



I don't think I need to remind anyone here what a catastrophic event The Great Storm of 1987 was.

In the build-up to its 30th anniversary last month we were treated to almost round the clock coverage in the media – on its meteorological back story - its violent trajectory across the southern half of the country - and everything from well-publicised and embarrassing forecasting failures - to the exponential loss of trees.

I have a very personal reason for writing this book and this evening, I'd like to tell you how I came to write it, and where it all began; what I learned about storms **and** what this one, in particular, taught us and also how the themes of the title, **Landscape, Legacy and Loss** - came to define my own unique perspective - in the reframing and retelling of this powerful, collective national memory - 30 years on.



But let's start with the weather...

As our lifestyles change - as fewer of us work outdoors or have our livelihoods influenced by the weather – we're much less affected by it than we used to be.

This gradual disconnection from the outside world, means that weather events need to be truly exceptional before they stick in our minds - and that we quickly forget all but the most extreme, the most outrageous.

If you were to ask a cross section of the population to give you their most vivid weather memories - each generation would be able to tell you about their own exceptionally hot or wet summer or their coldest, most severe winter.

People in their seventies will almost certainly remember this - the harsh winter of 1947 when snow lay on the ground for three months at the beginning of the year.



Or this
The Big Freeze of 1963 - a similar story



Those of you in your forties or fifties now will probably remember the long hot summer and prolonged drought of 1976 –

the most dangerous heatwave in living memory

and the benchmark by which all hot summers are now measured.



More recently - there was this -
the washout summer of 2007, when Tewkesbury Abbey was islanded by the swollen
flood waters of the Rivers Severn and Avon



And for people living in the United States, this year's Hurricane Irma - the biggest Atlantic storm for a decade - will almost certainly prove unforgettable too.

Here in the UK we've already had our own severe weather this autumn. We've borne the brunt of the rather prosaically named Storm Brian – and before that, we suffered the remnants of the more exotic Hurricane Ophelia.

But - as you may already know - geographically and technically speaking, we don't get **hurricanes** on this side of the Atlantic.

The official definition of a hurricane is of a severe, rotating storm - that develops as a result of clashing temperatures - whose most dramatic features are intense and heavy rainfall and sustained wind speeds of over 74mph AND which originates ONLY in the tropical parts of the Atlantic or the Caribbean.
SO – no hurricanes here...



So when, in October 1987, on the BBC lunchtime weather forecast on Thursday 15th October, a certain bespectacled weatherman stood in front of the camera and said this ...

He WAS technically correct. There was no hurricane coming...

However, a deepening depression in the Bay of Biscay **was** gathering strength and, even as he was talking live on TV, the biggest storm to hit the British Isles for nearly 300 years – and one that would display many of the same vicious meteorological characteristics of a hurricane – was moving towards the south coast of England - at a speed of 70mph.



There have been many storms across the UK both before and since, but the Great Storm of 1987 was the most destructive storm in living memory And it remains the most remembered weather event for people over the age of 40

In many ways it was the perfect storm - a combination of unusual and extreme meteorological factors in the build up, meant that atmospheric conditions were so volatile, that something truly dramatic had to happen.

It developed here - over the Bay of Biscay - in early – mid October, and on the morning of Thursday 15th October it started to move - rapidly - north and east, causing havoc over the Breton peninsula, before twisting into the English Channel.

At which point, it defied all predictions, and instead of tracking east along the Channel, it made landfall off the coast of Dorset in the early hours of Friday morning, then raged across the south and east of the country - leaving a trail of destruction in a wide slant from Weymouth to the Wash



The sheer force, the shocking phenomenal natural power of the elements – meant that no one who witnessed the storm first hand will ever forget it. Even the oldest residents of the worst affected areas across the UK could not recall winds so strong, or destruction on so great a scale.

