

KENDAL ORAL HISTORY GROUP INTERVIEW 0309F

Kendal Flood December 2015 project interview  
309f/Summary Sheet

Michael Ryan born 1963  
Interviewed April 2016

Track 1, pp.1-4

Mayor of Doodleshire  
[Lives on Shap Road close to Mintsfeet area].  
Unknown man knocked on door with an accurate prediction he was going to be flooded in five minutes.  
Wife and son away at relatives. As he was phoning them to say they would not be able to get home the water started coming up through the floor.  
From first warning to abandoning house ten minutes.

Track 2, pp.4-7

Sent home from work to inspect the damage  
Insurance company attended quickly  
A great deal of help from Scouts and Sandylands Church in particular  
Moved back into his house April 2016

Track 3, pp.8-10

Saved a lady from potentially drowning  
Cannot praise the work of the emergency services on the night enough.  
Two Scout huts damaged but now recovering

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309f/Page one

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Track one

I: Interview with Michael Ryan on the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2016 with regard to the flooding which took place in December 2015. Michael, can we start off with you just telling me what your normal job is and your other attributes ....

R: [laughter] My paid job is – I work for Booths supermarket as a supervisor in their cafe; so full-time job there. Run around making coffees, hopefully nice ones. My outside interests include being a scout leader – a group scout leader and I'm also currently at the moment the local scout district commissioner. So I'm responsible for about 12-13 groups around the area from Hawkshead to Kirkby Lonsdale and from Windermere down to Grange. Apart from that in the rest of my spare time I am also currently the honorary mayor of Doodleshire and I'm currently also the chair of the local residents and business partnership.

I: So as mayor of Doodleshire, that's quite a historic title isn't it?

R: Oh, but allegedly goes back to about 1190 from, yes 1190 from the time of Richard I when a young squire, or young man, from Kendal wanted to better himself. Went down to the king's court. Was fairly active I think is the best way to put it, in the court, and was banished from the court by the king and the easiest way to get rid of him was to pass him the market charter for the town. Brought it back and got slightly inebriated in the pub and was put in the stocks overnight. So the town, it sort of goes from there, because Richard Doodle was a bit upset and allegedly sent the equivalent of a fax to the king about his displeasure. The king thought, "well the best way to keep him away from me is to suggest he becomes a mayor of that part of the town." And there's been a mayor on and off ever since then.

I: Well you live on Shap Road ..

R: Yes.

I: How long have you lived there?

R: Been here for five years now.

I: And what's your impression of the place etc with regard– we were talking about the floods and so on?

309f/Page two

R: Well we always said as a family that if our house ever flooded, then Kendal would be in deep trouble. Since the flooding we found out that the previous time that this area flooded was 1895, so yes our supposition really was that it wasn't going to flood; it wouldn't flood because we were above the river - quite a way from it and if we flooded then Morrisons would be in trouble, Heinz would be in trouble and a lot of other businesses.

I: So was there any warning of flooding?

R: I literally had – well I came home and realised there was a lot of water all over the place.

I: Came home when?

R: On the Saturday evening, the 5<sup>th</sup> December. Luckily my wife had gone away with my son to a family party. I got home, there was water outside but not that deep. I was just sort of settling down having finished work and got a knock on the door, saying "you're going to be flooded in five minutes!" This is from someone – don't know who he was, wasn't part of any services, he just was doing a good social deed.

I: And was it five minutes or –

R: - pretty much to the minute, yes. By the time five minutes was up I had water in the house to at least the height of my wellies. It was very rapid and traumatic.

I: So on the actual day there was really no warning?

R: No. I didn't even get anything from, because we were signed up for flood watch and to get reports from them, and there was nothing come through from them on the phone, on my mobile or anything. It was just, I think it was one of those events that just happens as so unpredictable that nobody could have foreseen it. The amount of water that was thrown from the ends of the storm, plus the fact it just sat on top of Cumbria for a whole day and just unleashed all its water; nobody could predict it, nobody could foresee it. I also think, having had a reasonably dry spell beforehand, the top layer of the main soil was rock hard. We'd had a bit of rain beforehand which had just loosened a few inches of it, but the rest of it was rock hard, so there's nowhere for the

309f/Page three

water to soak into. So the only way it could do, was come straight down the hills, straight into the rivers and the rivers just couldn't cope with the amount of water. Nobody could have foreseen that amount of water coming down.

I: So having been told that you were about to be flooded, what did you do then?

