

# Lynmouth Flood Disaster: RAF rainmaking experiment blamed for Devon's worst ever flood disaster

On the anniversary of the Lynmouth tragedy that claimed 34 lives, we look at compelling evidence that scientists were carrying out cloud seeding experiments

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By [Colleen Smith](#) Devon Live Chief Reporter

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Operation Cumulus was the name of the experiment being carried out by the RAF and an international team of scientists in August 1952.

On this day, August 15 1952, the cloud seeding experiments came to a sudden end, official documents have confirmed.



Thirty four people died in the flash storms that have become known at the Lynmouth Flood

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devastated Lynmouth and into the village destroying homes, bridges, shops and hotels.

In August 1952 eyewitnesses described the 'purple black' clouds that accumulated over Exmoor - some even said the threatening skies had a weird greenish tinge. And more than one person observed that the clouds above North Devon and West Somerset were moving in completely opposite directions.



### Pictures from Lynmouth Flood Disaster 65 years on -

The disaster was officially termed a 'hand of God' event. But in 2001 the BBC unearthed new evidence from previously classified government files suggesting that a team of international scientists working with the RAF was experimenting with artificial rainmaking in southern Britain in the same week and could possibly have been implicated.



# The Lynmouth Flood Disaster

A dark day in Devon's history

Words by Martin Hesp

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Squadron Leader Len Otley, who was working on Operation Cumulus, told the BBC that they jokingly referred to the rainmaking exercise as Operation Witch Doctor.

The Ministry of Defence has categorically denied knowledge of any cloud-seeding experiments taking place in the UK during early August 1952. But the new documents suggest that Operation Cumulus was going on between August 4 and August 15 1952 - it was stopped abruptly on the day of the Lynmouth disaster.

Operation Cumulus was put on hold indefinitely after the tragedy.

RAF navigator Group Captain John Hart remembers the early experiments, [The Guardian reported](#) : "We flew straight through the top of the cloud, poured dry ice down into the cloud. We flew down to see if any rain came out of the cloud. And it did about 30 minutes later, and we all cheered."

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The meteorological office had previously denied there were any rainmaking experiments conducted before 1955, but a BBC Radio 4 history investigation, broadcast in August 2001, unearthed documents at the public record office showing that they were going on from 1949 to 1955. RAF logbooks and personnel corroborate the evidence.

ICI in Billingham.

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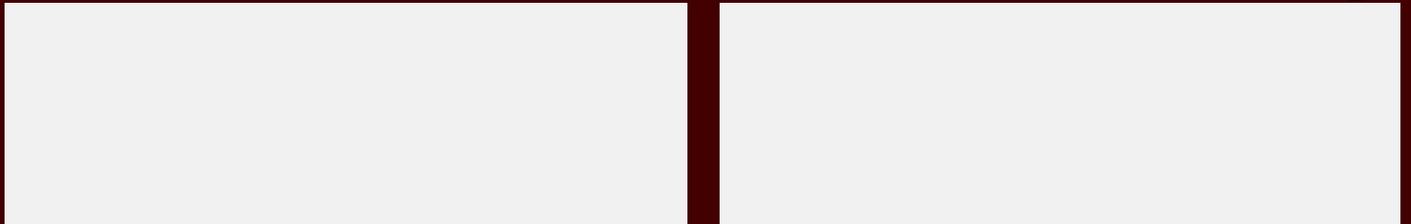
Swept away - 34 died in the Lynmouth Flood Disaster

A 60-year-old radio broadcast unearthed by Radio 4 describes an aeronautical engineer and glider pilot, Alan Yates, working with Operation Cumulus flying over Bedfordshire, spraying salt which caused a heavy downpour 50 miles away over Staines, in Middlesex.

"The rain was the heaviest for several years - and all out of a sky which looked summery ... there was no disguising the fact that the seedsman had said he'd make it rain, and he did.

"Toasts were drunk to meteorology and it was not until the BBC news bulletin [about Lynmouth] was read later on, that a stony silence fell on the company," said Mr Yates at the time.

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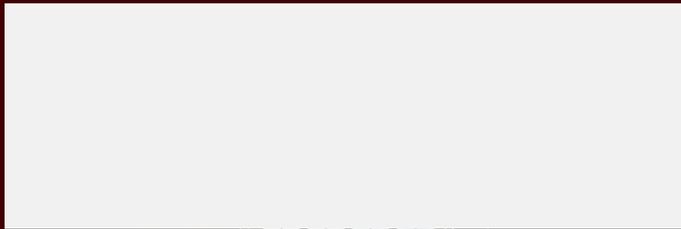
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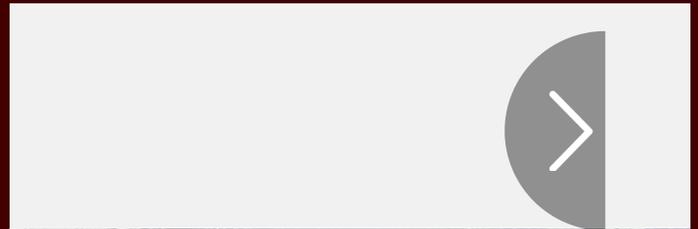
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UK weather modification experiments at the time targeted 'super cool' clouds to increase the volume of freezing water vapour particles.

Methods included firing particles of salt, dry ice, or silver iodide, into clouds, either from an aeroplane or from burners on the ground.

The clouds would be pulled below freezing by the extra weight of dense particles, making the rain fall sooner and heavier.

Significantly, silver iodide was claimed to cause a downpour up to 300 miles away.

