

The Floods of 1953

Information for Teachers



Contents

Introduction	3
Background.....	3
Harwich.....	3
Why did the floods happen?.....	5
Exploring extreme weather	6
Word bank activity	7
Additional resources	7
The Harwich Flood	8
Suggested question and activities.....	9
KS1 Who were the helpers?.....	9
KS2- How did the flood change what Harwich looks like today?	9
KS2 Why were some areas more badly affected than others?	11
What keeps us safe today?.....	14
Packing an emergency bag	14
Making a flood plan	14

Introduction

This pack looks at the floods that happened along the East Coast on January 31st in 1953. Communities along the coast were badly affected from Scotland to the south coast but as the storm that caused the flooding moved southward the storm surge was amplified. Canvey Island, Harwich and Jaywick were all badly affected with widespread devastation and 58 deaths in Canvey, 37 in Jaywick and Point Clear and eight in Harwich.

This resource has been prepared ahead of the 70th anniversary in 2023 and has been supported by Essex County Council, the Essex Record Office, Canvey Community Archive, Harwich Museum and the Environment Agency.

The resource is in three sections and looks at:

- Why did the floods happen?
- What happened in your area (there are area specific PowerPoints for this)
- How do we keep safe today?

The resource doesn't talk about the deaths in details but there is one slide in each area specific PowerPoint which mentions them. Feel free to edit or delete that slide if you wish. There is an emphasis throughout on the people who helped, and the final section is designed to empower pupils so that they understand the work that has been done since the flooding to protect them and the steps that they can take to keep themselves safe.

Background

Three things combined on the night of January 31st, 1953, to create a tidal surge 5 metres above the average level; a deep atmospheric pressure coinciding with an annual high spring tide and gale force winds all combined to funnel high tides southwards toward the narrow and shallow English Channel. As much of the Essex coast is low lying, once the coastal defences were breached the impact was devastating. The high winds brought down power and communication lines so without a system of communication no warnings were passed on as the storm tracked southward.

In England 307 people died and 32,000 people were evacuated. Land that was inundated by seawater was unusable for years - it's estimated that 160 000 acres were flooded (that's around 650 km² or 250 square miles). Infrastructure including power stations, gasworks, roads, railways, sewage services and water services were put out of action. It's estimated that damage ran to £50 million in 1953 which would be approximately £1.65 billion at today's prices (November 2022).

Harwich

(This information comes from *The Great Tide: The story of the 1953 flood disaster in Essex*, Hilda Grieve 1959, reprinted by the Essex Record Office 2020)

The first warning of trouble for Harwich came at 9:20PM on January 31st when the Harbourmaster visited the quay and saw that the water was already high, with another 3.5 hours to go before high tide. He realised that there would be flooding but as he hadn't had warning of what was happening elsewhere, it wasn't clear how bad this would be. He warned the police, the Borough Engineer, and the Harwich Harbour Conservancy Board to tell him to take a tide reading and to warn the RAF station and police at Felixstowe.

Between 10:00PM and 10:30PM the Police Inspector and Harbourmaster discovered that the quay had flooded, and that water was flowing toward West St, Church St and Kings Head St. Householders in the area were warned but it was felt that there was no need to panic.

At 10:40PM the Police Inspector phoned to ask Clacton police to send a car with a PA system as soon as possible. The Clacton car couldn't be contacted by radio as the high winds had put the transmitter out of service and the only other car with a loudspeaker had gone out to try and mend the fault. This meant that no car with a loudspeaker was sent to help warn the inhabitants that danger was imminent.

In Bathside the sea was pounding the sea wall and breaking over it. One householder set out to go from Alexander Street to Gas House Creek to see if his boat was all right. He said:

"I got as far as Stour Road and looking to the west was a sight I am never likely to forget. Away to the west the sky was a dirty yellow and the whole length of the protecting sea wall was one wall of spray which was flying several feet skywards."

He went home, knowing he couldn't make it to the creek and warning his neighbours of what he'd seen.

At 11:00PM the water was deepening on the quayside, washing around the Town Hall <https://historicensland.org.uk/services-skills/education/educational-images/town-hall-harwich-1925> and flowing up the nearby streets. The water burst on the doors of the Angel Public House and the Pier Hotel. The force of the water broke down part of the wall of the Angel and the front of the pier pavilion. By 11:30PM water was flowing up Church Street and past the doorway of the Naval and Military Home. <https://www.harwichanddovercourt.com/salvation-army.html>

A police constable was sent to warn people in the Quay and Old Town areas and went from street to street knocking on doors. He was eventually surrounded by water and had to take refuge upstairs in the Three Cups.