And that's because there had been nothing like it for 284 years



Not since the infamous Tempest that struck central and southern England on 26th November 1703 had there been such a catastrophic storm -

That storm was an extra tropical cyclone that developed over the West Indies, blasted across the Atlantic and raged for hours over Britain from North Wales to the Humber bringing down millions of trees

- over 4000 mature oak trees - in the New Forest alone.
- The Eddystone Lighthouse, off the coast of Cornwall, was completely washed away,
- 2000 chimney stacks fell in London
- The roof came off Westminster Abbey
- A fifth of the British naval fleet was destroyed
- and at least 8000 people were killed, on land and at sea.



But let's leave the weather for a moment –

Let me tell you how my own, personal interest in the Great Storm began.

A couple of years ago - in an old packing crate under a bed at my mother's home in Gloucestershire, I came across this : a photograph of a sculpture entitled 'Kew Threatened by the Wind'.

As you will know, the historic Kew Gardens in southwest London, has one of the largest botanical collections in the world, but as the storm crashed through the capital on that October night, it suffered some terrible losses:

A thousand trees were brought down: **500 felled instantly** on the night and another **500** damaged beyond repair - every last tree either rare, ornamental, or scientifically significant. Each one grown from seed, or transported from all corners of the globe to be planted in this hallowed place on the banks of the Thames

The sculpture in the photograph - The Kew Mural, as it's known - was carved with reclaimed wood from some of those specimen trees after the storm. As you can see - it's a huge and impressive piece of work that measures 10ft x 5 ft - And its a work of such extraordinarily mature skill – that it's hard to believe that the sculptor, a

young man by the name of Robert Games, was only 16 years old and still a schoolboy when he carved it.



In the immediate aftermath of the storm, the young Robert had written to the Director of Kew Gardens, to ask if he might have some of that precious windblown wood - saying he wanted to carve a large commemorative sculpture – so that the trees that had been lost - and the storm itself - would never be forgotten.

With the loss so great – and the shape of the Gardens so altered – the idea of a **memorial sculpture** using windblown wood very much appealed to the Director - and he invited Robert to come to Kew and take whatever he needed.

So, a few weeks after the storm, Robert and his father did just that. They hired a van, loaded their chainsaw and drove to London from their home in South Wales.



When they arrived at Kew this is what they found:

Heartbroken staff had begun the task of clearing the debris; gathering the broken boughs and ruptured stems, and creating these pyramids of timber, all over the arboretum.

Robert and his father set to work, filling the van with kind of wood craftsmen can usually **only dream** of using – vintage walnut, rare hornbeam, hickory and honey locust.

They returned to South Wales where Robert began his search for an artist to **design** his storm sculpture.

Robert knew exactly what he wanted: it would have to be bold and theatrical; it had to tell a story; it had to convey the strength of the wind, and the fragility of the landscape.

And it would have to showcase the grain, texture and tones of the exotic, reclaimed timbers.

Finally, Robert and his father were introduced to this chap:



Terry Thomas - an artist, living and working in Gloucestershire.

Terry was a man of many talents: he wasn't just a watercolorist and an oil painter, he was also a sculptor, an innovative designer of stage sets, and a flamboyant muralist - who had recently completed a large-scale commission for the rugby stadium at Twickenham

So Terry had all the right credentials - expertise, a sense of scale and flair - that Robert required, and after submitting several ideas and pen and ink sketches, he was commissioned to do the job.

You may have guessed that Terry Thomas was my father ...

Sadly, Terry died in 1998 – eleven years after the storm – and ever since, I'd had a strong, daughterly desire to celebrate his life in some way -pay tribute to him - both as a father - and as an artist

So, when I rediscovered that old photograph of the Kew Mural under the bed I knew instantly that I'd found the perfect way to do it.



I made a start – and began to do some research into the Great Storm
Very quickly, I became fascinated by the rare meteorological conditions and by images of the storm-battered landscape.

I started asking everyone I met if they could **remember that storm**,
and what struck me was that almost everyone I spoke to was able to tell me **exactly**
where they were, and what they were doing that night, in accurate and cinematic
detail –
like it was some sort of JFK moment.