The British Geological Survey examined soil sediments in the district of Lynmouth to see if any silver or iodide residues remain. The testing was limited due to restrictions in place because of foot and mouth disease, and it is inconclusive. However, silver residue has been discovered in the catchment waters of the river Lyn.



The list of possible uses included "bogging down enemy movement", "incrementing the  
... ..

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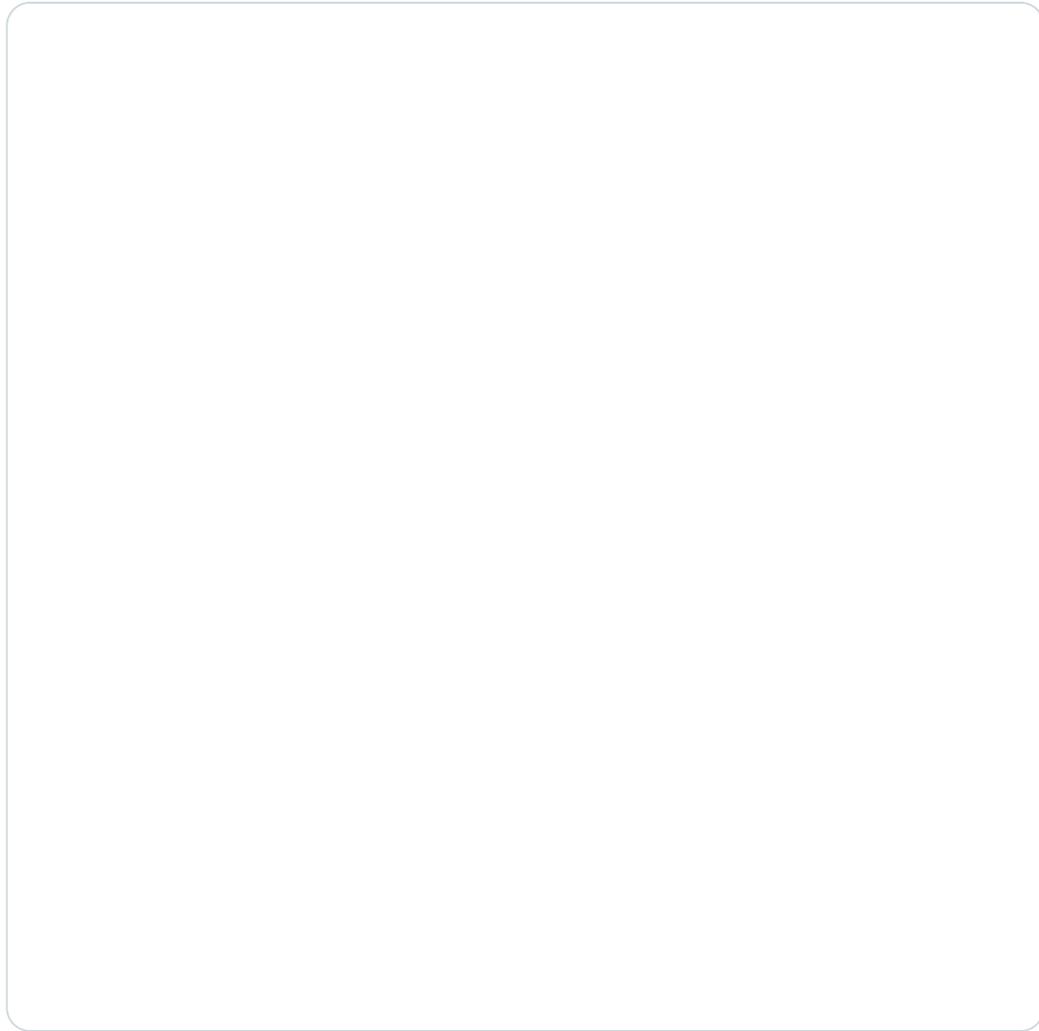
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Today marks the anniversary of the severe flooding in  
Lynmouth in 1952. 9 inches of rain fell on already  
saturated land over Exmoor, Devon in 24 hours, causing  
the River Lyn to flood.

👉 Read our factsheet for more on the weather that day  
[bit.ly/2KPTF7X](https://bit.ly/2KPTF7X)



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the small harbour village that night causing death and devastation.

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### Pictures from Lynmouth Flood Disaster 65 years on - John Pedder

Not all of the people killed were in Lynmouth. The deaths included babies, children, teenagers, back-packers, husbands and wives and the elderly.

One eye-witness was John Pedder (pictured above in 2017). He survived by climbing across rooftops and watched as cars, buildings and whole trees were swept by just feet from him.



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### Pictures from Lynmouth Flood Disaster 65 years on - Wendy Marker

Wendy Marker was working at a local hotel on that fateful Friday night, when her parents decided to evacuate their home.

"When I got back along the road I couldn't use the river path - they were all up at the school. Was I frightened? No, not really," said Wendy. "I'd lived by the river all my life and was used to hearing it roar. The school was above where we lived and they were all there except three people who lived in one of the other cottages. They refused to leave. But then they were always a bit like that - the sort who'd peer out from behind their curtains at you. Very old.

"And I remember the great crash that happened at around one in the morning. That was that for the cottages - and for the three old people. All gone. Not a thing left.

"It's strange really," she added. "You know most people have got something handed down from their mum, or their grandmother. I haven't got a thing. Not a single hand-me-down. It all went in the flood."

Controversy still surrounds the early cloud-seeding experiments. In 1955 questions were asked in the Commons about the possibilities of liability and compensation claims.

The BBC Radio 4 programme *The Day They Made It Rain* suggested that both the air ministry and the Treasury were aware that rainmaking could cause damage, not just to military targets and personnel, but also to civilians.

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