wales, to southern England, with the heaviest falls occurring in Wiltshire and Dorset.

On the 7th June a similar belt of storms located a little further north from Iceland to south-east England produced rainfall totals of over 3" around Chipping Norton and Stow-on-the-Wold. The highest being four and a quarter inches. Further storms occurred the following day although these paled into insignificance compared with the intense storms over southern Britain on the 9th. While many places experienced over an inch of rain, the greatest storm activity lay on a line from Brighton to Stratford-on-Avon, with two areas, one 15 by 12 miles north of Reading and the other 7 miles east of Oxford, recording falls of over 2". Wheatley was at the centre of this second area.

Summarising the week's weather, the Oxford Times of 18th June concluded: "It is doubtful whether any village in the kingdom can show a more extra-ordinary record of rainfall than that at Wheatley." The reporter for the Thame Gazette, perhaps a weather enthusiast or one of the lucky local inhabitants not to have been affected personally, wrote of the storm in glowing terms: "The climatic disturbances which have been so general throughout the last week were equally severe in this district and, although fortunately unattended by loss of human life, much serious damage is reported. Even the memory of the 'oldest inhabitant' will be taxed to recall such vivid and incessant lightning as that which was witnessed on Tuesday and Thursday. The sight was indeed a most magnificent one, the heavens being illuminated with sheet, forked and ribbon lightning, and, but for the damage which inevitably followed in its wake, the storm could be counted as a grand spectacle."

THE STORMS OF 9 JUNE 1910

The following account of the storms affecting the Reading and Wheatley areas on 9 June is taken from British Rainfall 1910. *'At that time the records from non-standard rain gauges were always treated with scepticism, especially when large falls were measured. More recently the credibility of these records has increased in view of the exceptional falls that have been recorded by standard equipment, for example the 6.75" fall at Hampstead on 12th August 1972.'*

The storm which fell upon the Reading area about noon on the 9th yielded just over 3 inches in Caversham, the amount falling off rapidly on the south side of the river, so that while several of the streets were converted into rivers in the northern and western parts of the town, there was comparatively little rain in the east and the south. At Kidmore End School the rain gauge in use measured 5.51 inches – but the pattern of the gauge was so defective, consisting, as we are informed, simply of "a funnel in a

bottle,” that it is impossible to accept it as accurate, and though we mention the figure here, we cannot let it stand in the list of maximum falls. Details of the storm at various points in this area are given at some length in the Observers’ remarks on the days in June on pp. 16 – 17.

The rain fell to less than 1.50 inches a few miles north of the Reading torrential area, and a narrow strip of country escaped with this light fall; but then it became intensified to a greater degree, and in the Oxford area the thunderstorm that broke at noon was more terrifying, and the hail worked worse havoc, than in the Reading area. The great focus of destruction seems to have been between Wheatley and Waterstock, about six miles east of Oxford. The destruction which befell the Vicarage garden at Waterstock is graphically described The careful measurements of Mr Leyshon at Wheatley School, though made with a gauge of faulty construction, and therefore, through no fault of his, inaccurate, give a clear account of the progress of the storm. The rain gauge consisted of a glass funnel placed in the neck of a bottle, and, apart from the extreme difficulty of measuring the mean diameter of such a funnel, the absence of any collar to protect the neck of the bottle from any water pouring down the outside of the funnel, made it practically certain that too much rain would be recorded in any storm. The fact that the readings of the gauge are given to three places of decimals of course merely shows that the calculation was carried to that extent but is no guarantee of the degree of accuracy possible in the instrument itself. We quote from a report in The Oxford Times:-

“The gauge was emptied, as is the custom, at 9 a.m. on Thursday, and the reading entered in a book kept for the purpose. At 12.42 the storm broke, and at 1.20 Mr Leyshon emptied the gauge on account of its limited capacity. It then recorded 2.675 inches. Twenty minutes later a further 1.665 inches was on record, while at 6 pm .857 inch had to be added to the record from 9 am onwards. At 9 am next morning there was a further .292 inch, bringing the total for the 24 hours up to 5.491 inches. Between 12.42 and 1.40, roughly an hour, over 4¼ inches of rain fell in the village.”

A rainfall record at Holton Cottage, Wheatley, about a mile from the School-house, gave 4.98 in., and this figure also we regret that we cannot place on the list, because the rain gauge proved on inspection to be exposed in such a way as to make it certain that more than the true rainfall would enter during heavy precipitation.

The amount recorded at both the School-house and Holton Cottage is probably not very greatly in excess of the truth; it is not impossible that compensating errors may make it very near the truth; for we know that the record of 3.93 in. at Waterstock was deficient. This is the figure given by Mr Ashhurst’s rain gauge, which like all the others, was specially visited and inspected by Mr Salter when the storm was being studied for the purpose of this article. The gauge is of the Glaisher pattern, in perfect condition, and would have given an accurate record, had it not been choked by hail, causing a certain quantity of rain to overflow. Thus it is quite certain that in this storm more than 4 inches of rain fell, much of it in very large hailstones.