

## The Watery Summer of 2012

The winter was mild. Here in Scotland it was damp, with several periods of very heavy rain, but in parts of England it was dry enough for drought warnings. The month of March was very warm; we had lunch in the garden several times. Primroses and cherry blossom were out along the Lade Braes. We expected a glorious summer, and some water companies imposed hose-pipe bans in anticipation.

It turned out very wet, with record rainfall levels in April and June, and twice the average rainfall in July.<sup>1</sup> In those three months (May was an exception) even when it was not raining, one dull day succeeded another. The apple blossom appeared, but the cold and the wind put an end to it before it had come right out, and before the insects had time to work on it.

All through the excitement of the Jubilee and the approach of the Olympics the weather still managed to make itself a big talking-point, with much being made of the jet-stream<sup>2</sup> and persistent low pressure systems. By the end of July things had quietened down, and little was said about it during the Olympics and Paralympics, except that the fact that the rain held off for the Games was counted as one more ground for national self-congratulation.

During the wet months the rain presented itself in every possible form. There were days of unremitting deluge, and days of constant drizzle. We got used to going to sleep to the sound of rain on the skylight, and waking up to hear it still pattering down. At other times there were showers punctuated by moments of clear sky. Once or twice there was rain of tropical intensity that would drench you within minutes, 'water slightly diluted with air' as Hardy describes it. On one such day I was grateful to find shelter under the overhanging roof of one of the new buildings on the North Haugh. Thinking, after about ten minutes, that the shower had passed I was lured out into the open, only to find that although the downpour was less ferocious, it was still raining hard enough to wet me to the skin before I got home.

The fine days in May when we were in Ireland made a particular impression. This may have been because of the contrast with what went before and came after, but by any standard it was exceptionally glorious—certainly on Aran, and by all accounts also back here in Scotland. The first couple of days of our holiday were variable, with some fine rain, but after that we baked under the sun. I rather wish there had been more rain on Aran, to demonstrate the clever water collection method in action.<sup>3</sup> After so much rain, everything was green and clean and sparkling under the sun. We had two days travelling from the West of Ireland to the East of Scotland without a cloud in the sky, until we were crossing the Forth and saw the Fife haar ahead of us.

In addition to the Irish trip, we had a few train or car journeys during the summer. The countryside was very green; in July and August the tiredness of high summer was less apparent than in other years. The foliage seemed to have swollen, as though there were more leaves or every individual leaf was slightly larger than normal. It sometimes had an oppressive effect. The fields and hillsides seemed especially green against the grey skies.

Fife roads are not very well drained and the puddles never had time to dry up completely, and even moderate rainfall would bring out the flood signs. The burn may have been reduced to its usual summer level while we were away during May, but for the rest of the time it was full, sometimes very full. Once or twice below Dempster Terrace the water almost came up over the banks. Several times along the Lade Braes I stopped to watch a heron standing beneath a little waterfall, with the swollen river swirling round its legs. Presumably it stands there because its prey will be off its guard as it is carried along and tumbled about by the rushing water.

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We had our own reasons for noticing the rain this year.

Our gutter was misaligned and all through the winter it had been overflowing, sending water streaming down the wall, which was heavily discoloured, with the base becoming green with moss.

1 The Met Office website describes April as the wettest on record across the UK, and June as the wettest since 1910.

2 A frequently heard malapropism was *gulf stream* for *jetstream*.

3 The islanders greatly increase their water catchment by constructing wide, sloping slabs beside each trough to channel the water down into it.

We were hoping to have it fixed and looking forward to summer to dry the stones. As the promise of March was not fulfilled we were very dispirited, particularly when we thought we saw fungus growing out of the stone. After one failed attempt at re-alignment only made things worse we now planned to install an additional down-pipe at the south end of the wall, running off into a soakaway.

Until it was suggested by the builder I had never heard of a soakaway and I thought it sounded dubious, but I consulted Alan and looked on the web and found that it is a perfectly respectable way of dealing with surplus rain water. It is sometimes known as a French drain, possibly because of a feeling that it is not quite a proper drain. You pipe the water away from the house and into a hole filled with gravel and rubble, and it seeps away into the soil. Rubble is the traditional filler for a soakaway, but nowadays you can buy plastic crate-like units which are more efficient. The hole needs to be at least five metres from the any building and well away from any boundaries.

We employed a builder to install the new down-pipe running into a water-butt. I have attached an overflow to the butt leading into six metres of plastic piping that runs, in a trench, down into the soakaway in the middle of the lawn. The six metres of piping arrived while Mo was staying with us and she helped me carry it from the delivery lorry. She showed quite an interest in the water butt itself, and enjoyed filling buckets and bottles. I noticed that whereas I can never remember which way to turn the tap, her clever little hands mastered it straightaway and got it right every time.

Experiments were needed to see how large the soakaway had be. It depends on the area of the roof, the amount of rainfall and the speed at which the water seeps away into the ground. Initial experience with dealing with the overflow from the water butt led me to believe that the rate of seepage would be quite high, but this was optimistic and the hole had to be enlarged after several nights of unremitting rain which filled it to above the level of the piping. I don't understand the physics of this, but there must be a risk of the water backing right up and flowing once more into the foundations of the house.

