

*The increasing likelihood of extreme weather events poses big challenges for the UK. Fortunately, there are some unexpected precedents.*

IN THE crypt of Winchester Cathedral stands a sculpture of a featureless man contemplating water pooled in his cupped hands. When it rains, the crypt floods, so the man is partially submerged. That's fitting for a building whose bishop until AD 862, Saint Swithin, is associated in folklore with incessant rainfall.

Last week, however, the water reached levels unmatched in recent memory, preventing anyone from visiting Antony Gormley's sculpture. Weeks of stormy weather have swollen the river Itchen to bursting point, threatening to deluge the ancient city, capital of the southern Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex during Swithin's time, and later that of England as a whole.



Elsewhere in the cathedral stands another remarkable statue, this one of a man wearing an antique diving suit. It commemorates William Walker, who spent six years working in the crypt's pitch-dark waters, single-handedly shoring up the cathedral's foundations in the early 20th century. His Herculean labours required nearly 26,000 bags of concrete, 115,000 concrete blocks and 900,000 bricks.

The engineers struggling to hold back the water in Winchester with sandbags and gravel are the heirs to Walker's approach. The same could be said of those who will have the job of rebuilding the defences of British towns afflicted by this winter's weather. That will be a slow, painstaking and expensive process. But given the increasing likelihood of extreme weather events, is that a sufficient response?

Much of the British Isles is clement, its population mostly unused to dramatic weather, and generally unprepared for the abrupt failure of transport, power and utility networks. But in the past month, the western regions' Victorian railway lines have become impassable, while the capital's Victorian sewage system has repeatedly overflowed into the Thames. Defending such vulnerable systems from future disasters will take ambitious feats of engineering rather than mere patching up – more like the construction of the Thames Barrier, without which London would have been far worse off.

But spending from the public purse is both financially and politically constrained: hence the hasty retraction last week of UK prime minister David Cameron's claim that "money is no object". Loosening the purse strings will require high-profile figures to break what psychologist Adam Corner calls the "climate silence" (see "Will record floods finally shift UK climate debate?"). Even then, the money needed to defend every acre of the UK's green and flooded lands is probably beyond reach.

Brits – just like those facing newly extreme weather around the world – need to find smarter ways to make their infrastructure more resilient, adapt so that they are personally better prepared for the bad times, and perhaps adopt the more stoical outlook of those who live in the world's more traditionally intemperate parts. More than that, they need to acknowledge that the climate, and with it their country, is changing – and that means some places may be beyond salvation (see "UK must abandon or adapt in face of floods").

On that last point, perhaps there's another Winchester denizen to look to: Canute, who became king in 1014 and is buried in the cathedral, is reputed to have commanded the Thames tide to turn back. Contrary to popular accounts, medieval sources make it clear that Canute knew he wouldn't succeed. Rather, he was making a point to his fawning courtiers about the limits of human power, even that of a king, over the forces of nature. That's a point we might do well to recall.