

The Great Flood of 1953

in Essex

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Introduction

The catastrophic East Coast Floods on the night of 31st January 1953 will stay in the memory of many of those involved whether directly, through their families, or as part of the community which was affected, together with the organisations and agencies that responded to the tragic events which affected our communities along the east coast of our country.

The events of that night will be commemorated throughout Essex with communities coming together to remember and reflect. They will also be joined on 31st January 2013, by HRH the Princess Royal who will be attending a commemoration service to be held at Chelmsford Cathedral and join the congregation to remember those that lost their lives, the families and friends they left behind and the responders who helped and supported the communities over the long period of recovery.

As a young boy, I do recall the events of that night living on Mersey Island, but it is for many others a particularly poignant realisation that there was almost a total lack of warnings which could have perhaps saved lives. So while the first impact was being felt in Lincolnshire, the people of Essex were unaware of the events unfolding and were still enjoying a normal Saturday evening.

As we approach the 60th anniversary, when even fewer of those with first hand memories are still with us, it is appropriate to remember, reflect and focus on what we can do to support our communities whatever our roles might be.

We have made significant improvements to our flood defences, weather forecasting and warning systems, but we can never be complacent and we hope that none of our communities ever have to face the tragic events of 31st January 1953 again. However, we know we must be prepared and not forget the power of nature and of the sea.

Cllr John Jowers

Cabinet Member for Communities and Planning

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What happened in 1953?

On 31st January 1953, three elements were linked in a fateful combination. It was the night of a spring tide, a deep atmospheric low pressure over the North Sea had been raising water levels and northerly gales were driving a wall of water down the coast. As it funnelled into the narrower area of the North Sea between England and Holland, this wall of water grew higher. At its peak the surge was 2.5 metres above the spring tide level. This was more than the defences could stand and spelled disaster.

In all over 300 people died, 24,500 houses were damaged and over 30,000 people were evacuated. Great tracts of farmland were made infertile by the salt water inundation and thousands of animals were drowned. This was one of the worse peace time disasters ever to strike Britain, comparable with some of the worst bombing raids of the Blitz. But just like the Blitz the spirit amongst the people was strong, each helping the other to overcome the worst.



In Essex, Canvey Island, Jaywick, Harwich and Thurrock were hit especially hard by the floods. 13,000 residents were evacuated from Canvey Island tragically 59 lives were lost with a further 27 lives lost in the seafront town of Jaywick and 8 lives were lost in Harwich. In all 119 people died in Essex, with a further 13,088 displaced from their homes.



Flood levels in Burnham-on-crouch were recorded at 14.75ft. Most sea defences along the east coast of England were not designed for such events and most could not prevent the oncoming surge of water. Sadly, many of the deaths caused by the floods could have been avoided if an effective flood warning system had been in place and communities had been given sufficient time to evacuate.

The Floods caused considerable amounts of disruption and damage including:

- The evacuation of 32,000 people
- 24,000 homes flooded
- 2 power stations out of action

- 12 gas works out of action
- 46,000 livestock lost
- 200 industrial sites inundated
- £50 million of damage (1953 prices)
- 160,000 acres of land inundated and not useable to several years

Work began almost immediately on repairing breaches in the sea defences and the banks of rivers to pre-empt a much-feared recurrence of flooding. This was a possibility due to the high spring tides predicted for mid-February.

Amid the widespread damage and personal suffering the event also demonstrated the incredible contribution that volunteers from our communities make in a crisis and still do today.

A prime example of this vital work was carried out by the British Red Cross, whose volunteers responded immediately to the needs of the thousands affected along the East Coast by the unfolding crisis.

Hundreds of volunteers assisted from running rest centres, offering first aid to the injured, providing food and refreshments and running the Red Cross' tracing and messaging service to respond to enquiries of missing people and giving news back to relatives.

The present day Red Cross plays a vital part in a response to an emergency but also in the crucial recovery afterwards; often through raising vital funds. Fundraising and rehabilitation services were a key role after the 1953 floods with supplies provided to affected villages and a range of goods, food and toys provided to people who had in many cases lost everything.

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Today - as in 1953 - the Red Cross exists with a focus on ensuring people get the help they need in a crisis. Voluntary organisations work alongside emergency services and other responding agencies to best help people affected, but can only do it through members of the public giving up their time and joining as volunteers.

The expertise and selfless devotion of volunteers from the wide range of voluntary and community groups made a crucial difference in 1953.

Insurance companies and Lloyds dealt with thousands of claims, and prepared to pay out millions. However, they had to decide which damage was caused by the storm and which was caused by flood. The usual household insurance covered properties for storm and tempest, but not against floods.