By 11:30PM water was also coming into the Old Town from the Esplanade, meeting water coming in from Bathside. The water flowed up toward the fire station at Kings Quay

Street. Suddenly, at around 11:45PM, water broke over Stour Road and water cascaded into the street between the road and the railway embankment. By midnight water was pouring into Harwich from three sides, over the esplanade, the quay and over the Bathside wall. The only thing protecting the rest of the town was the railway embankment. Just after midnight a huge wave swept over the sea wall and Stour Road. Part of the Bathside sea wall collapsed and water rushed through the streets of Bathside crashing into basements, yards and gardens below sea level.

People were calling the police for help from flats in Albert Street and from the Anchor. A police sergeant was sent to help, and he encouraged people in the upper flats to lower sheets to people in the lower flats to help them climb up to safety.

The fire brigade tried to reach Bathside by the Ferndale Road level crossing and via George Street but were driven back by water. At this stage the water swept over the embankment into the back gardens of Fernlea Road. Once this had happened all the police and fire brigade could do was to try to warn and help people. The fire brigade found two boats and rowed to help people where they could.

Other residents in Harwich started to realise what was happening and were waking and helping neighbours to get to safety. By 1:00AM the town was cut off by flooding and the electricity failed.

The police had the responsibility of rescue work and set about finding boats. Police officers, helped by local people, contacted boat owners, the Reserve Fleet at Harwich, H.M.S. Ganges at Shotley, Trinity House, and local fishermen, and arranged for boats to be collected by military vehicles and transported to a site near the Police Station, ready for daylight when the rescue operation could start.

The whole rescue operation was supervised by the police, and the boats were manned by police, firemen, and sailors, boys from H.M.S. Ganges, Harwich fishermen, St John's Ambulance and local residents. People trapped in their houses were evacuated via windows into small boats, and taken to five different landing points, and from there taken to the Reception Centre.

By sunset on February 1st the rescue work was completed, and over 1,000 people had been safely brought from their homes to the landing points and taken to other accommodation.

Why did the floods happen?

(Links to the PowerPoint 'Why did they happen?')

The PowerPoint gives a summary of the different factors that led to the flooding, which were a high tide, low atmospheric pressure and gale force winds.

Exploring extreme weather

What is extreme weather?

Start by checking your pupils' understanding of 'usual' weather patterns. You could encourage them to list what sort of weather they would usually expect in the different seasons.

Spring	Summer
Autumn	Winter

Older pupils could look at information on climate averages for themselves on the Met Office website. The nearest weather station to give a complete record is Shoeburyness and data is available for the period 1991-2020

<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/maps-and-data/uk-climate-averages/u1ot6ch7u>

Follow this by asking pupils for examples of extreme weather. They might remember it being very hot in the summer of 2022 for example. You can find some photos of some extreme weather events at the websites below (some of these are local newspapers so you may want to check what 'pop-ups' might show).

'Beast from the East' snow 2018 <https://www.gazette-news.co.uk/news/19829408.three-years-essex-hit-beast-east/>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_f5WiB524Sw

BBC news https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fao_dQX-pf8

2022 drought <https://www.essexlive.news/news/essex-news/essex-heatwave-east-england-officially-7456239>

Various photographs showing storms, flooding and drought
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/gallery/2009/jun/16/extreme-weather-uk-britain>