R: My first reaction was – “yes right. [laughs] What do you know ..” and from then on I thought, “well I’d better phone the wife, just to forewarn her that we may have a few problems coming up.” Phoned her and said, “we’re about to be flooded allegedly. What do you want me to save?” At which point my wife went, “how can I think about it!” My answer to her was “no, we’ve apparently got – oh my god it’s coming up to my feet!” And at that point there was water I could see bubbling through the floorboards and the carpet was bubbling. I said, “I need decisions now. And they’ve got to be very fast.” At that point, my wife being some way away, panicked and I said, “Look, I’ll just do what I can.” So my first thought was, in a flood thing, hardest thing to replace are photographs. So I grabbed the drawer of photographs, ran with them upstairs, came down and thought, “Mm, better save the computer”, because again it’s got, you know, most of our photographs now being digital are kept on there. So pulled all the plugs out of that. I didn’t care about the wiring, just grabbed the box, got that upstairs. Literally by that time it was up to my wellies. I thought, “about time to bail out” and left the building. So I locked it.

I: So from that time, from the time somebody knocked on your door and said, “you’re about to be flooded”, until you departed from the house –

R: - ten minutes. I reckon it was that close; and by then it was, I had wet feet because the water was over the top of a pair of wellies.

I: And how high did it get up?

R: In the house it got to, must have been about three feet of water in.

I: So what was the extent of flooding in the house?

R: Pretty much the whole of the ground floor had three feet of water in it. How it missed things like the fuse-board I will never know, but luckily our fuse-board was saved, but at that point it was beginning to get close to it. I knew there was going to be a problem for possible shortage-out, only if we got, if the electricity and water mix, that wouldn’t be good. But across the house everything literally on the ground floor that was on the floor was pretty much ruined. We’re talking surface - kitchen, radiators, doors, all the woodwork,

309f/Page four

fireplaces, TV, electrical stuff like that. All was pretty much flood-damaged and ruined. So yes, quite dramatic.

I: Yes. You left the house. Where did you go?

R: I left from Shap Road, walked down, well tried to get down Shap Road, couldn't get through there because by then it was waist deep. Backtracked, went down Mint Street, went across Sandylands. Carried on from there, over to a friend's house on Heron Hill.

I: And you said, "I've been flooded out"?

R: I phoned her on the way.

I: Oh right.

R: And said, "I'm on my way." [laughs]. Got to her house; she basically said, "Shower, whisky, coffee or a bacon sandwich?" Of which the only answer I could give was, "Yes!" So she said, "Well go and have a shower and by the time you've finished a shower, I'll have the rest ready." By that time, you know, I'd walked through a lot of *interesting* water, we should say. And literally only had with me what I had, and I'd managed to get a spare set of work uniform for the next day.

I: Right. Well we'll stop.

Track two

I: Yes, OK. So you stayed at a friend's house?

R: Yes.

I: And what about the following day?

R: The following day got up early. I'd already said that I would be at work so trudged into, from Heron Hill, into town trying to find a way across the river. Because most of the bridges had been closed for safety reasons, managed to get across; got up back up to Booths to find that most of Booths' people hadn't got in. Luckily I was there because I was the only keyholder who managed to get in. So I managed to get into work. I quickly realised that it was pretty much a major catastrophe in town so they turned round and said

309f/Page five

"Look we're not opening the cafe today. Your house has been flooded. Go home." Oh great, I can trudge back through the water again!

Walked home and then by that time, once I got in, the water had all pretty much gone. There was, sort of, odd puddles left but the majority of the water had gone. It was then just looking at the scene of – suppose the easiest way to say is – devastation, in the house. It was not a pretty sight. You could easily see where the water had got into, and got up to, and just mud. There was stuff from where I opened the front door. I think most of the water had come up through the floorboards and obviously having opened the doors to get in and out, it had allowed other, shall we say, slightly unmentionable objects to have crept into the house. So it was, sort of, look at it and then just gave up and phoned the wife, who was still up with her family. Just said, "Don't come home, because you can't get into town to start with. Every road's blocked out. I said it is, there's nothing to come home to. Try and phone everybody you know, and try and find us a house to get into for probably four months." And then trudged back through town to my friend's house.

I: Was there any help at this point, from outside sources?

R: [Sighs] I saw nothing that day while I was at home. I think everybody was more worried about trying just to get communications lines open and get traffic so that it can get into town". I think the biggest problem they had that day was the fact that Kendal was almost an island surrounded by roads that were impassable. And everybody's effort was let's get more people in to relieve the town, so we can actually get things going. We couldn't even get the food lorries into Booths and stuff like that. It was a lot to be done.

I: So what happened the following week?