Goods in the house were usually covered against both. It was announced that every consideration and sympathy would be shown to victims affected by the disaster. Farmers however, may have suffered severely unless helped by the Government grant and relief funds. Agricultural land is rarely covered against flood risk, and most farmers insured only their most valuable livestock. The biggest payout was on the hundreds of small craft torn apart and splintered in the East Coast harbours and inland.



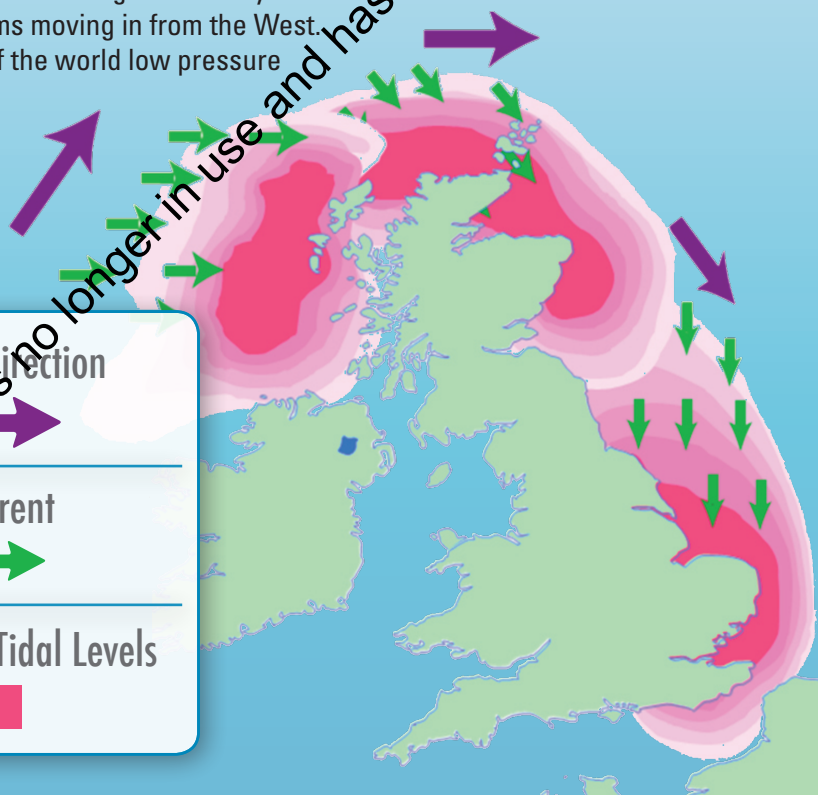
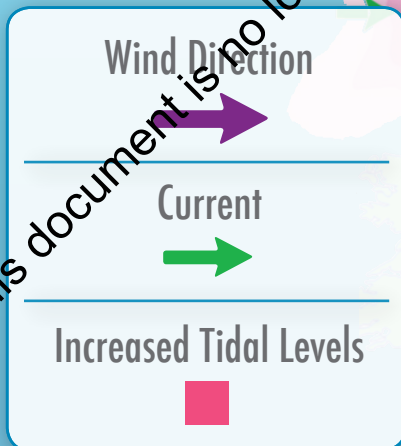
Photo courtesy of British Red Cross

Red Cross members collecting goods at London Bridge station before the items are sent to the many people left in need of help along the East Coast of England

What is a tidal surge?

A surge is simply a bulge in the sea surface. High atmospheric pressure pushes the surface of the sea down, making it lower than normal: a negative surge. Low atmospheric pressure pulls the surface of the sea up, making it higher than normal: a surge. Linked to a low pressure system are strong persistent winds, causing the height of the surge to increase and generating waves that can damage the coastline.

Such changes are going on all of the time, but under the right conditions, deep low pressure systems, strong winds, large surges in excess of 10 metres can occur. In the 1953 surge heights of 2.5 metres were experienced in places: this means that the sea surface was 2.5 metres higher than normal. Surges can occur at any point in the tidal cycle. If they occur at low tide, they rarely cause flooding, but if they occur at high tide, they can cause significant flooding. In the UK surges tend to be generated by Atlantic low pressure systems moving in from the West. In other parts of the world low pressure systems can have different characteristics.



What happened when we had a tidal surge in 2007?

A surge tide was predicted for the coast of Norfolk for the early morning tide on Friday 9 November 2007. The surge was forecast to coincide with the high tide at Great Yarmouth. The flood level at Great Yarmouth was the highest since 1953.

Severe flood warnings were issued across the region. Five in the town of Great Yarmouth and the rest in Suffolk. These were issued 18-23 hours in advance of the relevant high tide.

