The Great Storm of November 1824

'*Twern't a sea - not a bit of it - twer the great sea hisself rose up level like and come on right over the ridge and all, like nothing in this world.*

(Eyewitness - 1824 Storm Surge over Chesil Bank at Fleet)

When John Meade Falkner set his famous novel *near the centre of Moonfleet Bay, a great bight twenty miles across, and a death-trap to up-channel sailors in a south-westerly gale*, he was able to draw on factual reports and reminiscences that had all the ingredients for a *rattling yarn*.

He went on: *For with that wind blowing strong from the south, if you cannot double the* Snout*, you must most surely come ashore… and once on the beach, the sea has little mercy, for the water is deep right in, and the waves curl over full on the pebbles with a weight no timbers can withstand. Then if the poor fellows try to save themselves, there is a deadly* under-tow *or rush back of the water, which sucks them off their legs, and carries them again under the thundering waves…*

John Trenchard, the novel's narrator, looking back to the start of his tale in 1757, remembers on 3rd November *a wind as I have never known before, and only once since. All night long the tempest grew fiercer, and I think no one in Moonfleet went to bed; for there was such a breaking of tiles and glass, such a banging of doors and rattling of shutters, that no sleep was possible, and we were afraid besides lest the chimneys should fall and crush us. The wind blew fiercest about five in the morning and then some ran up the street calling out a new danger — that the sea was breaking over the beach, and that all the place was like to be flooded…it was but a nine hours' wonder, for the wind fell very suddenly; the water began to go back…most said that never had been so fierce a wind, but some of the oldest spoke of one in the second year of Queen Anne (1), and would have it as bad or worse.*

In fact, when Meade Falkner was growing up in the 1860s and 1870s in Dorchester, and then Weymouth, the older generation would still have remembered and talked about the

Great Storm of November 1824. This rivals the hurricane-like conditions of November 1703 and October 1987. Falkner's descriptions (down to the time the wind blew fiercest and the fear of chimneys crushing the occupants below) was almost certainly culled from the memories of 1824.

The most destructive part of a hurricane is the storm surge. This unusual rise in sea-level results partly from extreme wind and wave action backing-up seawater on shelving coasts and concave bays and inlets and partly from the very low atmospheric pressure. The period of high water associated with the surge is likely to last from around six hours to several days and may exceed 4 to 5 metres above normal tide level.

On Monday evening, the 22nd November 1824, the wind was blowing at hurricane force from the south. The Customs Officer at Lyme Regis noticed anomalies with the tidal level This was a time of Spring Tides. At 1 a.m. on Tuesday 23rd November, the tide seemed to be rising when it should have been low water. At 3 a.m., five hours before high water the level was at the Neap Tide high - probably about 1.5 m. In other words, it was about a metre or so higher than would have been expected. Before 4 a.m., a local remembered *the sea had risen to great height*. Some exceptionally large waves hit the coast of East Devon and of Dorset between 5 and 7 a.m. These were tsunami-like and referred to at the time as *tidal waves*. They seem to done the most damage.

At East Fleet, the sea began to break over the beach at 5 a.m. At 6 a.m. the water seems to have come up the valley at East Fleet towards the Church, some way inland, *as fast as a horse can gallop* (i.e. about 35 mph per hour). This wave seems to have been almost like a tsunami in appearance. James Bowring was standing near the gate of the cattle pound when he saw, rushing up the valley, the tidal wave, driven by the hurricane and bearing on its crest a whole haystack, and debris from the fields below. They ran for their lives to Chickerell, and when they returned they found that five houses had been swept away and the church was in ruins.

The waves came over the Chesil Beach at Chiswell where it is higher at about the same time as the wave incursion at East Fleet. The village of Chiswell was almost destroyed and according to one account 28 of the inhabitants were drowned and 80 houses damaged or washed down. The Chesil Bank throughout its whole extent was lowered from twenty to thirty feet. The Newspapers gathered reports from their correspondents and other literary individuals residing or visiting the area. Three examples may suffice.

Dorchester, Nov.23 ─ *Last night this town was visited with a tremendous gale from the S.W., which for several hours continued to increase, till the most violent hurricane prevailed ever remembered by the oldest inhabitants. Its devastating effects were felt in every quarter, and the damage to dwelling-houses in the destruction of chimnies (sic), roofings, and glass, created alarm and anxiety for the safety of the affrighted families. About six o'clock this morning, a heavy stack of chimnies on the house of the Rev. H.J. Richman was blown down with a tremendous crash, and falling on the bed of the rev. (sic) gentleman, crushed him and his amiable wife beneath the ruins. Instant alarm was given, and medical attendance promptly obtained; but it was too late; one common and instantaneous destruction involved them both. Mr. Richman was rector of the Holy Trinity (2) in this town, and had but a few weeks enjoyed the possession of the new church recently erected in that parish…*

The effects of the storm are not confined to this town; and afflicting accounts of the loss of lives and property must be expected from along the whole coast. Weymouth has suffered very considerably; a large portion of the Esplanade being completely carried away, and other loss to the estimated amount of several thousand pounds. A Dutch ship is on shore in the bay, near the Old Castle; and other vessels in Portland-roads, already dismasted, and otherwise damaged, are expected to share the same fate. Some idea may be formed of the violence of the wind, when it is stated, that the Regulator*, Exeter coach, was blown over twice between this town and Salisbury.*

