

Michael Fish and the Great Storm

Posted by Peter on 16 October 2007

Today, we revise some vocabulary about the weather, particularly about the wind, and we remember the big storm that hit England exactly 20 years ago.

When you feel the air moving, or you see the leaves on the trees moving, we say in English that "the wind blows" or "the wind is blowing". And if the air is moving a lot, we say that the wind is blowing hard, or the wind is blowing strongly.

If the wind is quite gentle, we can call it a "breeze". But if the wind blows very strongly, we call it a "gale". And a "storm" is even stronger than a gale; and a "hurricane" is even stronger than a storm!

There is a scale of wind speeds called the [Beaufort scale](#). A very light wind is force 1 or 2; and a very violent wind is force 9 or 10; and so on. Weather forecasts in English often use the Beaufort scale to say how hard the wind will blow, particularly weather forecasts for ships at sea.

Twenty years ago yesterday, 15 October 1987, people in Britain switched on their TV sets to watch the evening news and weather forecast. The weather forecaster was Michael Fish. Mr Fish is retired now, but for many years he was Britain's favourite TV weather forecaster. He was famous for his brightly coloured ties and jackets. While he was telling us about the weather that evening, he said that a woman had telephoned the BBC to ask whether it was true that a hurricane was going to strike England that night. Well, said Michael Fish, he could assure us that [no hurricane was on its way](#).

And - yes, you guessed right - that night the wind over southern England increased. Soon it became a gale, then a storm and finally a hurricane. It was in fact the most violent storm to hit England since 1703. It caused a huge amount of damage. All over the south of England, trees blew down, cars were [overturned](#) and walls [collapsed](#). Eighteen people were killed by the storm that night, and over 15 million trees were [uprooted](#). People woke up in the morning to find that the roof had blown off their house, or that their car was crushed underneath a tree, or even that a tree had fallen into their kitchen. Roads were blocked, schools were closed and there was no electricity. Many people were unable to get to work for several days.

Of course, people quickly repaired the damage. Even in the woods and the gardens, where so many trees were destroyed, new trees have grown. But poor Michael Fish has never been allowed to forget what he said on the weather forecast. It was not his fault, of course. The computer at the [Meteorological Office](#) (which is Britain's national weather forecasting service) forecast a big storm, but thought that it would pass further south, over France. Today the [Met Office](#) has much better computers and better information from satellites. It is confident that it would not make the same mistake again. I hope they are right. Our climate is changing. Extreme weather events, like floods or violent storms, are likely to become more common in future. We will be able to [cope](#) only if we get good information about the weather.

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