

Historical research finds Britain's 1987 hurricane exposed growing separation from nature

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The historic hurricane of October 1987 that wrought devastation to households across the South and East of Britain exposed a range of

anxieties and fears in people and an increasing sense of separation from nature.

Personal responses collected weeks after the [storm](#) reveal how the roaring 100mph-plus winds and the impact it had upon infrastructure and domestic dwellings evoked memories of the Blitz and tapped into the dread of late Cold War-era nuclear war.

And the loss of heat and power experienced by many shattered the safe sense of personal sanctuary and exposed the growing boundaries between the nation's interior and exterior lives.

These are some of the findings summarized in a new research paper "[That Awful Night in October': Sensory Experiences of Britain's 1987 Hurricane](#)" published in the journal *Cultural and Social History* and written by historians at the University of Exeter. They have been studying personal accounts of the hurricane held by the Mass Observation Project (MOP)—a national repository for observed modern British history.

"Through the MOP, we have access to detailed accounts of unsettling, uncanny, and sometimes terrifying, experiences of the storm," says Dr. Timothy Cooper, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, at the University of Exeter, Penryn, Cornwall.

"In recording the sensory effects of the gale, their writings reveal how readily feelings of comfort and safety in the home could be undone, and point to a process of sensory withdrawal from external nature that tells of important changes in embodied relationships to the natural environment in the post-war period."

The MOP, curated by the University of Sussex since 1981 after originally being launched in the '30s, contains personal accounts of

everyday life in Britain written by volunteer panelists in response to annual questionnaires or 'directives.'

Directive 24, part 2, issued several weeks after the hurricane, sought to elicit personal experiences of the hurricane, which swept across the southern and south-eastern counties in the early hours of October 15, 1987. Nearly 550 people responded—more than half of whom lived in the most impacted areas—establishing the most extensive archive of personal testimony on the impact of the event.

In studying these responses, the authors Dr. Cooper and Matthew Turner found that many people turned to either lived or imagined experiences to explain how they felt. The loss of electricity and the blackout that followed elicited from some a 'sensory nostalgia,' harking back to 'the Dunkirk Spirit' and to reading by 'cosy candlelight.' But there was also a very prevalent sense of terror at the kinetic energy of the wind which "sounded droning like the thousand bomber raids which set out over Southern England to Dortmund" to one writer, and "worse than the war" to another.

For those people not old enough to remember the Blitz, apocalyptic fears of a future war provided the theme of several responses. One woman wrote, "In my half-awake state I thought it was a nuclear attack," while another, describing the morning after, penned, "It was really eerie, like the aftermath of a nuclear explosion."

The storm also exposed anxieties around the dark and windows, with several people reporting that they had to physically relocate to a different room in the house to reduce their levels of stress and unease.

"Britain's 1987 storm was undoubtedly a profoundly disruptive embodied experience for those who encountered it," says Matthew Turner. "We can see clearly how it disturbed and discomforted many

people, bringing into question the perceptual technologies and networks of power that sustained the distinction between internal domestic comfort and the exterior world of 'nature' in the twentieth century.

"The efforts that some people went to physically re-establishing the corporeal boundary between inside and outside worlds, trying to regain their associated comforts in the face of the storm, reveals how terrifying a threat 'nature at its most vicious' could be."

The article is part of Dr. Cooper's wider research into the storm, looking at its politics and [environmental history](#), and more broadly how weather sits in Britain's social and environmental histories.

More information: Timothy Cooper et al, 'That Awful Night in October': Sensory Experiences of Britain's 1987 Hurricane, *Cultural and Social History* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/14780038.2024.2379507](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2024.2379507)

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