Everyone remembered the noise of the wind, the pounding rain and the howling
darkness.
There were tales of toppled chimneys and tiles lifted from roofs;
of smashed windows and shattered greenhouses, of power cuts and flooding and
crushed cars



But what most people remembered was the huge loss of trees **15 million** of them toppled in the space of only a few dark turbulent hours.

Several months later, when people did the maths, they calculated that a seventh of the total number of trees in Britain were brought down that night.

Woodlands, orchards, parks and gardens all across the South and South East were devastated and in London, which has always prided itself on being a 'green city', 250,000 trees were lost.

Significant landmarks disappeared too – perhaps, most famously, in Sevenoaks in Kent, where a single squall brought down six of the seven mature oak trees that stood at the edge of the Vine Cricket Ground.



And all the great gardens and historic estates of East and West Sussex, of Kent and Suffolk suffered terrible losses too.

This is a picture of Emmetts Garden - an elegant Edwardian house and six acre estate on the North Downs – that lost 95% of its mature woodlands in the storm, as well as its priceless collection of exotic trees and shrubs.

So – weathermen aside, of course- it was the scale of the loss and the transformation to the landscape in a way not seen since the Blitz – which made this storm so memorable

I decided I needed to return to Kew Gardens to see the mural – and I also made an appointment to see the Head of the Arboretum - a man named Tony Kirkham, who'd agreed to tell me his own storm story.

Tony told me that after a difficult drive into work that Friday morning, he'd finally arrived to find Kew Green like a war zone, its handsome row of mature horse chestnuts - lying like skittles on the ground.

But the sight that greeted him **inside** the Gardens was much, much worse.



Everywhere, the trees to which he and his staff had devoted time and care, were lying on the ground, their root plates lifted, the gouged earth like a moonscape.

Gone were the the rare hickories, the tulip trees with their glossy green leaves, The specimen oaks, ash, birch and yew, the celebrated rhododendron dell, the Indian bean trees, the grand horse chestnuts, the magnolias, the larches and the pines.

Gone, a white swamp oak from the United States, the biggest of its kind anywhere in the world -

Gone - an endangered Marn Elm from the Himalayas, that had survived the ravages of Dutch Elm disease, only to be brought down by single swerving gust of wind.



Gone too was this beauty – the 150 year old Tree of Heaven, **Ailanthus Altissima**, which crashed onto the recently restored roof of the iconic William IV Temple

And - also lost forever - were a glorious English walnut, planted by the Queen in 1959, to mark the 200th anniversary of the Gardens – and a beautiful Japanese Cedar, planted by Emperor Hirohito of Japan, on a state visit to the UK in 1979.

The clear up began, the scale of the task ahead was daunting.

BUT it didn't take many months, before the staff at Kew began to notice that the storm had done, **overnight**, what no landscape gardener would have ever dared to do: namely - to clear the arboretum of the oldest, and most decrepit trees - the ones that should have been felled but hadn't been - which, in turn, allowed for new planting and much needed rejuvenation.



And that wasn't the only unexpected outcome: Tony took me to see this tree – It's a Turner's Oak - one of the oldest trees in the arboretum, planted in 1793 in the reign of mad King George III..

Before the storm, the Turner Oak was in very poor health. It had a thinning crown, small leaves and suckers all along the main trunk.

On the night of the storm, a single violent gust swept the Turner high into the air; **but** instead of tipping over, the tree dropped back into its planting pit, like a plug into a hole.

The following morning, garden staff, who had a thousand other trees to deal with, left the old Turner alone, thinking that the wind had dealt the veteran tree its mortal blow.

But several months later, when they returned to it, they were surprised to find it in rude health.

And, in the years since the storm, it has put on another 25% of its canopy.



So - what happened?

The violence of the storm had done the old tree a favour, it seemed
By lifting it, and allowing it to resettle, air had circulated around the roots,
decompacting the bole, **rejuvenating** the hard, lifeless soil
that had been pounded by lawn mowers and thousands of pairs of feet,
over the last 250 years **and allowing oxygen** to reach its underground support system
–bringing the old tree back to life.

