

# Chesterfield: how an antiques centre struggles to pick up the pieces after Storm Babet

*By Kai Kong*



A vintage boy figurine damaged in the storm.

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Surrounded by dust and moisture, Sofia Brown stands on the top of a stepladder, asking her friend to pass her a drill and trying to remove a yellowed curtain track. Meanwhile, her cousin sprays sugar soap to clean the brickwork in another stuffy room.

They are rebuilding her antiques centre Olympia House, which had housed 50 traders selling homeware, clothes, toys, books, and other vintage items in Chesterfield.



Sophia Brown inside her antiques centre under renovation.



Brown's friend Debbie Ramsdale is passing her a drill to remove a curtain track. She also helps Brown to remove a soaked wooden cover of a window.



Brown's cousin Amjad Latif is cleaning the brickwork with a drill brush and sweet soap.

On 20 October, the two-storey building near the River Rother was devastatingly flooded as Storm Babet battered the country. The 38-year-old owner arrived the following day. She climbed over debris, trying to save her shop with teams of volunteers.

Brown said everything in the area was covered with inches of black sludge, which she later learned contained toxins. She and the others suffered stomach-aches and swollen fingers. Nearly 95 per cent of her goods and furniture, valued at least £50,000, were contaminated.

“It looked like the aftermath of a tsunami,” she said.



Brown's co-worker and friend, Kayleigh Goodban is showing the original shopfront with her vintage homeware. Now, only debris is left in front of the shop.



Damaged antiques and furniture also fills the shop's car park. Another Brown's friend, Lucy Banks is holding a broken original 1800s stained glass window.

The Met Office said seven people died in the UK as a result of the storm. Over 1,000 properties in England were flooded, and of those, 400 homes in the Derbyshire town were evacuated. An 83-year-old woman who lived opposite the antiques centre died in the flood.

Five months later, the community is still disposing of debris and renovating their properties, with some residents placing skips outside their yards.



Residents on the other side of the River Rother have skips outside their yards.



One resident's car was damaged by the flood, with water still in its headlight.

Without insurance payouts and government grants for months, Brown could not even pay for utilities such as telephone and water bills. She and her cousin started to repair the centre just by using just hammers and chisels.

One week after the floods, the government said businesses could get £2,500 from the Business Recovery Grant provided they were actively seeking flood insurance. But Brown did not receive the grant until the second week of February this year.

“If you'd have come and met me before Christmas...my head had gone. I didn't want to talk to anybody,” she said.

“We've been left to just fend for ourselves,” she added.

The floods had dragged branches and rubbish into the river, with litter stuck in trees along the banks. Brown said it was “disgusting” and that the Environment Agency should step up clearance work. But the burden of tackling the pollution has now fallen on a voluntary group.





Dale Smith in front of his canoe club unit.

“We’ve been doing it probably every weekend since the flood,” said Dale Smith, 56, the founder of Pleasley Canoe Club. Members of his club have spent over hundreds of hours removing rubbish for the town.

“If we don’t, there’s nobody else to do it,” he said, “people will litter pick, but you’ve got to have a certain skill set to operate around moving water.”



A cyclist riding along the River Rother, with rubbish stuck in trees. An oil drum, a pallet and a log in the flow of river.

Back at the antiques centre, Brown said she planned to keep her shop flood-proof with bare brick walls, concrete floors, metal partitions and UPVC doors. She was determined to move forward, thanks to the help from her family and co-workers.

“All the traders that sell within Olympia House, we are a family,” she said, “they all come and they help,”

“When water does decide to enter the building again,” she said, “ we can let it recede...wash it down and carry on.”