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THE STORM OF JANUARY 2, 1976

BY

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Introduction:

Although Ireland is a rather windy country, and experiences gales every year, particularly in the winter period, those causing widespread damage happen only a few times per century. One of the more recent memorable storms was perhaps "Hurricane Debbie" which occurred on September 16, 1961. The worst storm this century was probably that of February 26/27th, 1903. Another of importance was on January 11/12th, 1974 (Meteorological Service Internal Memorandum IM 79/74). Another notable storm, although less severe, occurred on January 2, 1976. Unlike the January 1974 storm, which was heralded by several days of an almost continuous series of gales, the latest storm took the general public, and to some extent the weather forecast office, a little by surprise.

During the previous month the weather in Ireland had been dominated by an unusually strong anticyclone centred in the North Atlantic to the west of Europe. Later this anticyclone had declined and frontal wave depressions, originating further west in the North Atlantic affected the northwest of Europe. A minor depression passed over Ireland on January 1, 1976 giving some gale gusts in places. This was followed however, by another depression which intensified considerably, particularly when it was off the north coast of Ireland, during the afternoon of January 2, 1976 giving storm force winds in many areas throughout the country.

For a preliminary analysis of the extreme wind distribution during the storm the maximum wind averaged over ten minutes and the highest gust for each station is shown in Figure 1. In this figure the arrow points with the wind direction and the strength of the ten-minute mean wind, expressed in the Beaufort wind force scale (see Figure 2), is plotted at the tail of the arrow. The maximum gust in knots and the spatial progress, depicted by isochrones, of the occurrence of maximum gust is also given. It seems that for the northern and central parts of the country the strongest ten-minute mean winds of the storm blew from the west-northwest or northwest direction but for the southern and southwestern regions maximum winds were mainly from the southwest or west-southwest. The maximum mean winds reached violent storm force 11 at Roche's Point and storm force 10 in the Shannon and the Mid-West regions and at Malin Head. Maximum gusts in excess of 80 kts were encountered in the same areas except in the case of the station at Malin Head where a gust of 73 knots only was recorded. Surprisingly enough the highest gust for the country (85 kts) occurred at Birr.

In Figure 1 a time cross-section of the times of occurrence of maximum gusts has been entered at half hourly intervals. The isochrones are seen to converge closer to each other in the Shannon region which might suggest a localised delay in the spatial progress of the occurrence of the maximum gust or alternatively that maximum winds may have been sustained for longer in the region. The delay was caused by a post cold frontal trough well marked over the northeast half of the country. The anemogram from Birr shows a fairly sharp peak of strong winds, perhaps more typical of a squall, in contrast to the more gradual build up of wind force recorded at Shannon Airport. On the other hand the wind trace at Shannon Airport doesn't suggest that the strongest winds were sustained for an unduly longer period than at most other stations. No firm conclusions could be drawn therefore, about the character of the wind during the somewhat slower spatial progress of storm force mean winds and maximum gusts in the region between Shannon Airport and Birr. Newspaper accounts refer to the unusual intensity of the storm in the area particularly along the upper Shannon from Limerick to Portumna or Athlone.