R: The following week, work started up again as normal – oh joy. At that point we started getting, obviously, all the utility companies coming through, checking; yes I think we had the electric board check three times in one day to make sure it was safe. The gas people in, BT by then were just running around town changing everybody's boxes. We then went to the flood centre, got a load of cleaning stuff, managed to find ourselves somewhere to live. And just tried to get as normal a life as we could, I suppose, is the easy way to do it. By the end of the week we'd had our insurers come through and visited the site. We'd made the list of everything done and then started just throwing stuff into a big pile outside the house.

309f/Page six

I: So your insurance company came fairly quickly?

R: Yes. They were over before the end of the first week. They'd been in, taken an inventory of all damaged stuff.

I: So, if you weren't living here, how did they contact you?

R: They had our, my mobile ....

I: (?partner's) phone ....

R: Yes, BT. Although they changed the box to come to the end of December to get the phone lines switched round. So I was living pretty much on the end of the mobile phone.

I: What about other people in the town, (indistinct) etc, how did they help?

R: It was really good when we were moving house and stuff like that. The community has been absolutely wonderful. Certainly the scouting community being part of it, has been so great. Just been there to help, been there to support; been there when times have been hard. I can't thank again the people from Sandylands church who, when we moved back last week, just brought a van round, have been absolutely superb at helping us move back. Been friendly, been back to check we're OK again as well, over the weekend. So the community itself has been wonderful. There's been so much support from people. Even just to ..... just listening. For those who can't visit [indistinct] washing machines or stuff like that. I can't praise the community enough. It almost felt like an old – going back in time a bit when community was so key. I think some days, we're going to lose it these days.

I: So what about officialdom. Did you get much –

R: - I haven't seen a councillor, I haven't seen my MP. No I think in that way we haven't seen anybody.

I: So you've really relied more on a circle of friends ...

R: Yes I think the friends and acquaintances put the word out that we're doing things and getting help that way. I think it's always the old way that it's who you know that matters more and it really shows up in these times, that who your friends are and who you can ask for help.

309f/Page seven

I: Did you visit the town hall centre, when it was in the centre .... or in the shopping centre?

R: My wife visited the one in the shopping centre. We didn't use the emergency shelter in the town hall at all. The only time I visited it was Sunday morning in a work capacity to drop some food and water and stuff like that down to them from Booths. We've got some sort of load of cleaning stuff and things like that from the one in the town centre. Not a lot else really.

I: So you're not using them now, at the moment?

R: No. No. We've tended to find that a lot of the, certainly financial help, because we have insurance and because we have jobs, is not available to us. But of all the money that has been raised by people through, in concerts, music, street collections, it has gone to a very select group of people, ie those who don't have insurance and those who don't have jobs. If you've got both of them then, yes the government's given everybody five hundred quid but the rest of the money is just not available.

I: How far did that five hundred go?

R: Not very far [laughs] let's be honest, by the time you've replaced fridge and a freezer then that's probably five hundred quid gone. Yes it's nice to have it, but you'd think there should be a possibly fairer way of distributing funds that have been given to all flood victims not just..... I think if a lot of people knew that it was based on certain criteria they probably wouldn't have been so generous.

I: And what's the current situation with your home?

R: Currently we moved back in a week ago, we are still waiting on things like carpets to be finished but the house is redecorated. We only got heating back yesterday because the boiler blew up. It's needed pretty much every part inside it replacing. We are surrounded still by boxes of stuff, yes it's probably going to take about a month to get back to normality, but we're getting there.

I: OK and we'll stop it again.

309f/Page eight

Track three

I: Right. So we've covered the physical aspect of the flooding. What about the aftermath?

R: Ah yes, I suppose as a family we've tried to make sure that the impact of the flooding has been lessened for our son as much as possible. It's been stressful, certainly as part of the actual night of the flooding itself, as has been reported in the Gazette. I was, I suppose, fortunate – lucky – to be in a position where I could, I suppose, save somebody's life. That has left a deep impact on me, to the case that I'm actually now seeing a counsellor for post-traumatic stress. Right.

I: Do you want to expand on that or ...?

