

## The January Storm (Hurricane Low Q) Recollections of 15<sup>th</sup> January 1968

**“’Twas then a blast o’ Janwar’ win’ blew hansel in on Robin.”**

The words above are from Robert Burns’ song “Robin”, sometimes known as “There was a lad was born in Kyle”. The word “hansel” was once used to describe a gift given at the beginning of the year to bring good luck. Hurricane “Low Q”, the blast of January wind that visited upon Central Scotland on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1968, brought only death and destruction. As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this disaster these are some personal recollections and stories of how it affected the Vale of Leven and beyond.

Sunday 14 January 1968 started as a fairly mild, benign day for the time of year. There was nothing remarkable about the weather. In the evening it grew cooler and a strong wind developed, which was hardly unusual for the time of year. Weather forecasting 50 years ago was not as accurate as it is now but for the previous couple of days the Met Office had been keeping an eye on a depression that had started somewhere to the east of Bermuda and was now heading across the Atlantic towards the UK. They had expected it to miss the British mainland and pass somewhere well to the north, over the Faroe Islands. Their predictions proved wrong.

As the storm deepened and widened, its wind gathered force and it hurtled over the Western Isles towards the Clyde estuary. Late in the day it arrived on the mainland and created one of the worst natural disasters ever recorded in Scotland. For several hours it whipped up through the estuary, rampaging through Glasgow, the West of Scotland and further east. For the next few hours, peaking between 3am and 5am and with the speed of an express train, it devastated property, transport and utilities and wreaked death and destruction across the Scottish Central belt. It did not miss the Vale.

As in the assassination of President Kennedy, most people in their sixties and older will have strong recollections of the night of the great storm. I was 19 years of age and at this time, when I lived in George Street, Bonhill. I had spent the Sunday evening in Balloch with friends. We had been in the



pub, which at that time closed at 10pm. My friends lived in Mill of Haldane and as I recall, I caught a 132 bus to Bonhill on my own. I got off at Bonhill Bridge and headed up towards the brae.

At that time Louis McCaskell's chip shop was at the foot of Bonhill Brae. Louis' was acknowledged as one of the best fish and chip shops in the area and it was almost always

busy. I remember stopping off there and queuing for a bag of chips as many of us young folk did in the days before Asian takeaways.

After buying my chips I wandered up past the Cooperative shops on Bonhill brae noticing that the wind was getting unusually strong. Walking up the hill I recall leaning forward at what seemed like a 45 degree angle into the wind to keep my balance. I remember holding my coat tightly into my body as the wind threatened to tear it from my shoulders.

I got home, went straight to bed and awoke on Monday 15<sup>th</sup> to scenes of devastation everywhere. I was a very heavy sleeper back then and I was surprised to see the extent of the damage that had been done as I slept.



**Storm Damage in Glasgow (few images are to be found of damage locally)**

At the time of the storm I worked as an apprentice electrician in the Antartex sheepskin factory and I used to walk to work in the morning down through Bonhill, over the bridge and along the riverside to the old Craft buildings where the factory (now Antartex village) was sited. There was ample evidence all the way of the violence of the storm and even more when I arrived at work to hear horrific stories from workmates, some of whom had been up all night. One of them had been very lucky to escape when the roof was blown from the block of flats, which was his home in the Haldane.

A gale becomes a hurricane when the wind reaches 74 mph. At Abbotsinch (now Glasgow) airport on the morning of 15 January a gust of 103 MPH was recorded and on Lowther Hill in Lanarkshire the wind peaked at 125 mph.

During the night most people had been kept awake by the relentless roar of the storm and by dustbins and other debris being blown around outside. Many garden sheds ended up in the wrong gardens and greenhouses were simply blown away. Throughout the night the wind raged up through the Leven Valley. Doors were ripped from telephone kiosks and chimney heads collapsed through the roofs of several houses. For a time the Vale was totally cut off, both North and South, because of roads blocked by falling trees. Council workers and police braved torrential rain and worked through the night to get the road open.

The communication and transport situation was a mess. In Glasgow a total of 67 railway lines were blocked and in Edinburgh, 31. Blocked roads everywhere meant that buses could make little progress on their scheduled routes.

These were the days before mobile phones and satellite communications so all telephone systems were hard wired. The telephone cables to Alexandria and Helensburgh were damaged leaving more than 1000 people without telephones. Luss had its telephone exchange completely cut off and emergency work had to be started to run a cable for six miles from Luss to Helensburgh to get the village reconnected.