Following notification from the Environment Agency, multi-agency Gold Controls opened in predicted counties Police Headquarters. The early warnings enabled them to make sure that they had the right people in the right places at the right

time. Decisions were taken to open rest centres and organise voluntary evacuations. In Norfolk 7500 homes were called on by police officers, 1050 people were housed in evacuation centres and hundreds of residents chose to evacuate their homes to alternative accommodation. The timeliness of the warning allowed mutual aid (for example water safety teams) to be brought in from as far away as Devon and Merseyside. The East of England Ambulance Service had sufficient time to redeploy its resources to strategic positions without compromising emergency cover on the day.

Immovable defences were delivered by the Environment Agency to Great Yarmouth to protect an electricity sub-station (serving 31,000 properties) and specialist large bore pumps were mobilised from their depots in the Wessex area.



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Local tales

For the anniversary of the 1953 floods BBC Radio Essex have collected a number of memories from local people. They have kindly given their permission to share some of these in this booklet. Many of the memories make mention of the strong sense of camaraderie which was present throughout the event with everyone helping everyone else. There is also a strong sense of the emotion felt by all during this time of devastation and loss.

Mr. Cockle was making a reconnaissance of breaks in sea wall and Mr. Foyster had set up a forward H.Q. at a local builder's office.

Peter Wright helped recover bodies in a boat at **Jaycock**: "It was decided that we had to look for people who were then unaccounted for. I teamed up with our local milkman. "We got a dinghy and we rode to various bungalows where he delivered the milk and I'm very sorry to say that we found eight people who had drowned. This was a very harrowing experience for me as a young man."

Cocklers, shrimpers, fishermen, white weeders and yachtsmen from Leigh and Southend helped evacuate people, which helped the internal rescue services considerably.

Iris Collier recalls her neighbours drowning and the miraculous survival of their daughter, Linda Foster on **Canvey Island**. She said: "It was awful - I kept hearing her screaming and calling me but I couldn't do anything to save her. But by the time they got onto the veranda the water was so high that they just drowned the pair of them because it was so cold the water. But the baby they'd put it into the big pram and the next morning it was floating on the veranda in the water."

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Harwich Police Inspector Ken Alston: "An outstanding feature of it all was that the people themselves were calm - stoicism I suppose you'd call it. "And they sat there patiently waiting to be lifted out of their bedrooms into whatever was going to rescue them - they had no idea. "There was a retired seaman and I can see him now sitting with the window open, shirt sleeves rolled up, calmly smoking his pipe just looking at the water outside his bedroom window."

John- Canvey Island

"I remember an elderly lady with a parrot that seemed to be the most talkative one in the group," he said in the eight minute interview. "There was a sort of stunned quality about everybody, they hardly seemed to know what they were doing."



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Did you know?

After the floods the Ministry of Health advised people to boil all water used. In some of the flooded areas damage to the water supplies and sewage installations were reported to have contaminated people's drinking water.

To help with the clean up in Essex hundreds of 'Mrs Mops' went into action with scrubbing brushes and pails to clean homes that had been damaged by the floods. The wives of business men, Army Officers, clerks and shop assistants answered the call for volunteers. They scrubbed the mud and filth from scores of deserted homes along the Essex sea front to prepare for the return to the stricken families. They lit fires to dry out the rooms.

What has changed?

One of the reasons for the devastating consequences of 1953 was the absence of any effective system for warning people of the impending disaster. Today, the Environment Agency operates a state-of-the-art flood warning system 'Flood Warnings Direct', which uses information provided by the Met Office and other sources. When a threat of flooding exists, they work with the police and local authorities to inform the public as early as possible. Live flood warnings and maps are published on their website

www.environment-agency.gov.uk and people who live in flood risk areas can receive direct warnings through the Environment Agency's automatic voice messaging services as well as by text message and email.

Containing the massive destructive power of the sea is an expensive and never-ending business. The situation is constantly changing, so there will never be a time when we can relax and declare the job complete. There are many reasons for this. The sea erodes walls and banks, it also shifts millions of tonnes of sand and gravel along the coast, altering the shoreline and often reducing the protection given by beaches and dunes. Britain is tilting with the East Coast slowly sinking into the North Sea at a rate of 150mm per century. This coupled with the continued sea level rise means that the impacts of climate change will be felt most along East Anglia's coastline.

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In the aftermath of the 1953 floods there was a major sea defence construction programme, which included the sea walls on Canvey Island and at Jaywick. These defences have been maintained, extended and, in some cases rebuilt over the ensuing 25 years. The investment in new flood defences and in flood warning systems proved well justified in 2007 with the flooding much less extensive and most importantly no loss of life.

