



Homes and businesses were flooded, tens of thousands of pounds of damage caused by high winds, and journeys by road and rail disrupted as the UK was battered again by rain and gales.

A band of heavy rain accompanied by winds of 70mph trundled across much of the country from the north-west, bringing with it chaos. Forecasters said on Thursday night that there was likely to be a reprieve on Friday before another weather front arrives at the weekend, this time from the south-west. Next week it is likely to turn calmer but colder, and there could be snow on the way.

The Midlands and south-west England bore the brunt on Thursday. In the Sparkhill area of Birmingham, a roof blew off a mosque, damaging three cars but missing passersby.

People in Halberton, Devon, were evacuated after a section of the 200-year-old Great Western Canal crumbled, allowing water to pour into fields.

Hundreds of homes were left without power in parts of the south-west as lines were brought down by the high winds and dozens of schools were closed. Christmas light switch-ons in Exeter and Plymouth and Cardiff's Winter Wonderland festivities were postponed.

Trains between Somerset and Devon were cancelled or delayed because part of the track was flooded and there were also problems in Hampshire after a train hit a branch that had fallen across the line.

An RNLI lifeboat stood by on the Somerset Levels amid concerns that more rain falling on ground that has been sodden for months combined with a high tide could lead to severe flooding. Parish councils across Somerset were asked to turn village halls into makeshift shelters.

People were evacuated from Billing Aquadrome campsite in Northamptonshire, while in Devon the coastguard warned people to stay out of the sea after a canoeist got into difficulty off Burgh Island, sparking an air and sea rescue effort. He managed to get back to shore under his own power.

The weather also made it into the House of Commons when the Tory MP Roger Gale raised the case of a shipment of livestock that had made it halfway across the Channel before being beaten back by the weather. "This is absolutely intolerable and it is done in the name of free trade," said Gale.

It all made for difficult driving conditions. The M48 Severn crossing was closed to all traffic while the Tamar bridge between Devon and Cornwall was shut to high-sided vehicles, caravans and motorcycles. The AA said it had experienced record callouts this week, receiving 900 breakdown reports every hour. On a typical Thursday it attends around 9,500 incidents. This Thursday it was expecting to reach the 13,000 mark.

The Met Office issued severe weather warnings for Thursday covering much of England, Scotland and Wales. By nightfall, Anglesey had suffered the worst of the downpours with 42mm of rain falling in 24 hours.

Paul Gundersen, the Met Office's deputy chief forecaster, said: "The current unsettled spell of weather is set to continue with further spells of heavy rain expected across the country over the next few days.

"There has been some torrential rain and squally winds on Thursday as a cold front moved across the UK, but another deep depression developing off Iberia will head towards us for the weekend. This is expected to bring more heavy rain and strong to gale force winds to many parts of the country."

There is some uncertainty about exactly what track the low pressure will take at the weekend and so where the strongest winds will be. Currently, The Met Office is forecasting the potential for gusts of 60 to 70mph for south-eastern coastal counties of England overnight Saturday and into Sunday. The Environment Agency warned there could be severe flooding across England.

By Thursday night more than 80 flood warnings – meaning flooding is expected – had been issued for England and Wales. Of them, 36 were for the south-west and 29 for the Midlands. In addition there were more than 180 flood alerts – meaning flooding is possible.

Ian Tomes, Environment Agency area flood risk manager, said: "We have mobilised teams across the country to check on flood defences, clear any river blockages and closely monitor river levels.

"We will do everything we can to warn and inform people about the risk of flooding from rivers but we cannot always prevent it, so people need to take action to prepare now."