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Thames Flood Prevention

THE remarkable tidal flood which occurred on January 6-7, 1928, in the Thames basin, with disastrous consequences in the districts of Westminster and Chelsea, where, unhappily, a number of lives were lost, has become, perhaps, a dim memory, but the incident is still recallable and again claims attention in the issue recently of the report of the Departmental Committee on Thames Flood Prevention.* The Committee was appointed in April 1931 with the following terms of reference : "To consider the present organisation for the prevention of damage by floods in the tidal portion of the Thames, and to make recommendations as to the further measures, if any, that may be necessary, as to the Authority or Authorities to which the duty of carrying out any such measures should be entrusted, and as to the basis on which the cost should be distributed."

The problem is undoubtedly one of grave public importance affecting the safety of many inhabitants of the metropolitan area, and its significance was emphasised in 1929 by the publication of a report by Dr. A. T. Doodson of the Tidal Institute, University of Liverpool, whose researches in the matter of ocean surges, undertaken at the joint cost of the London County Council and the Port of London Authority, showed a connexion existing between such surges in the North Sea and abnormal tidal levels in the Thames, an increase in height of so much as 7 ft. being considered possible. The full extent of the implications of this discovery remains to be determined. Undoubtedly, it has a widespread bearing on tidal phenomena which calls for early investigation in the interests of all riverside dwellers and riparian authorities.

Confining attention at the moment to the locality of the Thames valley and to the conclusions of the report under consideration, it is of interest to note that the Committee unanimously advocates the institution of a single authority to exercise control over the measures to be taken to prevent flooding throughout the entire tidal area. At the present time, there is an unco-ordinated 'medley' of bodies entrusted with the duty, with great disparity of powers, consisting of county and county borough councils, catchment boards and commissioners of sewers—the result of haphazard historical development. In place of these heterogeneous units, the Committee recommends the

* Report of the Departmental Committee on Thames Flood Prevention. (Cmd. 4452.) Pp. 24+1 map. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1933.) 6d. net.

formation of a Joint Committee to consist of representatives of the County Councils of Essex, Kent, London, Middlesex and Surrey, the County Borough Councils of East Ham, West Ham and Southend, the Catchment Boards of the Essex Rivers—Lee, Medway and Roding—the Thames Conservancy, and the Port of London Authority.

As to the wisdom of single and centralised control, there can be no shadow of doubt, and the suggested composition of the controlling body leaves little ground for criticism. The county and borough councils, naturally, are to have the preponderant representation (nine members), the catchment boards being jointly represented by two members and the Thames Conservancy by one member out of a total number of fifteen, the remaining three members being nominees of the Port Authority. It is perhaps permissible to observe in this connexion that the functions of the Port Authority are mainly concerned with navigation and commerce, and not necessarily or essentially with land protection, though, if the Authority is willing to add to its responsibilities in this direction, there is no valid objection. Furthermore, there is the consideration that the jurisdiction of the Authority over the bed of the river extends from Teddington Weir to an imaginary straight line drawn from the entrance of Havengore Creek in Essex to Warden Point in Kent, so that the greater part of the area to be controlled by the Joint Committee comes under the daily observation of the Authority's officers. At any rate, the Authority has expressed its readiness to place at the disposal of the Committee the use of the Authority's offices and organisation and the assistance of its staff—a public-spirited offer which is deserving of commendation. A significant omission (in view, no doubt, of their impending dissolution) is that of representation of the two remaining independent commissions of sewers in Kent, which still jointly control some forty miles of river frontage.

The Committee, when formed, is to examine the whole position and to make a survey of the entire area "to see what works of flood defence are necessary". It will be the duty of the Committee to "employ such experts and obtain such advice as they may think necessary with a view to a thorough investigation of the problem of flooding in the tidal basin" and, thereafter, to formulate proposals for remedial works, including restriction on users of land (if any) which may be considered desirable. These proposals are to be submitted

for consultation with the executive local authorities, upon whom will devolve the execution of the various projects. In case of conflict of opinion, any authority persisting in objection to an approved scheme of the Committee would have the right of appeal to a Minister of the Crown.

The question of the distribution of cost of protective works is met in the report by reference to the provisions of the Land Drainage Act, 1930, which govern the situation in catchment areas, and it is recommended that the principles of that Act should, in general, be followed in other areas. "Thus, the cost of construction of flood works included in an approved scheme should be a charge on the County or County Borough Council, with a discretion vested in the County Councils to defray it, either as expenses for general county purposes or as expenses for special county purposes chargeable on such areas as they think fit, or by apportioning it between and charging it on such areas and in such proportions as they think fit or partly by one of these methods and partly by another". Maintenance of works would continue to devolve on the riparian owner, if at present liable; otherwise, it would fall on the county or county borough council. Such is the general outline; there are certain details of incidence and apportionment of cost which need not be particularised here.

An important and justifiable reservation is made in exempting the Committee and the executive local authorities from liability for claims. They are not to be held liable to compensate sufferers from the effects of a flood: "the risks are altogether too uncertain and the possible liabilities too onerous". It will be agreed that in the present state of knowledge respecting the causes and advent of floods, it is impossible within the limits of human foresight to make provision for all contingencies that may arise; and, indeed, unless excessive expenditure is to be incurred, there must continue to be an element of risk of damage, which it will be the Committee's duty to endeavour to reduce to a minimum.

Having, after patient and painstaking inquiry, arrived at its conclusions, the Departmental Committee has incorporated them in a series of recommendations. It now rests with the Government to carry the recommendations into effect. Action in the matter should be taken without delay in order to safeguard the public, and to remove the possibility of another experience so tragic and disastrous as that of January 1928.