The Environment Agency has an extensive coastal research and monitoring programme which has provided them and their partners with an improved understanding of the natural processes around our coast. Traditional concrete and steel sea defences still have a part to play in protecting coastal communities, but we need solutions which are going to be sustainable in the long term. For example, at Sea Palling in Norfolk, the concrete sea wall built in the 1950s has performed well in a very hostile environment. But it has been coming under increasing threat of undermining as a result of covering beach and foreshore levels. To overcome this problem the Environment Agency is investing in a long term beach management strategy comprising of the construction of offshore breakers, rock groynes and periodic sand nourishment. Similar approaches have been undertaken and are planned on the Essex, Suffolk and Lincolnshire coasts.



What can you do?

Community Emergency Planning

We have mentioned already in this pack the strong sense of camaraderie shown by the communities along the East Anglian coast throughout the 1953 floods and the resulting recovery. Communities today have the opportunity to plan ahead, working together to produce an emergency plan to make sure that everyone is aware, knows the risks and are prepared.

In the event of an emergency, local emergency services will always have to prioritise so that they help those in greatest need. They will target their resources specifically where life is in danger and may not be able to get to your community immediately. Being well prepared with a good community emergency plan will help you and your community to turn your awareness into action, keeping everyone safe until the emergency services can get to you. There are people who can help you get started with your plan, you can work with the Essex Civil Protection & Emergency Planning team, local councils and the Environment Agency (contact details are at the back of this pack). They will help you to make sure that your plan take into consideration all of the risks to your community, not just flooding. In Essex, some communities already have plans in place, covering the most likely emergencies. The most common emergencies, such as loss of power, even for a short time let alone a prolonged period, when in conjunction with severe weather conditions, such as snow or high winds, can have a dramatic impact upon an isolated community.

Just looking at the examples of how people helped each other in 1953, highlights the need for communities to come together in times of emergencies. As our climate changes we need to adapt our approach, supporting each other and being prepared for the more unusual event that the change in weather patterns are bringing our way.



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Rochford

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The Environment Agency's flood warning service has three types of warnings that will help you prepare for flooding and take action



FLOOD ALERT

Flooding is possible,
be prepared



FLOOD WARNING

Flooding is expected,
immediate action required



**SEVERE FLOOD
WARNING**

Severe flooding,
danger to life

Floodline Warnings Direct is the Environment Agency's online flood warning service, go to www.environment-agency.gov.uk to sign up for free flood warnings or call Floodline on **0845 988 1188**.

Know the Risk, Be Informed, Get Prepared

Resilience is about being able to bounce back from whatever life throws at us. As individuals we can take actions to make sure that we can better cope with disruptions. This personal resilience can be built on to work within our communities so that we can work with our neighbours to help and assist each other. Businesses need to be resilient too, by taking some steps now and considering business continuity issues organisations will be better equipped to survive a disruption.

The lists below provide some tips to increasing resilience.

Resilient Individuals

- Compile a list of important contact numbers/details
- Prepare an emergency kit
- Talk to your family about what you should do in an emergency
- Find out if you live in a flood risk area – if you do:
- Register with Floodline
- Store valuables upstairs or in a high cupboard
- Know where to switch your utilities off
- Put ICE (in case of emergency) numbers in phone
- Regularly test your smoke detector – “Test it Tuesday”
- Think about escape routes from your house
- Consider having a ‘pet buddy’
- Back up your important computer files and store somewhere else

Resilient Communities

- Compile a community emergency plan
- Encourage neighbours to look after each other
- Encourage your community to be ‘Resilient Individuals’ as above

Resilient Businesses

- Know who has responsibility for Business Continuity Management
- Identify your critical activities and assess the risks
 - Determine what you can do to reduce the impact or likelihood
 - Develop your response actions
 - Exercise, maintain and review your business continuity arrangements
 - Embed business continuity into the culture of the organisation

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Useful contacts

Essex County Council	0845 743 0430
Essex Civil Protection & Emergency Management www.preparedinessex.co.uk	01245 430 320
Environment Agency Floodline www.environment-agency.gov.uk	0845 988 1168
British Red Cross www.redcross.org.uk	0800 871 1111
Met Office www.metoffice.gov.uk	0870 900 0100
Highways Agency www.highways.gov.uk	0845 750 030
The Association of British Insurers www.abi.org.uk	020 7600 3333
National Flood Forum www.floodforum.org.uk	01299 403 055
Health Protection Agency www.hpa.org.uk	01235 822 603/742

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A photograph of a turbulent ocean with white-capped waves under a blue sky with scattered clouds. The water is dark blue with white foam from the waves. The sky is a clear, bright blue with some light, wispy clouds. The horizon line is visible in the distance.