Southampton, Nov. 25. ─ *Yesterday we experienced here the highest tide and most tremendous gale ever remembered. Weymouth is quite ruined. The beautiful esplanade, stones, chains, and all, are swept away, and in some places scarcely room for a carriage to pass in front of the house. Boats and wrecks are washed up into the streets. The pier head, which has borne the brunt of many storms, is completely overturned. The cellars and kitchens are full of water; and to complete the calamity, a fire broke out in one of those circular houses at the back of the King's statue, which consumed two large houses. The total damage to the town is estimated at £20,000; but this falls greatly short of the distress at Portland. The sea made a complete breach over the whole length of the Pebble Bank, and overwhelmed the village of Chissell (*sic*), and buried the inhabitants in its ruins. More than thirty bodies are now, I am informed, taken up – twenty-two houses are swept down. Only two cottages are standing in Westfleet; and of the church, scarcely one stone is standing on another. Lynch is quite destroyed. Four large hay ricks are floated up several hundred yards from the back water…three vessels are on shore; one, a large West Indiaman, I saw wrecked, and not a soul was saved.*

Weymouth, Nov. 25. ─ *A most painful duty devolves upon us to recount the awful dispensation of Providence, in one of the most tempestuous gales of wind, from S.S.W., accompanied by the highest tide which this town ever experienced. It commenced about four o'clock on Tuesday morning, and*

continued with unabated fury for several hours. The pier, at the entrance to the harbour, is nearly demolished, together with the greater part of the Esplanade. The different quays were deluged, and the lower rooms of houses in various parts of the town were inundated. Boats were seen floating in the street; one in particular, from the harbour nearly to the church; the damage sustained is immense. But the scene of desolation here is comparatively trifling. The most melancholy reports are hourly arriving from Abbotsbury, Fleet, and all along the coast. At the former place a Danish brig has been wrecked, laden with fruit. Five hands were on board, four of whom were providentially saved…A large West Indiamen, the Corvile*, laden with rum, &c. has been wrecked off Fleet; the whole crew perished. A Dutch galliot has also been wrecked opposite the Old Weymouth Castle, laden with butter and cheese: the whole of the cargo lost, except a few trifling articles. Several houses at Chisel, in the Island of Portland, have been totally swept away, by the tremendous waves passing over the beach, and many of its inhabitants are buried in the ruins. Twenty-three bodies have already been found; among them a man, his wife, and seven children. The ferry passage-house is also nearly demolished, and its inhabitants narrowly escaped with their lives. The ferryman was drowned, in endeavouring to take a soldier's horse from the stable; the horse was saved. At Fleet the church, with almost every house in the village, is swept away, and several lives have been lost.*

There were several other occasions in the late 19th century when the Chesil Beach was lashed with storms. On 25th November 1872, there was a shipwreck during a gale of "great violence" with much noise from the backwashing shingle. Then on 3rd September, 1883 a southwesterly gale saw the overtopping of the Chesil Beach. Moreover, in the years after *Moonfleet* was published – in 1903, 1904, and 1910 – Chesil Beach was again overtopped.

Moonfleet is book-ended by storms. John Trenchard and Elzevir Block are left to fend for themselves when the brig *Aurungzebe*, bound for Java gets caught up in a raging sea off the Dorset coast. As the foundering vessel nears Chesil Beach, *above all the rage of wind and sea* [they] *could hear the awful roar of the under-tow sucking back the pebbles on the beach…there was a deafening noise as we came near the shore, the shrieking of the wind in the rigging…between us and the shore was a maddened race of seething water, white foaming waves that leapt up from all sides against our broken bulwarks, or sucked back the pebbles with a grinding roar till they left the beach nearly dry.*

Meade Falkner's final chapter ─ *On the Beach* ─ starts with four lines from William Cowper's poem, written in 1782 to commemorate the tragic loss of the ship the *Royal George*.

Toll for the brave,
The brave that are no more
All sunk beneath the wave,
Fast by their native shore!

The melancholy task of watching for the bodies, coming ashore with the flotsam and jetsam, looking *like black buoys, bobbing up and down, and lifting as the wave came by*, falls to John Trenchard and others. Elzevir is found and laid to rest; a lighthouse is built on the *Snout*; the old church beautified; old houses rebuilt and fresh ones reared; new almshouses erected; the Manor House becomes a stately home again. John is content *to watch the spring clothe the beech boughs with green, or the figs ripen on the southern wall: while behind all is spread as a curtain the eternal sea, ever the same and ever changing. Yet I love to see it best when it is lashed to madness in the autumn gale, and to hear the grinding roar and churn of the pebbles like a great organ playing all the night. 'Tis then I turn in bed and thank God, more from the heart, perhaps, than any other living man, that I am not fighting for my life on Moonfleet Beach.*

Thanks are due to Ray Ion, who has tracked down the old newspaper extracts used in this article.

(1). In November 1703 there was a famous storm that destroyed most of the windmills in England. Recorded in parish registers as: *The great storm, both at sea and land, the greatest man knew in England was on the 26th day of November in the year 1703*. In this storm the Eddystone light was destroyed with all its occupants drowned, and within the first six hours the Royal Navy had lost twelve ships and over 1700 men. Around 8,000 people were killed and thousands more injured. The author Daniel Defoe was in London at the time, and he used his own experiences of *this terrible Providence* as material for what became his first full-length book, *The Storm*, which he published the following year. The storm, which continued over several days, was bound to have affected the Chesil Beach.

(2). In 1859 Meade Falkner's father, Thomas, accepted a curacy under the Rev. J. Fisher at Holy Trinity.