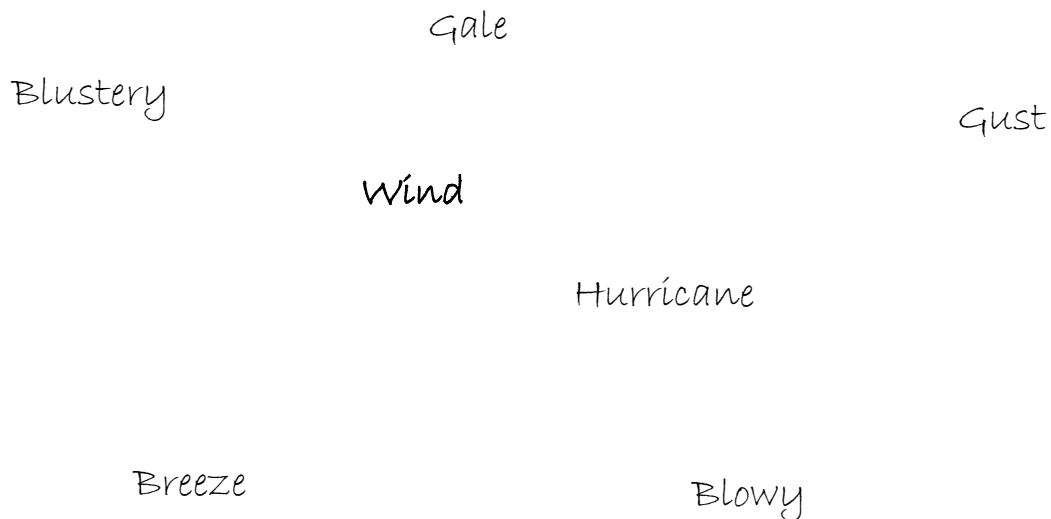
Word bank activity

Group work

As a whole class, list words associated with weather - for example:

Wind, sun, rain, snow, frost, hot, cold

Give each group one of these words and ask them to write other words linked to it.



Then ask them to put these in order from mild weather to extreme weather. They could add descriptive words and use the word banks to produce poetry around weather and extreme weather.

Additional resources

Coastlineers have lesson plans and practical activities. Many of these are aimed at older pupils but there are links to YouTube videos of a model showing tidal surges

<https://coastineers.co.uk/>

<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/coastineers-lesson-plan-coastal-flooding-12331715>

The Met Office has free resources online for KS2 including a section on extreme weather

<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/coastineers-lesson-plan-coastal-flooding-12331715>

They also have factsheets for historical weather events, including the 1953 floods although these are not written for children.

<https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/library-and-archive/publications/historical-facts/historical-weather>

The BBC has a good explainer on storm surges

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/features/63177227>

The Harwich Flood

(Links to the PowerPoint 'Harwich Floods')

This PowerPoint shows a collection of photographs provided by the Curator of Harwich Museum (<https://www.harwichmuseum.com/>) and audio recordings from the Essex Sound and Video Archive. You can use the quotes from the recordings or play them aloud.

- Slide 2 shows an aerial photograph of the flooding.
- Slides 3-7 are photographs of different location showing flooded areas.
- Slides 8-10 briefly describe the events of 31st January and 1st February, with recordings from an interview with Kenneth Alston, a policeman on duty that night.
- Slide 12 lists the people who died – feel free to remove/edit this if you feel it inappropriate for your class.
- Slide 13 shows the new memorial garden.
- Slides 14-20 focus on the helpers and show the police, fire brigade, St John's Ambulance helping to rescue people, the RSPCA and PDSA rescuing animals and people being evacuated to a rescue centre, as well as a recording of Ray Chippington recalling how his family were rescued.
- Slides 21-22 show some of the damage caused by flooding.
- Slide 23 includes a recording of Pam Lacey talking about living in a temporary caravan site on Harwich Green after the flood.
- Slide 24 shows a group of young people who helped with clearing up. Lots of youth groups were involved, both helping during the emergency and with the clearing up. Scouts, Sea Scouts, Guides, Cadets and young members of St John's Ambulance and the Red Cross were all involved.

You can find more aerial photographs of Harwich during the flood on Historic England's Aerial Photo Explorer site <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/>
<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48285>
<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48287>
<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48284>
<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48286>
<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48288>

Suggested question and activities

KS1 Who were the helpers?

Start by asking children to list people who help us today.

Can they remember who helped people in the flood?

Were they surprised by any of the helpers? (They may not have thought of the St John's Ambulance for example)

What helpers can they see in the old photographs?

Do they help people? Slide 24 shows a group of children and young people from various groups who helped with the clearing up. What could they do to help someone who has had to leave their home because of a disaster?

KS2- How did the flood change what Harwich looks like today?

There are photographs of some well-known landmarks such as the High Lighthouse in the flood. One challenge is to try and match up the place where the photographer was when the flood photograph was taken and see what has changed.

It is possible to do this using Google Street View or, if it is safe, to take the children out on a walk around some of the affected areas.

There are photographs of Grafton Street, Albert Street, Albemarle Road, Stour Road and Main Road. It is often possible to work out the same viewpoint by looking for landmarks in the photographs such as the church in the two photographs on the next page.

By using Google Street View, it may be possible to match views such as this with the photograph below

<https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@51.9448711,1.288374,3a,75y,183.55h,89.45t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sGJyJo1hokbWMyfugWArLxQ!2eol7i16384!8i8192>



Main Road Today



Rescue on Main Road in 1953

You could also use the air photographs from Historic England and compare these to satellite views on Google maps.