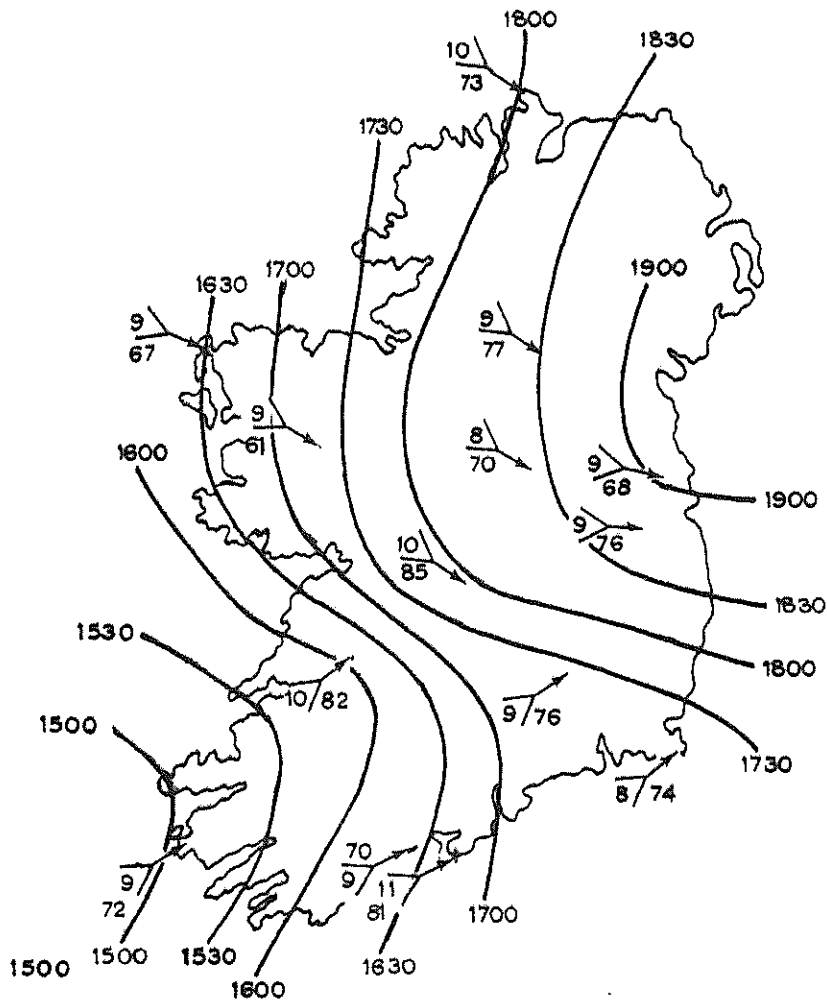


Fig. 1. The direction (indicated by an arrow) and the strength of the maximum ten-minute wind in the Beaufort wind scale (shown within the arrow tail) are plotted for each synoptic station. The maximum gust (in knots) and isochrones showing the time of occurrence (GMT) of maximum wind gusts are also included.

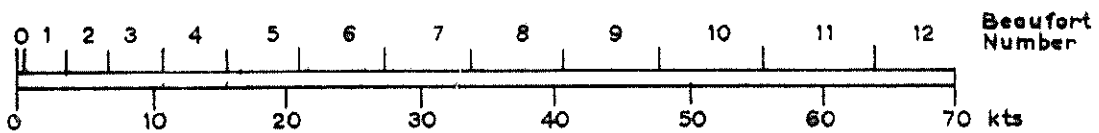


Fig. 2 Beaufort scale number and equivalent wind velocity in knots.

Table 1, attached, gives the direction, speed and time of the maximum gust at each station for the storm of January 2nd. The highest ten-minute and sixty-minute mean wind speed recorded at each station is also shown. The number of hours with gusts of 48 knots or greater and the times, in hours GMT, preceding and succeeding the first and last gusts respectively, is also shown in the table to give some indication of the duration of storm condition at the various stations. These latter columns of the table show that generally the storm lasted longest in northwest, west and southwest regions while the minimum duration was inland mainly east of the Shannon. It is worth noting that, of the stations examined, Claremorris experienced the lowest maximum gust and had the lowest number of hours with gusts reaching or exceeding 48 kts but on the other hand the number of hours with gale gusts reported at Claremorris was comparable to most other stations (gale gusts have not been included in Table 1). It is also interesting that although Birr reported the highest gust for the country the duration of storm winds there was relatively short.

Table 2 compares the January 1976 storm with the storm on January 11/12th, 1974 and also with another somewhat less severe storm which occurred in the same month in 1974. It appears from the table that the January 1976 storm was of shorter duration than the first January 1974 storm and much shorter in the north and west of the country. The highest ten-minute mean winds were lower except in some mid-west regions. Comparing the storm with the second storm of January 1974 it proved to be about equal in duration except on the north coast and in some north-western areas where it did not last as long. The maximum mean speed over ten minutes was greater in many inland and eastern regions during the latest storm, particularly at Birr and Dublin Airport. Claremorris however, experienced a much stronger wind force in January 1974.

TABLE 1

Highest Gusts and their times of occurrence, highest mean speed over ten-minute and sixty-minute intervals, the number of hours with gusts ≥ 48 kts and time (in whole hours GMT) preceding and succeeding first and last gusts respectively. January 2nd 1976

Station	Highest Gust			Highest Mean Speed Recorded over		Gusts ≥ 48 kts		
	Direction	Speed	Time	10-minutes	60-minutes	Hour at start	Hour ended	Actual No. of hours.
	o	kts	GMT	kts	kts	GMT	GMT	
Valentia Observatory	240	72	1508	46	44	0800	1900	10
Roche's Point	250	81	1645	56	50	1000	2200	11
Cork Airport	250	70	1629	45	41	1000	2000	9
Rosslare	230	74	1725	40	39	1100	2100	9
Shannon Airport	240	82	1607	54	52	1200	2100	8
Birr	300	85	1756	51	38	1500	2000	5
Kilkenny	240	76	1723	43	41	1600	2100	4
Casement Airport	280	76	1845	44	40	1200	2200	7
Dublin Airport	290	68	1905	46	43	1300	2200	6
Mullingar	300	70	1823	39	35	1500	2000	5
Clones	310	77	1830	43	42	1400	2300	8
Claremorris	320	61	1727	43	39	1500	1800	3
Belmullet	320	67	1630	43	40	0800	2100	12
Malin Head*	320	73	1810	53	49	0900	0700 (Jan. 3rd)	17(14)**

* Effective height of anemometer 18 metres (10 metres approx. for all other stations)

** Essentially two periods with gusts; in southeast to south winds from 0900 to 1300 GMT and in northwest winds from 1700 to 0700 GMT

TABLE 2

Highest mean speeds over a 10 minute interval and the number of hours with gusts ≥ 48 kts for the two storms in January 1974 and the storm on January 2nd, 1976.