Around Balloch, the wind blew down many mature trees, including several on Drymen road. The trees had badly damaged a few walls and fences but fortunately the adjacent houses narrowly escaped damage. In Balloch Park so many trees had come down that the park had to be closed for several weeks. There was a mile of fallen trees on the old Lochside road to Luss. The Loch itself was

whipped into frenzy. The Maid of the Loch broke free from her moorings but she was secured before any damage could be done.

Many smaller boats were also cast adrift on the Loch and on the river Leven. In Luss two cabin cruisers, which had earlier been beached on the shore vanished without trace. Caravans on Loch Lomond side were blown over, some were blown apart and some actually totally disappeared.

The Mill of Haldane took a real battering; it was one of the worst hit areas in the Vale. Many people were awakened by the sound of the roofs being blown off their houses. One maisonette block also lost its roof. This was ripped off "like a doll's house" to land yards away. In scenes reminiscent of the Clydebank Blitz 23 Haldane families had to leave their homes to find shelter with friends and family. The worst hit areas in the Haldane were Cranloch Court, Dumbain Crescent, Carmona Drive, Shandon Brae and Shandon Crescent.



**Storm Damage in Glasgow**

In Alexandria, as elsewhere, many houses had their roofs and chimneys damaged. The roof of a bicycle shed in the Vale of Leven Academy blew off and badly damaged the adjacent Janitor's house.

Bonhill was also badly hit. Of the 20 people who died in the Central belt that evening, possibly the most tragic involved local man, Hugh Timoney and his wife. He was killed when his car crashed into a tree on Main Street Bonhill, near Dillichip Loan. Mr and Mrs Timoney were from Bridge Street in Alexandria. She was in labour and he was driving her to a maternity hospital in Duntocher when his car hit the tree, which had fallen in front of his car.

His wife was taken to the Vale of Leven Hospital where her injuries were treated before it was decided to transfer her to Braeholm Hospital in Helensburgh. As it happened the Black Hill road was completely blocked. The ambulance had to struggle back to the Vale of Leven where baby Andrew was born safely.

The road from Renton to Dumbarton was also completely blocked by fallen trees. Shops had their windows blown in and sunshades were ripped from their rollers.

There was an amazing escape in Dumbarton. A four month old baby was sleeping in her pram in a top flat in Cumbrae Crescent South, when a chimney head crashed through the roof and onto the pram driving it straight through the floor. The child's parents suffered minor injuries but they frantically dug through the rubble with their bare hands as they tried to find the baby.

By the time the emergency services arrived all that could be seen of the pram was the handle. They worked desperately for an hour before hearing a cry and finding the baby alive and almost miraculously, without a scratch. Three churches in Dumbarton, Old Kilpatrick and Clydebank were also totally destroyed.



Ships sank in the Clyde Estuary and shipyard cranes were blown down. In Greenock five people died, including three men who were drowned after a dredger capsized off Princes Pier. Football stadia, including Ibrox and Parkhead were extensively damaged.

Assessing the damage in the cold light of day it was actually surprising that more lives were not lost.

A shortage of materials and incessant rain compounded the misery. Thousands of houses in Glasgow and beyond were damaged by the hurricane, their occupants pleading for tarpaulins to cover the roofs. For weeks and months tarpaulin covered roofs became a familiar site throughout the central belt of Scotland as it took a year to repair all the houses.

Building workers and slaters were working 90 hours a week in exceptionally dangerous conditions to repair the damage. To add to the 20 people killed during the storm thirty more workmen were later killed, while working on storm repairs.

The Glasgow and West of Scotland Master Slater's Association was eventually forced to impose a maximum working week of 64 hours with a full day off on Saturday being compulsory.

Farmers also suffered. Nineteen out of every 20 farms in the central belt were affected in some way or other. Many farmers suffered major loss of income because their cash crops were swept away. Poultry farmers were also badly hit.

After a couple of days the storm was largely forgotten or ignored by Mainstream Media in the UK. The West of Scotland, being 400 miles from London, was not seen as newsworthy.

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Opportunist advert in Lennox Herald on week after the Hurricane

Locally, the Vale of Leven District Council set up a Hurricane Relief Fund. Nationwide the total repair costs quickly soared to £30M but the Downing Street Labour government, led by Harold Wilson was unsympathetic. They eventually handed over £0.5M, not as a gift but as a loan. In contrast, when the oil tanker Torrey Canyon had sunk off Land's End the year before, there was a swift payment of £1.5M. Several grants towards the environmental cost were also made. This was despite the fact that no lives were at risk.

The people of Scotland displayed typical stoicism in the aftermath of the disaster. They had taken a battering but they rallied and worked together to assist those who were affected.

They say that it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. In this case one positive effect was that building businesses involved in repair and reconstruction really prospered in the couple of years following Hurricane Low Q.

It was a night that will never be forgotten by those of us who witnessed it.