

Going under

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Pre-reading A: Predicting the content

Read the headline and the sub-heading. What do you think the article is going to be about?

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Britain is world-renowned for its depressingly damp climate. We are used to suffering week upon week of rain. So why have a few heavy showers caused such devastation around the country this summer?

Aida Edemariam reports
July 24, 2007

2 Pre-reading B: Key words

Match these keywords from the text with the definitions below.

trapped
ploughs

run-off
absorb

drainage
crop

sewers
paving

flush
freak

1. _____ removing liquids from something
2. _____ covering the ground with tiles, stones, concrete, etc.
3. _____ digs up the land in lines, using machines
4. _____ excess water that cannot sink onto the ground
5. _____ kept in one place and stopped from moving away
6. _____ a system of pipes underground to carry waste water away
7. _____ take in liquid a little at a time
8. _____ very unusual
9. _____ plants grown for food
10. _____ to wash away

Now read the article, check the words in context, and see if your prediction was correct.

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- 1 Anyone attempting to take a train to or from the southwest of England this weekend could be forgiven for wondering if they had accidentally strayed on to the set of a disaster movie. Trains appeared on boards and then simply vanished. Announcers on the London Underground announced lists of lines progressively going out of service. As for those who had to watch their homes and businesses surrender to the rising tide, among them there was a general sense of disbelief. Disbelief that a downpour so short should wreak such havoc, disbelief that such scenes should be occurring at all.
- 2 The disbelief is justified. This, after all, is a country famed for its wetness. Rain is our national weather. Snow – well, we all know what happens when Britain is dusted with a few millimetres of snow. Excessive heat, like last summer's, causes difficulties, too – but rain? Given our extensive experience, surely we should lead the world in rain management.
- 3 Alas, it seems not. Thousands had to be evacuated over the weekend, thousands more are trapped in their homes. That's thousands to add to those still unable to go home after floods in the north of England last month, which killed eight people – and countless millions to add to a national insurance bill eventually expected to top £2.5 billion. Evesham, in Worcestershire, the worst-hit town this weekend, experienced floods of up to five metres. And it isn't over yet: at the time of going to press there were warnings that flood waters weren't expected to peak until tonight, and Oxford and Bedford and Gloucestershire were preparing themselves to be the next major areas hit. All are entitled to ask how such relatively short bursts of rain – just one hour in London, somewhat longer in places such as Oxfordshire – could have such devastating results.
- 4 In fact, the answer lies partly in how quickly it all happened. Brize Norton in Oxfordshire received 121.2mm of rain between midnight Thursday and 5pm Friday – a sixth of what it would expect for the whole year. South Yorkshire got a month's worth of rain on June 25. And it has been raining for weeks now, "and the ground is very wet, so immediately you get rainfall, you get runoff", explains professor Adrian Saul, of Sheffield University.
- 5 It isn't just a case of the ground not being able to absorb so much so fast – drainage systems can't either, and have simply been overwhelmed. "When you design a system you have to take a level of risk, and generally the level of risk is sufficient to protect our communities," says Saul. "But once that level has been passed, the defences are overwhelmed. It's very fortunate that the Victorians built the systems as big as they did. In London in particular, [they] had the foresight to see that there would be change, and it's protected London ever since." Which is, of course, impressive, and true, but it is also true that they were built when London's population was a quarter of what it is now – and last Friday, they simply didn't hold up.
- 6 "Our sewers are not designed to deal with that capacity of water flowing through them," says Nicola Savage, a spokeswoman for Thames Water. They are also not designed for the way we currently treat them. We each, personally, use far more water than ever before. There is also "a tendency for the public to use the sewers as a litter bin," Savage adds. "People flush nappies down toilets, sanitary products, and tights. In particular, we need to encourage people not to be pouring stuff down the sink – for example, fat, oil and grease. The sewers were never designed to cope with this sort of material."
- 7 Thames Water says that it is spending £323 million improving its sewers, but until recently, Ofwat [the economic regulator for the water and sewerage industry in England and Wales] has been reluctant to allow very much investment by water companies, because they wanted to keep water bills down.
- 8 Saul is also involved in a £5.6 million project called the Flood Risk Management Research Consortium,

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which is investigating how farmers can control the flow of water off land. Farmers can decrease runoff if they plough across hills, rather than down them, and strategically placed trees can help retain water. And the more animals there are on a piece of land, the more they pack the ground down, and the less it can absorb water. This leads to crop damage, which will soon be evident in our shops. And if intensively farmed animals get no drinking water for 48 hours, thousands will die, which will also affect the price of food.

