

Saturday May 28th 2016. A date to remember in Spaxton and Aisholt. We had lain all day in the flow of a sluggish, sultry southerly airstream originating over northern France. The sky had been cluttered with ragged, threatening-looking yellowish clouds but they had failed to build significantly and as my wife and I were preparing to drive over to the Cottage Inn at Keenthorne for an evening meal, I actually said (and I'll never be allowed to forget it) that I didn't think it looked as though we were going to get any of the forecast storms after all. Hmmm...

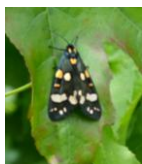
As we set off, it was obvious that the clouds were indeed building, and ahead of us was a uniform grey wall from which large – very large – drops of rain started to hit the car windscreen, accompanied by the odd flicker of yellowish lightning. We got to our destination just as the storm broke, but it was obvious we were only on the eastern edge of it, although we still witnessed some spectacular intense blue lightning flashes, which put the pub's electricity off twice. We expected instantaneous deafening thunder each time but it took all of fifteen seconds before this happened, with great detonations rumbling and crashing their way, increasingly muffled, directly upwards. The discharges must have started at least three miles up. What a colossal mountain of clouds must have built up by then.

All was quiet again by the time we left, with just enough daylight to show a chaotic sky, and to illuminate our way home – but then we got to Spaxton, and it was obvious what we had been “on the edge of”. No village residents will need reminding of that unbelievable river of mud, topsoil, gravel and rocks which had surged down Bush Road and the High Street and into drives, gardens, porches and outbuildings. What a sight the next morning, with everyone occupied in shovelling up that thick red blancmange which had seeped in everywhere.

However, it was soon evident that even Spaxton had not received the main onslaught of rainfall. It was at Aisholt that the mountainous storm cell had struck full on, unleashing its unbelievable deluge, accompanied by truly terrifying thunder and lightning – aptly described by Deborah White at Durborough Farm as “biblical” in scale. Roaring rivers and waterfalls off the main Quantock ridge had engulfed all, with the grotesquely enlarged Peartwater stream having wrecked the Rectory footbridge, while an entirely new river coming off Aisholt Common had carved out a cave under the tarmac where the metalled road at Higher Aisholt Farm ends, forcing in boulders which then pushed their way up, creating a series of gigantic pustules in the road surface. Triscombe and West Bagborough also suffered. I tried to imagine what it must have been like to have been caught out up at Will's Neck.

My neighbour David told me later that he had been watching all this on the Met Office's Rainfall Radar web site, and that it was, in fact, the result of two storm cells colliding. The first, approaching from the Blackdowns, came to a halt right over our area, only to be followed by a second cell which kept going, bumping into the first one, whereupon the two centres started rotating around each other, quickly building up into this massive – yet extraordinarily localised – storm. The rainfall rate at one stage was off the scale at **more than 10 inches to the hour**. Surely a once-in-a-century event, which will be regaled around winter firesides – or viewed again and again on family videos – for years to come.

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A pleasing coincidence while visiting a farm at Charlton Musgrove this week. My host had spotted a handsome Scarlet Tiger Moth resting on a willow leaf, a distinctive cream-and-black mottled wigwam shape. I nudged it gently in the hope it would reveal its brilliant red underwings for the camera, which it did, but then took off. As it did so, I heard what I thought at first was an elderly tractor barrelling up the B3081 from Wincanton, but then realised it was a plane coming, and guess what appeared over the tree-tops – a Tiger Moth! Of the de Havilland kind. Not scarlet but yellow, in its wartime training colour scheme. Two worthy targets for conservation!

