

Wettest year ends with downpours

Written by Darren

Wednesday, 02 January 2013 12:24 - Last Updated Wednesday, 02 January 2013 12:27



Hours of rain continued across much of the country on New Year's Eve, from downpours in some parts to the merely miserable, meaning that as 2012 ended, Britain was on course for the wettest year since records began.

The Met Office said just 46mm (1.8in) of rain by midnight would make this year the wettest – and six steady hours of rain in some places should have ensured that. England, which had drought orders in place in many areas in the spring, has already set a record, with 1,095.8mm of rain between 1 January and Boxing Day.

Parts of upland Cumbria, south Wales and south-west England saw torrential overnight rain, raising the likelihood of further flooding. Hundreds of Environment Agency flood alerts and warnings remain in place, and the Met Office has issued yellow warnings of more heavy rain and gales in many parts of Scotland, the north-east of England, London and the south-east, and Wales.

The ancient Tarr Steps bridge on Exmoor was washed away when fallen trees, swept down the swollen river Barle, snapped protective steel cables installed after a flood more than half a century ago. A spokeswoman for Exmoor national park said the stone slabs, some believed to be up to 1,000 years old, are all numbered, and will be replaced.

After an afternoon track inspection, Cheltenham racecourse cancelled New Year's Day racing because the course is under water in places. Ticket holders will have their money refunded.

In west Dorset, where the Undercliff path near Lyme Regis was closed several days ago, there

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were further landslips.

One of the flood warnings covers the river Thames near Hampton Court, where tourists were startled to see part of the Tudor moat filling with water.

However, the rain was set to clear in time for midnight celebrations for most, including Derry, which was kicking off its year as UK city of culture with plans for a fireworks display; Edinburgh, where up to 60,000 were expected in the streets around the castle; and London, where hundreds of thousands came to line the banks of the Thames in a city mostly closed to through traffic but with the underground running through the night, and free public transport for all from just before midnight into the small hours.

The year has seen a dismal succession of floods in many places, with at least 8,000 homes and business flooded, many repeatedly. The Environment Agency said almost 200,000 more were protected by flood defences.

In April, parts of Devon and Cornwall endured more than 24 hours of nonstop rain and, in June, Honister in Cumbria had eight inches of rain in one day. In July, the river Axe at Weycroft Bridge in Devon rose to 3.58 metres, the highest level ever recorded and the river Ouse in York reached its second highest recorded level in September.

The forecast for the first day of 2013 is much better, with calmer, drier weather, giving thousands of households a respite from weeks spent filling sandbags.