- 9 The consortium is also investigating how individuals can help reduce a problem that, in fact, they have helped create: by extending their houses, paving driveways, building car parks – all decreasing the amount of soft ground to absorb water, and increasing the amount of runoff into drains and rivers. “In

essence, anything that runs off the house should be stored locally,” says Saul. Instead of going straight into the sewerage system, rainwater can be collected – in storage tanks under driveways, for example – and used to flush toilets or run washing machines. Small trenches called soakaways can be dug in gardens and filled with stones, to trap the water and release it into the ground a bit more slowly. Every little helps.

- 10 For although what Britain has experienced over the past month is, as experts explain, a series of freak weather events, our changing climate means that there may soon be more of them, more frequently. Today Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire are having to get out the sandbags and evacuate the citizens. Tomorrow, next month, next year – who knows?

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3 Comprehension check

Re-read the text more carefully, and decide whether the following statements are **True (T)** or **False (F)**.

1. The flooding in Britain this summer is no worse than usual.
2. Insurance costs will be very high.
3. One reason for the floods was that a huge amount of rain fell in a very short time.
4. Victorian engineers fully anticipated the extent of population growth.
5. The public have been putting the wrong kind of material down the toilet.
6. Farmers could help prevent flooding if they ploughed their land up and down hill.
7. The price of food is likely to rise.
8. The more we build, the more likely we are to see floods in the future.

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4 Vocabulary development 1

Find words in the text that mean the following. Paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. *famous everywhere* (sub-heading)
2. *enormous destruction* (sub-heading)
3. *wandered by accident* (para 1)
4. *sudden period of heavy rainfall* (para 1)
5. *cause so much damage* (para 1)
6. *covered with very small quantities* (para 2)
7. *when this article was printed* (para 3)
8. *completely defeated* (para 5)
9. *ability to think ahead and anticipate future problems* (para 5)
10. *carefully and thoughtfully* (para 8)

5 Vocabulary development 2: Expressions of quantity

The expressions of quantity on the left have all been taken from the text. See if you can match them with the nouns they modified on the right.

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. week upon week of | a. lines |
| 2. lists of | b. rain |
| 3. up to | c. what it is now |
| 4. a sixth of | d. soft ground |
| 5. a month's worth of | e. freak weather events |
| 6. a quarter of | f. water |
| 7. that capacity of | g. five meters |
| 8. the amount of | h. what it would expect |
| 9. a bit more | i. rain |
| 10. a series of | j. slowly |

Now scan the text to see how many you got right.

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6 Skills development: Referring expressions

What do each of these words refer to? Paragraph numbers are given to help you.

no.	para	word	context	refers to...
1.	1	those	<i>As for those who had to watch...</i>	
2.	1	them	<i>... among them there was...</i>	
3.	3	thousands	<i>Thousands had to be evacuated...</i>	
4.	3	millions	<i>... countless millions to add...</i>	
5.	3	all	<i>All are entitled to ask...</i>	
6.	5	they	<i>... as big as they did...</i>	
7.	5	they	<i>... they were built...</i>	
8.	8	thousands	<i>... thousands will die...</i>	

7 Recognizing irony

The writer of this article, Aida Edemariam, sometimes uses irony for dramatic effect.

- Find 5 examples of irony in the subheading and the first 2 paragraphs.
- Why do you think the use of irony is concentrated only at the beginning of the article?

8 Discussion

- Has your country experienced unusual amounts of flooding recently?
- Has it experienced other changes in the weather?
- Do you think such changes are probably due to global warming?
- What measures is your government taking to help prevent global warming?
- What measures do you think it should take?
- What measures do you think individuals in your country should take?
- In what ways have you changed your own behaviour to help reduce the risks?