Having enlarged the hole, I despaired of finding enough rubble to fill it, and so have resorted to buying two plastic units. I need to bury them and cover the whole thing up, and plant grass seed on it. It's been a slow job because digging is quite an effort and I only do a bit at a time, and also because I like to see the water running out of the pipe into the hole. When it's raining hard I sometimes go out into the garden to listen to the water tinkling down into the butt, and then pouring out, as though from a gargoyle, into the hole six metres away.

This experience has made me look at down-pipes and gutters, and notice how different houses are equipped to deal with rain-water. We were on the Island of Seil (one of the Slate Islands off the coast of Argyll) where all the quarrymen's cottages have their down-pipes leading into water-butts. We noticed that there was no provision for managing the overflow from the butts, and surplus rainfall must therefore flow into the foundations of the cottages. I don't know whether this happens now, but I guess when the cottages were built there never was any surplus water, as it was used up as fast as the rain could fall.

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One damp, windy Saturday at the end of June I did a milestone walk from Cupar to Craigrothie and Ceres, where we were to spend the day with the Jarvises. Everything was very lush, and the rain came and went. There were impressive contrasts, with dark cloud and bright sunlight. It was the day of the Ceres Highland Games, which carried on despite the increasingly heavy showers. Carrying on was the only attitude to take this summer, so that our jackets and shoes were damp for days on end. It has been a season of dramatic skies and irritating personal inconvenience.

We hear that bread prices will rise because of the the near-drought conditions in England at the beginning of the year, followed by the heavy rain at the time of the wheat harvest. In a car-park the other day we were button-holed by an aged north of England farmer with a nineteenth century beard who told us that his grain was soft with the rain and his combine had sunk to its axle in the mud.

Our apples were wiped out entirely by the weather, but after two bumper years we can hardly complain. The brambles were much less plentiful. There were very few luscious big berries, and we found ourselves picking many that in other years we might have left for the birds. Friends too have reported greatly reduced fruit crops. Other plants responded extravagantly to the conditions. A

fox-glove grew enormously tall, reaching up among the boughs of the barren apple-tree; Anna's roses were better this year than ever before; and a mullein in the front was almost as high as the first floor window—it remained standing there, its leaves withered and brown, making me think every time I passed that there was a very tall stranger in the garden. Despite the dearth of fruit, the brambles spread vigorously, throwing out their tentacles all over the garden and through the fences into our neighbours' gardens.

On our October trip to the West we had one day of unrelenting rain, one of showers and cloud, and one of sunshine, affording us different ways of enjoying the autumn colours: through mist, or showing bright against a dark sky, or catching the low sunlight towards the end of the day. There were broad patchworks of fir and golden larch; the brown of the bracken and grey-green of the coarse mountain grass; the delicate faded green of the threatened ash; the almost shocking red or maroon of the copper beech. It's hard to be sure, because it depends so much on mood and on how one remembers the past, but the contrasting browns and greens seemed much richer this year, and the temptation is to see this as the effect of the summer's weather.

The abnormal rainfall is presumably responsible for the changed behaviour of the plant-life, but its effect on animal-life is harder to assess. The one big change that we have noticed in the garden this year is that the coal-tits are more versatile than we have seen them before, feeding not only on the peanuts, but also on the stuff we put on the ground and on the nyger seed, and that they have displaced the great- and blue-tits. This could be a result of the rain. Perhaps the eggs or nestlings of the other birds were washed away by one of the heavy downpours. Or on the other hand it might be that the wet has produced such a natural abundance of food that the other birds have gone off to the country and left our nuts and seeds to the coal-tits. As for their new-found versatility, is it due to a dearth in their normal food, or is it rather that the finches, pigeons and crows are less in evidence, allowing them to move in?

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I'm afraid I annoy people by refusing to be annoyed by the rain, indeed by positively welcoming it. I like to look out on sunny days, but I like it much more on wet days. Rain-clouds clinging to hillsides have always been the view of nature I like the best. One of my earliest memories is of watching rain arriving on the window pane and running down in crooked paths. Probably not in those very early days, but at some point, quite soon, I began to speculate about the minute forces that caused the drops to turn this way or that. At primary school during wet lunch-hours we were allowed to sit in rows in the hall reading comics, with the glow of enjoying what was usually forbidden. But though there is great pleasure to be found indoors, to be outside with the rain blowing in my face or beating on my back always seemed more exciting still, as exciting as the dense London fogs when I would arrive at school late and exhilarated. I've not grown out of this feeling.

The low temperatures were almost as depressing as the rain for those who, like Anna, thought longingly of the long hot days we were not having, of time spent in the open air, of soaking up the sunlight, of the freedom of going lightly clad. But still, apart from a few who regard this summer's miserable offering as a personal affront, most of us find some enjoyment in such a very unseasonable season. It's inconvenient to put things off because of the weather, and it's unpleasant to be very wet, as it is to be swelteringly hot or freezing cold, but there is a real pleasure in these extremes because they are, as it were, something to write home about. And when the extreme weather carries on for a length of time which is itself extreme this pleasure is multiplied. There are some whose houses or long anticipated holidays were ruined, and some who through poverty or the demands of their work are obliged to be outdoors whether they like it or not, and there are a few who are simply irreconcilable to the rain, but the rest of us will look back with a sort of pride on the jolly wet summer of 2012—unless, as is threatened, it turns out to be only the precursor of many colder and wetter summers to come.

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