The results were so spectacular that Tony and his colleagues have devised a
decompaction programme which actually **MIMICS** the effects of the wind
and which has been adopted in arboreta the world over, giving new life to mature
trees.



So now I was curious to know whether what had happened behind the **rarefied walls of the arboretum** had been reflected in the wider landscape too.

I approached foresters, woodland managers, ecologists and conservationists, who told me that in most places, the damage caused by the clear up **was worse** than the storm itself

But that after months of bulldozing and bonfires, it soon became clear that the unprecedented **violence** of the storm had generated **exceptional horizontal and vertical vigour**.

As seeds, blown by the wind, began to take root in and among rows of newly planted trees - overwhelming the storm-damaged and replanted woodlands with ***natural regeneration***



And where trees fell and canopies changed, **new light brought new life** to the forest floor.

Here in the Mens, an area of woodland in West Sussex – the storm’s devastation was so great that the decision was taken not to even try to clear it

And where the fallen trees were left to lie, feeding nutrients **back into the soil as they decayed, other plants like ... violets, primroses and bluebells flourished...** And shrubs like elder, dogwood and hawthorn - began to grow in sunny spaces – attracting butterflies, bees and birds, who found new opportunities for roosting, and breeding in the holes and crevices of the broken trees.



Unusual fungi fed on the rotting timber and rare and ancient woodland trees, like midland hawthorn, wild service and spindle sprouted in secluded glades.

After the storm – meteorologists presented a new and **persuasive theory**: They said that there was **clear historical and meteorological evidence** to suggest that catastrophic storms of this magnitude, occur in the UK every 2-300 years, with serious storms also known to occur at the end of each century.

So gradually, I came to understand that great storms, **though** catastrophic and upsetting are not **IMPOSED** on nature, they're **part of it**. That they occur **within** the natural course of events, and are **part of a naturally unstable** and ever-changing environment. **And** that our forests and woodlands are composed the way they are, and look the way they do, precisely because they are **always in the process of recovering from the last Great Storm**.



But the loss to the landscape and the storm's environmental legacy, were not the only stories:

I also wanted to re-imagine the storm through the eyes of people who'd lived through it – and faced it head on – and I uncovered some remarkable and previously untold human stories – many of which still resonate today.

I met the beach fishermen of Hastings, a proud and tightly knit community of families, who've fished the same waters off the south coast for generations. And I heard how they'd struggled - in atrocious conditions that night, working in teams to save their boats - from the winds and the rising seas - only to discover - when the storm had passed the following morning, that they had lost one of their own men that night – Jimmy Read - the strongest fisherman on the beach.

30 years later, I also discovered that they've never forgotten Jimmy - that his memory is still preserved and his legacy still lives on in the town.



Another little known story concerns a group of asylum seekers, who, in May 1987, had been detained here – on a converted car ferry in the eastern port of Harwich. Their story had long term ramifications too - but of a different kind.

The group of 100 asylum seekers on the Earl William were already desperate - these were people who had fled war torn countries for the safety of Britain, but whose legal cases for asylum were being deliberately delayed, by the government of the day, lead by Margaret Thatcher who wanted to limit the number of immigrants they allowed in.

The Earl William was a stinking old hulk - long past her sailing best.

When the government had commandeered her, they'd stripped of her engines, replaced the maritime crew with security guards and provided precious little in the way of facilities on board, to cater for the physical and psychological needs of her reluctant passengers.



After being transferred from other detention centres and held for months with no prospect of release, some of the asylum seekers jumped overboard - others went on hunger strike to draw attention to the appalling conditions on the ship,

They were supported – as you may be able to see in this photograph – by couple of very young Labour back benchers – one Jeremy Corbyn and one Dianne Abbott – both 30 years younger of course - who took the asylum seekers' protests to Westminster – but to no avail

Their ordeal continued - until October 1987 - when the Great Storm reached its raging peak over the eastern seaboard....and the Earl William, tied to port by 13 ropes and 2 anchor chains - was ripped from its harbour moorings and sailed drunkenly out to sea, her terrified passengers still locked in their cabins.

