



FORCE OF NATURE

—
THIS MONTH COLUMNIST RICHARD BARR RECALLS TWO
NATURAL DISASTERS, ON DIFFERENT SIDES OF THE WORLD,
WHICH EVOKED TREMENDOUS COMMUNITY SPIRIT
—

NOT MANY PEOPLE IN NORFOLK had heard of Walcott before December. Knowledge of Walcott before then was probably in connection with the name of the footballer Theo Walcott. Indeed on one of the signs to Walcott someone had printed Theo before the name of the village. It was there for many years before it was taken down.

Even fewer people will have heard of Marysville in Australia. The two towns are on the opposite sides of the world from each other. Both suffered appalling damage through the overwhelming forces of nature and both share wonderful community spirit.

On February 7, 2009 the state of Victoria in southern Australia was on high alert for bush fires. There were high winds and the temperature was approaching 40°C. All local fire services were positioned ready to attack any fire that broke out.

On December 5, 2013 the Environment Agency in this country issued severe flood warnings for the north Norfolk coast. Tides at least as high as those in 1953 were predicted. Throughout the day preparations were made to move emergency services into position so that, if necessary, rescues could be carried out.

Walcott is a low-lying village next to Bacton on Sea. It has a sea wall and from time to time the waves do splash over onto the road. What happened on December 5 was far more than a little splash.

We are used to seeing television reports of the devastation caused by natural disasters, aircraft accidents, smashes between cars and the effects of war. We inevitably become numb to the reality.

The day after the flood I took a walk in daylight along the seafront of Walcott. What you do not see from the photographs in the media is the suffering of the people who live here, the overwhelming effect of having so many houses damaged by floodwater (approximately 60 per cent of all houses here were flooded). You also do not get any idea of the size of the problem. People's personal possessions were spread across the neighbouring fields, so that it looked as though there had been an air crash rather than a flood. The force of the sea was so great that it knocked holes in the walls of houses and lifted up and broke mobile homes as though they were toys. One young mother described what happened to her home:

'The sea had claimed our outbuildings, ripped the back off our home, sucked out all of our worldly possessions and business equipment and then spat them out over a 10 acre field, killing sheep in its wake. The shock was incredible - enough to send me into full body shock two days later with three days of nausea and vomiting.'

Poignant pictures went up on Facebook of teddy bears that had been in the flood and were looking for their owners.

Unless you visit, you do not smell the kerosene spilt from the many central heating oil tanks that were washed away, nor the sewage, which erupted from the drains underneath the streets. Even the manhole covers were washed away.

Yet even on that first day, I saw signs of a fight back. The Chair of the parish council (whose own home was also flooded) was co-ordinating operations from a caravan in front of a local restaurant (itself flooded and damaged).

Local volunteers were pouring in - even the coastguards who had been on duty throughout the night of the floods were turning out individually to help, along with the local fire service.

My village (Bacton) made its playing field pavilion available for storage of donated items. The North Norfolk District council moved mountains to get the homeless rehoused. Generous people from all over were offering furniture and appliances to help those affected.

Three years and nine months earlier, Marysville suffered greater damage from a different force of nature. A bush fire had broken out many miles away. Initially it was thought that the town would not be affected but there was a change in wind direction and the fire started to move towards Marysville. It was so fierce that it completely overwhelmed the fire service: One team of firefighters had to jump into a river to save their own lives. Others had to retreat because the efforts that they were making to fight the fire had no effect but threatened to burn them to death.

The fire developed a life of its own, moving faster than you could run and bringing with it a storm of burning embers, which set fire to everything in its path. A decision was made to evacuate the town. Sadly not everybody got away and 40 people died. Almost all the houses were destroyed and most of the businesses.

Last November we visited Marysville and had lunch at the Marysville bakery (the only business which had survived the fire). We shared our food with friendly king parrots. As we looked around, the whole town looked fresh and new. The only sign of the disaster three years earlier was the exhibition at the tourist centre which contained graphic descriptions of the horror of what came to be called Black Saturday.

As I write this, many of Walcott's front gardens have rubbish skips full of family possessions which were ruined. Walls of houses have to be stripped back and replastered. Structures and furniture can be replaced, but the things that memories are made of have been destroyed for so many.

Yet Marysville and Walcott have shown that they have an indomitable spirit. Marysville rose, literally, from the ashes. Its revival is movingly recorded on a village website: www.gomarysville.com where time lapse photos show impressive reconstruction efforts.

The flood and the fires will never be forgotten but both these communities are demonstrating that whilst the forces of nature can knock them down, they have the determination to get up again. Both need support. Marysville needs to rebuild its tourist trade. Walcott is still raw from what happened in December. I have no doubt that it will be back to its old self in very short order.

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