

Drought stories

"I remember syphoning the bath water out of the window, towards the garden, with my mother. Where we were, at the time, there were no standpipes. It didn't come to the point where we were actually out of drinking water, but there were hosepipe bans. I remember all the grass in the park being brown. No green anywhere. And that was really the response of, you know, not just one dry summer, but two. You know, it was because 1975 was such a dry summer that 1976 was a drought."

"I think my most enduring memory of the droughts in the mid-seventies was the colour of the countryside. My job took me out into the countryside, all over the South of England, and it was yellow. It was pale yellow. Instead of being green, in a normal summer it gets a bit dry but it's still green. But those summers, the ground in the countryside was yellow. It was more like the colour you get in Malta, than you would normally get this country."

"One of my earliest memories, in-fact, was the '76 drought, when the river, which was at the bottom of our garden, which was King's Dyke. My dad straddled me so my legs were either side of the trickle that was going down the centre of the channel and normally that river was 10 metres wide 3 metres deep so that's one of my first memories."

"Reservoirs dried up. There were things on the television and in the press, photographs of completely dry reservoirs. Sometimes, when there'd been villages and things in the valleys, where the reservoirs were created, these appeared. They were ruins of the villages. Sometimes the drought was so severe that water was actually rationed. I remember seeing pictures in the press of standpipes in the road and people had to come out and draw their water in buckets. It got very, very desperate. Of course there was a hosepipe bans and people get very unhappy because their precious flowers and vegetables, in their gardens, died."

"Crops died. Even quite deep rooted things just gave up. The grass withered and so the cattle were on the verge of starvation and farmers had to import hay and other cattle food from Wales and the West Country and the North."

"However, the implications of that drought dried out the soil. Round here, in Yate and Chipping Sodbury, there is quite a lot of clay soil and the drought dried out the ground down to as much as 12ft in some places, coming out at 4m. The implications of that, long term, was that some months later, the buildings, when they were trying to recover from the effects of the drought, started to heave out when the water got back into the soil and this caused cracking in many houses and industrial buildings. As a structural engineer, I was brought in to have a look at these buildings to see how we could re-mediate them. We dug down and did a hit and miss back fill and so forth but the implications of that, longer term, is that it affects your premiums on your insurance."

"So the insurance companies obviously wanted to save money and keep their premiums down so were very much interested in changing the building regulations and they were part of the cause for altering the depth of foundations to make sure that the seasonal changes in weather conditions didn't affect changes to houses and other buildings. They were able to make regulations slightly more onerous to cut down their risk for any more claims on their insurance."

"One of the more relevant times was back in 1976 when we had a long drought, which was beautiful for holidays and things. I actually went camping that year with my two children and my wife."

"I also remember a story my friend, telling me, Bev, that her little brother was born that summer and he was allergic to disposable nappies, so her mum had to use towelling nappies and, because the water was only on two hours a day, her entire childhood, from when she was nine, she remembers bucket upon bucket of pooey nappies, soaking all round the house, waiting for her mum, waiting for the washing machine to come on so she could do that one cycle per day."

"When I was about eight, I can remember the drought of 1976 because in Barry, where I lived, we had water shortages and we had a stand pipe at the end of the road that was only on for two hours a day. And we went on holiday, up to near Birmingham, where my uncle lived and there was no water shortages there, so my mum didn't have a car, but she filled up as many bottles as she could carry to bring home, in a shopping bag, on the bus, so we had water when we got into the house."

"75 was the P registration for new cars you see. Anybody that grew potatoes had a new car 'cause that made that much money. The first time they made a lot of money, wasn't it? '75. Everybody had a new car with P on it and I said, P for Potatoes."

"We sold potatoes off just one end of the field and I bought a new car. That is why I say farmers make more money in a dry year."

"Potato prices were extremely high that year and it was basically because there was a shortage and there wasn't that many people that had the capability to irrigate. We weren't growing potatoes, that particular year, but those who had potatoes made a lot of money, in 1976. And that was really because the country was shot. We probably haven't seen anything like that, ever since, to such an extent. We've seen potato prices climb but, when you do the maths on it, you know, today, that price, and they were getting 300 pounds per tonne then, that price, today, would need to be about 1200 pounds a tonne. We actually selling potatoes today, and it was a good price, for us, it was 200 pounds a tonne."