No one knew then, that this dramatic turn of events would ultimately bring about a change in asylum law that still stands today.



Perhaps the most desperate of the stories involves another ship - the floating wreck of the Herald of Free Enterprise: the infamous, cross-channel ferry that had sunk in freezing waters outside the Belgian port of Zeebrugge in March, that very same year, with the loss of 193 lives.

Seven months after the tragedy, in early October 1987, the disgraced and unwanted vessel - condemned to scrap, was being towed from Zeebrugge to a breakers yard in Taiwan on the other side of the world, and was sailing through the Bay of Biscay, **just as the great storm was** beginning to develop.

With waves in Biscay were like walls of water, some of them a hundred feet high: and, after several days and nights of relentless climb and drop, the tug's stressed tow ropes finally **snapped...** and the Herald broke away from the tug, and was blown back the way it had come, carried ahead of the gale - **crewless, engineless** for four full days, before finally being recovered off the coast of northern Spain.



And the most poignant storm story of all – the death of a rough sleeper in a London park.

An unidentified man, crushed to death by a falling plane tree, as he slept in his cardboard shelter, here in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The search for this man's identity preoccupied me for well over a year:

News reports described him only as a tramp or vagrant, and all I knew was that he'd died a **nameless death**

and had been given a **anonymous parish funeral** in Camden, six weeks after the storm.

His plight moved and intrigued me, in equal measure and in the book, I go in search of his identity.

And after tracing his family's roots to the north east, I can finally give him a name and tell his story –

a story that starts in the Durham coalfields and ends in the capital, on the night of the storm.



There were other stories too

Unsurprisingly, I suppose, I found myself drawn to the artists, writers and craftsmen who'd responded creatively to the storm, just as had my own father and Robert Games.

I spoke to John Makepeace, the celebrated furniture designer, who wanted to give some of the fallen trees an alternative, second life, and who created this beautiful table in the shape of a leaf, with the wood of a fallen mulberry tree from Kew Gardens.



And I met a pair of lutiers from south London
who'd trawled the city's parks in the wake of the storm with their chainsaw,
collecting fallen apple and cherry, Hungarian ash and figured maple,
relieving exhausted and overwhelmed parks officials of the huge trunks just left lying
on the ground

And who'd been asked to collect a Pagoda tree and a rare Osage Orange from Kew,
with which they made an exquisite series of six course, early renaissance lutes, like
this one.



Finally, I returned to my father to the original inspiration for the book - The Kew Mural -

And to this – his original pen and ink illustration, given to me by Robert Games.

In search of his roots – and my own - I travelled back to to Terry's home town of Falmouth in Cornwall – to try and understand his early artistic influences.

I talked for hours to his older sister – heard how he'd grown up in Falmouth's steep streets, played on her sandy beaches and camped out on her rugged Arthurian clifftops – heard how his artistic talent had emerged in childhood - how it had developed, untutored - how the **landscape had defined him**, given his life shape, orientation and meaning.

And in the end I understood how **this deeply rooted sense of place had** breathed into him an appreciation for all landscapes, giving him the sensitivity and understanding he needed to reimagine the devastation at Kew, for this muscular, meaningful design.



You can still see the sculpture –
it's still there at Kew Gardens hanging on a wall in the Victoria Gate tea room
You can get right up close to it - touch it and smell it.
And although time has faded the rich colours of the wood, you can still see the
craftsmanship in the carving, note the delicate interplay of grain, texture and tone.

And even now, 30 years on, it's lost none of its original impact.
It still tells a story.
It still shows the fragility of all our structures,
the vulnerability of all our landscapes,
when faced with Nature's tremendous, unstoppable power.

