

Why our water is going down the drain

Haphazard development, lack of investment and reliance on Victorian structures are creating a looming water crisis in parts of Britain, yet we are still more fortunate than other countries. It will take effort, organisation and a lot of money, but adequate supplies for all are within reach, says Lord Deben

A THOUSAND years ago, English rivers were fed by hundreds and hundreds of tiny streams that ran in a pattern like the veins on a spreading leaf. This natural drainage flowed slowly and carried little silt. Then, as farming developed, it demanded more extensive and speedier drainage. Ditches were dug, peatlands harvested and even the heavy clay soil of East Anglia made productive. Efficient water management drained the natural rivulets into manmade channels that fed directly into rivers. It was the basis of the Agricultural Revolution and few considered the long-term effects of drying the peat or carrying the top soil out to sea.

After the Second World War, artificial fertilisers and chemical inputs were unquestionably seen as the way ahead. Productivity soared, supported by public subsidy, and the chemical residues were carried away along these improved drainage systems, further polluting rivers and damaging biodiversity. At the same time, piped water was extended to almost every village and, with it, more and more homes were connected to the sewage system. Millions of houses were built or improved and businesses expanded—all of which expected to be supplied. Water had never been more available nor more convenient; it was cheap, in town and country alike, and people expected it to be cheap—after all, it fell free from the sky.

Alas, the system had not been planned. It had grown in an entirely haphazard way and, by the 1970s, the strain was becoming all too obvious, so the then Prime Minister, Edward Heath, pulled it together into a more

logical structure of 10 regional water authorities. These new bodies inherited an aged, under-invested system funded by an outdated mechanism of water rates, which were largely unconnected with usage. Neither governments nor municipalities ever provided adequate investment because there were always more urgent demands for funds.

When Britain signed up to the European Community's water regime, the awful truth had to be faced: we had the worst water standards in northern Europe. Beaches were filthy, sewage floated in the seas, hosepipe bans had become the norm and the fast-growing demand could not be met. Huge investment was required to make up for past failures,

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which is why Margaret Thatcher determined on privatisation as the only way to afford to do what was clearly necessary.

Looking back, it can be seen that neither public nor private ownership has been a success. At the

heart of it is an unwillingness to pay the necessary price for water. Even after privatisation, successive governments used the regulators to keep the water bills down for electoral reasons. Companies were allowed to profit improperly and yet, at the same time, they were not allowed to undertake the necessary investment. The financial regulator, Ofwat, drove the system and the Environment Agency lacked the funds or the influence to play an effective role.

Now, following the extensive report by Sir Jonathan Cunliffe (*Town & Country*, →

In 2025, Carsington Water in Derbyshire was a mere two-thirds full (below), a stark contrast to how it appeared in 2016 (top)



The water issue



The reservoir count

- By mid June, reservoirs across England were averaging 88% fullness, a marked improvement on 2025, although some were still low for the time of year. The healthiest levels were across the North of the country
- The last major reservoir created was Carsington Water in Derbyshire, opened in 1992. It covers 750 acres and can hold 7,800 million gallons of water
- The Government has announced plans to build nine major reservoirs by 2050
- Work started on Havant Thicket Reservoir in Hampshire in 2024; it is expected to be operational by 2031
- The Fens Reservoir near Chatteris in Cambridgeshire should be functioning by 2036 and the Lincolnshire Reservoir near Sleaford by 2040
- Other proposed new reservoirs yet to be started include Abingdon in Oxfordshire, Mendips in Somerset, Broad Oak near Canterbury, Kent, as well as others in Suffolk, East Sussex and the West Midlands

Among the first of the new Queen’s duties in 1952 was to open Claerwen Dam in the Elan valley, Wales, still Britain’s highest

August 6, 2025), which was highly critical of the lack of cohesion, the Government has put a new structure in place which seeks to correct the failures of privatisation without the huge cost and questionable value of a return to public ownership. However, fundamental problems remain and are made more urgent by the changes in climate. Much of Britain’s water infrastructure is more than a century old and deteriorating fast. There is water in the North, but a real shortage in the South and East. The means of carrying water to the stressed areas are wholly inadequate and dependent upon canals and aqueducts built by the Victorians. The South of England is at the end of the water transfer system and, all the way down, water is taken by various regional undertakings, so that there is simply not enough left for Southern or South East Water. Of course, these poorly run businesses ought to have built reservoirs to conserve local rainfall, but, through a mixture of regulation failure, planning refusals and company neglect, they haven’t.

Indeed, a new reservoir hasn’t been built in England for more than 30 years (*see box*). The Canal & River Trust (CRT) needs urgent investment to repair the ageing infrastructure bringing water from north to south. Dams, aqueducts and canals need upgrading if their failure is not to threaten whole communities and if they are to play their necessary role in flood prevention. Yet the Government is planning to reduce CRT’s budget. The cost of that cut may well be measured in lives, as well as in economic loss. It must not be allowed.

In the East of England, things are even more serious. Here, shortages are endemic. The Essex and Suffolk Water company has announced that it cannot provide water for any new or expanded business in its area until 2033. Yet, every year in winter, vast quantities of freshwater are pumped from the fields into the sea. Then, during summer, in this semi-arid region, farmers don’t have enough water for the irrigation upon which they depend. Urgent works to conserve this

Far from clear: the Wye, affected by sewage outflows and agricultural run-off, is at the forefront of campaigns to clean up our rivers

water supply are a priority for a Government that has properly recast the regulatory system, but still has no long-term integrated programme to address these issues.

Drier summers, wetter winters, more severe storms and torrential rain—this is today’s reality and we need a land-use policy to reflect it. Serious flooding is inevitable unless previous drainage methods are reversed, slowing the water flow by allowing more to be held in the land. Farmers should be enabled to plant trees and hedges appropriately and encouraged to dig and restore farm ponds. Farm reservoirs should become the norm and be part of agricultural permitted development, so they don’t require planning permission.

New buildings should be designed to reduce wastage, save water and be drained in a sustainable way. White goods and water kit—from shower heads to taps—installed should meet higher water-saving standards. There must be no more paving over front gardens

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for car parking, but permeable surfaces instead, to allow the water to drain properly.

Our rivers need cleaning up. Water companies and agriculture have an equal role in this. For example, the cause of pollution in the Wye (*Town & Country, May 27*) is a 50-50 split between sewage outflows and agriculture—the direct and indirect run-off from poultry farms is a major contributor. The food industry has a pivotal role in the clean up, but if we want clean rivers, farmers cannot be undercut by imported food produced without the environmental costs imposed on them here.

The reality is that there is no business as usual. Britain is not ready to cope with torrential rainfall or summer drought. Yet water is not only an essential for life, but a necessity for economic growth. The data centres that will drive the future economy use huge quantities of water. Food security depends on water for farmers. In much of the rest of the world, water is even more scarce than it is here and many producers we have relied on for imports will become too water-stressed to supply. In a world where already more than two billion people lack safe drinking water, climate change will exacerbate the problem. Despite all that Britain has to do and the huge costs involved, we are truly fortunate. We can have the water we need, at a price we are able to afford, if only we have the determination to secure it. 🐉

Lord Deben is a member of the House of Lords, a former Environment Secretary and a former chair of the Climate Change Committee