R: Yes I was walking through Sandylands and there was a lady. Never met her, wouldn't probably recognise her if I saw her again, was walking towards me and as she was passing one of the side streets the force of the water coming from that one, added to the water coming from behind her down the hill, knocked her off her feet. She was struggling, basically she couldn't get up back onto her feet. Luckily I'd thought on the way over, because I'd already seen a few manholes come up - I'd taken quite a long, sort of, six-foot pole with me which had a hook on the end. I managed to basically hook her as she passed me, and bring her into the side then pretty much rescue her. If not, I don't know what would have happened to her and I think she could have quite possibly become a casualty of the night's floods. So, yes, I'm sure she could have. I gave her some advice. Suggested that perhaps, the following week, she should possibly go and see the doctor just to let her know that she'd swallowed copious amounts of unclean water – I think is possibly the best way to describe it. And then went back on my way. Yes it was, I'm still getting nightmares from it, hearing her scream, and you hear these tales of having somebody have "bloodcurdling scream" – I now know exactly what that means. It's one of those screams that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand out and your blood feels as if it's running cold and time just stands still, it was – yes, horrific.

I: So how has it affected your wife and your son?

R: That event hasn't. I think in general I think we felt, you know, whilst the house was being rebuilt that we were just camping and just marking time till we could get back to our house. Yes it was stressful because whenever we wanted anything either (a) we'd lost it in the flood, or (b) whichever house we happened to be in, it was always at the other house. So yes, I think it felt as if

309f/Page nine

we were camping for four months rather than living; just marking time till we could restart life again back home. I suppose now we've got to the fun side of the flood, we've been lucky that our insurance has finally paid out. I know there's an awful lot of people in town still struggling with insurances so we're now at the stage where we can now put a nicer view on the flood and buy some nice new things. Sort of restock the house in a slightly different way because we don't want too many reminders.

I: So how has the wider community helped you?

R: I think the wider community, I said previously, have just been there. There have been times when all of us have been low and just needing somebody – friends, people we know, just to go and talk, or just even sit at times, quietly. You know, the church has been excellent as it sometimes is; and the parish church, as I know vicars in both, through scouting. Again, it's been a great place just to go and quietly at times just sit. Just to contemplate the fact that, yes, we lost a lot of stuff, but we are here. Yes, we're fortunate in Kendal that there was very little loss of life. In what could have been a major, major catastrophe. The emergency services on the night were – you cannot praise them enough for what they did and how they were helping people, from what I've seen as I was just trudging through town. They are remarkable people, they are the true heroes of the night, you know. A hero is a word these days, I think, that is bandied around for football players who score a goal. I don't see them as heroes. Those people who put their lives on the line countless times to look after people, you can't praise them enough. They're the ones who should be recognised.

I: From your scouting point of view, and the scouts themselves – how have they been affected?

R: Scouting, we've had two of the town's scout centres were flooded on the night. One of them just lost a lot of kit, which they're now slowly replacing; I think they tapped into the community fund to get some money from that. And they're looking at grants to replace it. The other scout hut lost its floor, it's had to have part of its walls redone, again lost some kit but they have now got the floor replaced. They're back in and scouting is happening as normal.

I: Right, is there anything else you think that we've not covered?

R: I don't think so. It's, I just hope for the town that it doesn't happen again. It's a memory that will last with me forever.

I: Thank you very much.

309f/Page ten

R: I certainly think that now in some ways Cumbria's been – lucky I suppose is a strange word to use for a major flooding – but I suppose in a way what you have to think of is the fact that whilst what happened was devastating, as, you know it ruined Christmas for a lot of families and things like that. And this is going to take months still to sort out. We're lucky in the fact we were flooded first and so that the insurance agents were able to start looking at Cumbria as a whole.

Then two weeks later the next load of flooding came through to take out both Yorkshire, Lancashire, Scotland. So you can understand in some ways why insurance companies are lagging. It's not because they don't want to get it sorted out for everybody, but the additional number of claims that they are processing must be horrendous. I suppose we're lucky that for those people who have started, the insurance companies are able to get onto it. So we can get the builders into Cumbria whereas Yorkshire, Lancashire, it's still there, they're now waiting for Cumbria to be finished to release all the builders. It sounds silly that we're looking for builders, but when you're talking one and a half, two thousand homes and businesses in one town, and that's one town in the third largest county in Britain, the numbers are just mind-boggling. So, yes, I think to have – from my own personal experience and thoughts – I feel lucky that I'm back at home within four months. There's going to be people who, eighteen months down the line, probably won't be home.

You know you can see it's still down in Somerset, remember from the flooding they had two years ago. That there are people still there, still not back in because again, it's a numbers game. I would dread to think how long it's going to take for the whole country to recover and the problem is we know that next winter there will be more storms and will it be us? Will it be somebody else who gets flooded? Only the big man upstairs knows the answer to that one and I think even with the weather now, even he's scratching his head going "Eeh heck, what have I done!"

I: Thank you.

Transcribed by PH, October 2016