



# Jules Hudson

## COUNTRY ESCAPE

Watching the January weather pound the town that was his home for 20 years was a very emotional time for Jules. Have our lessons been learnt, he wonders

Since the late 13th century, Edward I's castle has overlooked the coastal town of Aberystwyth at the centre of Cardigan Bay. Over hundreds of years it has seen the town below wax and wane as its fortunes have changed. In the early 15th century the castle was the seat of power for Owain Glyndwr, but during the civil war Cromwell's lads effectively demolished it, lest it should ever be of use to those troublesome Royalists. Since then it's seen calmer times. The town grew during a flush of expansion at the hands of the Victorians and Edwardians, who created the promenade and many of its now famous institutions and buildings: the University, The National Library, the Pier (built by pier supremo Eugenius Birch no less), and the railway that connects the capital of Mid Wales to the rest of the world, to name but a few.

For more than 20 years Aberystwyth was my local town. It was a place I came to appreciate warts and all, and as someone who's not really into towns at all, for Aber I willingly made an exception. The seafront still retained the charm and grace that its 19th-century builders had intended. Its hotels were still hotels, not bedsits, and it wasn't littered with the garish plastic cacophony of fruit machines and candy floss stalls that have ruined so many once enchanting coastal hotspots. On a warm summer's day, if you dressed most visitors to the prom in blazers and boaters, and took a picture in black and white, you'd be transported back to the Edwardian golden age of the seaside town, donkeys and all.

So imagine my horror, then, as I watched the news in January, as the weather set itself against the coast, the castle, and the community that is Aberystwyth. The Victorian pavilion and huge swathes of seemingly impregnable stone sea walls were smashed to pieces, yet astonishingly what's left of Birch's great pier survived.

Not since January 1938 had such a storm come ashore, and believe me we've had a few over the last two decades that I can recall. Seventy six years ago the repairs cost an estimated £70,000. Today this latest bill will run into millions.

Across the country, the new year storm that ushered in 2014 has had a devastating effect on many people. Thousands of homes

and businesses have been flooded and eight lives have been tragically lost.

This time last year I wrote about the pressing need to address the fundamentals of development: of how and where we build, and what we do with the water these projects create. Draining everything into our rivers is not the answer, but certainly there are many now voicing the opinion that a return to dredging our rivers will certainly help. Every time these events happen, the great and the good line up to assure us

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all that lessons have been learnt. Let's hope that 2014 becomes a real year of change. Let's stop talking about what we need to do, and let's see some real demonstrative action once and for all.

As I watched the clear up begin along the prom on TV, I wondered whether the people of Aber would come along and help. Well they did – some 200 of all ages turned out with barrows, buckets and shovels to do their bit, just as their forebears had done more than 70 years ago.

Nature reminds us every now and then never to take it for granted. It also reminds us that it's the idea of community that makes our settlements work. Aberystwyth's long history tells of people coming together for over a thousand years: no matter how devastating the recent storm has been, the great promenade will be back for us all to enjoy, and it'll be imbued with all the more local pride and sentiment thanks to the efforts of everyone who helped clear it up. Maybe the old folks are right. Perhaps every cloud does have a silver lining.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archaeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the Countryfile team, but is best known as the leading face of Escape To The Country. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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