



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Record rainfall, a lost summer, homes flooded, then chaos in the snow. It's been a crazy year. But 12 months ago, things were very, VERY different

Cast your mind back just a few weeks to the morning after the night before. It's the 1st of January 2013, and despite a fantastic evening at the village hall, I'm not nursing the sort of hangover that has brokered the start of many a year in the past. What's more I'm up early and full of optimism, because when I look out of my kitchen window I'm greeted with a view I've come to adore, yet have hardly seen of late. Stretching out before me is the rolling landscape of Herefordshire. The sky above is a pale wintry blue, there isn't a cloud to be seen and as a result 2013 has started well. It's not raining.

Ends of year are the sort of milestones that statisticians love and accountants hate. It's a chance to gather the facts and figures into tables and graphs, except this time the numbers are being crunched by a jolly bunch who've had a truly bumper year: the weathermen.

We now know that 2012 was the wettest year on record. But rewind 12 months, and you'd never have thought it. Back then we were in the grip of a serious drought, one that had been several years in the making thanks to successive lower than average rainfalls and a decade-long run on new houses, washing machines, dishwashers and power showers.

In March, I found myself recording an episode of *Open Country* for Radio 4 in Wiltshire. We were exploring the drought and looking at how it was affecting the landscape, the rivers and all the species that depend upon the region's ancient watercourses, including us as human beings. In a tributary of the River Lambourn, an expert from the Environment Agency walked me through a dried-up riverbed. The source of the river itself, he explained, had shifted a mile downstream, and they were now looking ahead to rescuing fish trapped in shallow pockets of water and moving them to areas where they might spawn and survive.

Apart from the very real concerns of the story, it was a beautiful day, some 24 degrees in late March. The programme was due to air the following week on the 5th April, the day the hosepipe ban came into force across much of England. The situation was dire, our expert asserted. Only continuous rainfall until the end of the year would replenish our rivers, reservoirs and aquifers.

As we walked away from the parched bed of the Lambourn and enjoyed the surreal temperatures, we all agreed that such a dramatic natural solution to the drought was impossible. How we laughed.

The following week the writing was on the wall. On the 6th April, the day after the hosepipe ban came into

force, I was filming for *Escape To The Country* in Shropshire. High amongst the county's famous hills I struggled to describe a view obscured in a blizzard of arctic proportions, before leading our lovely homebuyers towards a front door part buried under a four-foot snow drift. The irony of these two different moments separated by just a few days was inescapable.

The gods that run the weather were kind during the Olympics, but otherwise they've wrought an awful year across the country as those many thousands of people affected by flooding will agree. The lessons are as simple as they are now urgent; we need to think

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again about how we build, where we build and how we drain our towns, cities and countryside. Flood defences and flood-modelling schemes should come to the fore not because it's something we may now see year after year; hopefully we won't. It could be decades until we have another record-breaking year. But despite the best efforts of the weathermen, the truth is we simply don't know and won't know until it's too late.

Preparedness, as always, is everything. And as for the weather? Be careful what you wish for.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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