Station	11-12/1/1974 (1)			27-28/1/1974 (2)			2/1/1976 (3)			(1) - (3)		(2) - (3)	
	Direction	Mean Speed	hrs with gusts	Direction	Mean Speed	hrs with gusts	Direction	Mean Speed	hrs with gusts	kts	hrs	kts	hrs
Valentia Observatory	o	kts	hrs	o	kts	hrs	o	kts	hrs	kts	hrs	kts	hrs
Roche's Point	190	54	16	200	54	11	240	46	10	8	6	8	1
Cork Airport	210	62	13	220	53	13	250	56	11	6	2	-3	2
Rosslare	210	58	12	220	48	8	250	45	9	13	3	3	-1
Shannon Airport	200	46	12	160	42	12	230	40	9	6	3	2	3
Birr	220	55	11	220	53	6	240	54	8	1	3	-1	-2
Kilkenny	220	47	8	210	39	7	300	51	5	-4	3	-12	2
Casement Airport	200	44	9	200	36	5	240	43	4	1	5	-7	1
Dublin Airport	190	53	13	190	45	9	280	44	7	9	6	1	2
Mullingar	230	47	12	200	35	8	290	46	6	1	6	-11	2
Clones	220	45	10	200	38	5	300	39	5	6	5	-1	0
Claremorris	220	43	10	230	44	8	310	43	8	0	2	1	0
Belmullet	260	40	10	220	59	9	320	43	3	-3	7	16	6
Malin Head	260	50	25	240	49	12	320	43	12	7	13	6	0
Malin Head	240	54	27	190	61	23	320	53	17	1	10	8	6

Reports of the Storm of January 1976, received from other Sources

From newspaper reports it seems that, from a local point of view, peak storm conditions lasted some two hours in many places. The Westmeath/Offaly Independent wrote that most damage was done in the Midlands area between 1730 and 1930 local time when the storm was "fierce in intensity". It appears that the most widely disruptive aspect of the storm was the number of trees which fell blocking a considerable number of major and minor roads, cutting electricity and telephone cables in several places and directly causing most of the traffic accidents at the time.

The Electricity Supply Board (ESB) estimated that some 90,000 homes, or one tenth of the total number of homes supplied, had their electricity disrupted for a prolonged period at a cost to the Board of about £250,000 for repairs. Cable damage was particularly bad in the West Limerick and Kerry regions and extra repair crews were drafted into the area. Widespread disruption of electric supply was also caused in the extreme south of the country, in counties Cork and Kerry. There were many lucky escapes reported throughout the country. Flying slates and collapsing walls were reported from Limerick city, Dunlaoire and Cork city. Five people were killed however during the height of the storm - three deaths in the Midlands, one in Co. Wicklow and one in Belfast.

During the storm the river Shannon overflowed its banks in Limerick. The tide level at Limerick Harbour was only three inches short of its record level of twenty seven feet. The Shannon south of Athlone also burst its banks and low lying areas were heavily flooded. Cos. Louth and Meath were also badly hit - the Drogheda fire service answered some 58 calls. Some flooding of houses was also reported from Ballina, Co. Mayo and from Cos. Cavan and Monaghan.

The Connaught Tribune reported that the storm hit south Co. Galway with unusual ferocity and that it was generally assumed in the area that had the blast continued for another half hour the effects would have been "disastrous". At Kinvara the sea cascaded across the quays and for a time the town was threatened with being cut off from the outside by the tides which swept over the road in two places. Fortunately the storm abated just when calamity appeared imminent. The Clare Champion described the trail of destruction in Co. Clare with particular reference to the West and Southeast where the gales caused much havoc. It was said to be one of the worst storms ever in Killaloe and it caused widespread, though not serious, damage.

Air, sea and rail movements were widely disrupted. Some 400 passengers, many of them returning with their families after Christmas to their EEC duties in Brussels, were delayed at Rosslare because the Ferry, St. Patrick, was ten hours late arriving from Le Havre. Many islands off the west coast were isolated, cut off by the heaviest seas of the winter. A number of aircraft were grounded for some hours at the airports and an inflatable cargo hanger at Shannon Airport was blown away.

This storm does not appear to have had the same widespread severity as other storms in recent years. On the other hand its severity in the mid-west region of the country, along the upper river Shannon, is not too often experienced there. Averaged over the country as a whole storm force winds were sustained for some three-fifths and three-quarters respectively of the equivalent periods for the two previous January 1974 storms. On average, the duration of storm force winds for "Hurricane Debbie" was about the same as for the January 1976 storm.

Judging the storm by the number of homes with major disruption in the ESB supply this storm would seem to have been about one third as disruptive as the first storm in January 1974, and about equal to the second storm of that month. The number of deaths by accidents attributed to the storm was double each of the previous two storms but the numbers of deaths in all cases were relatively few.

The storm reached maximum vigour as it passed into Great Britain and it moved on from there to the Baltic States through the North Sea and Denmark. Some 47 deaths and widespread damage were reported from Great Britain and northern Europe.