Although many houses were cleaned up and, after some considerable time, people moved back in, not all could be lived in and some were destroyed by the flood.

Some key questions to ask

- How different do the buildings look today?
- Can they see any buildings today that they can see in the old photographs?
- What do they think the area might have looked like if the flooding hadn't happened?

KS2 Why were some areas more badly affected than others?

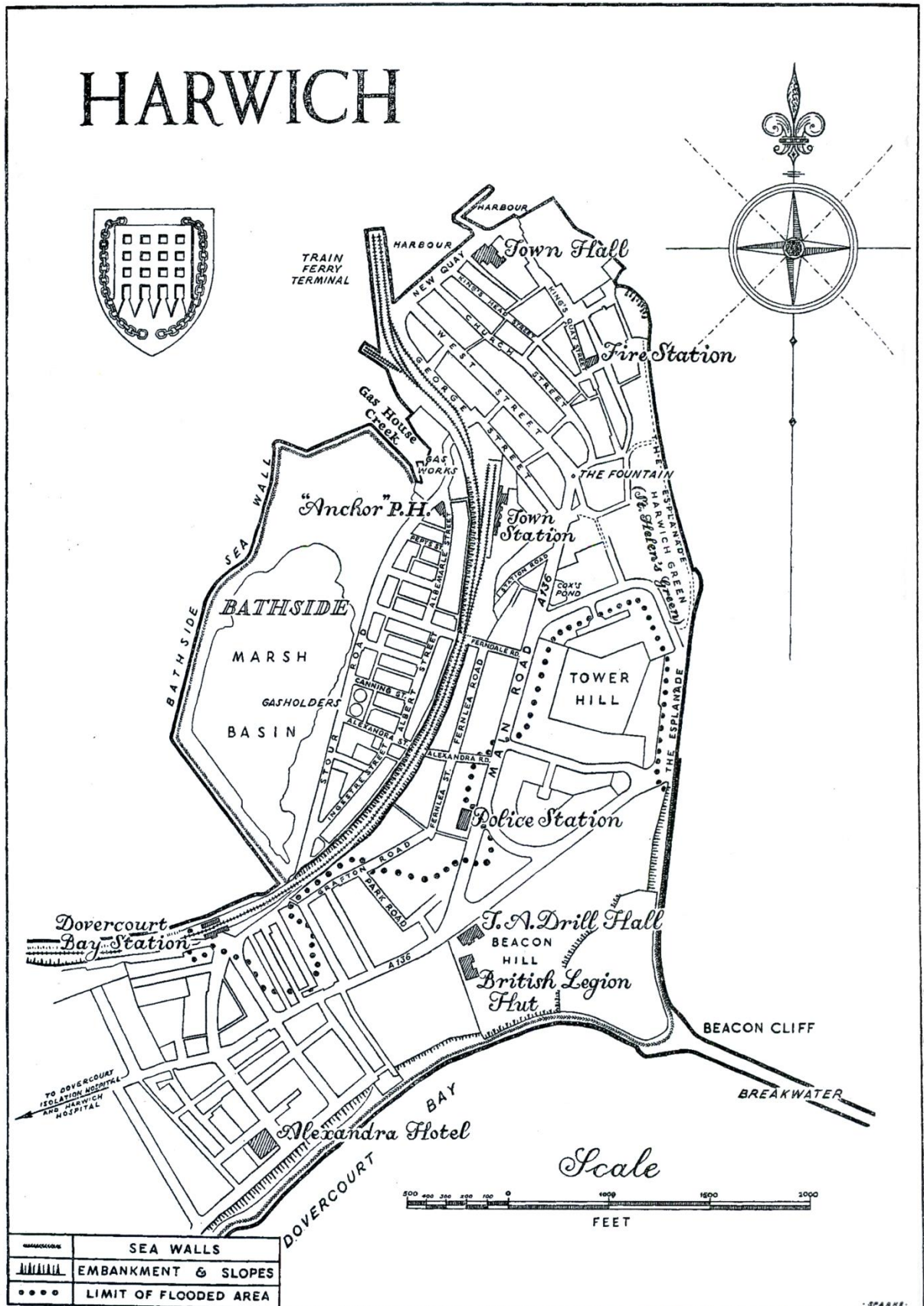
The map overleaf, adapted from Hilda Grieve's 1959 book 'The Great Tide', shows the areas of Harwich which flooded. Ask pupils why they think some areas were more badly affected than others.

Two things you can encourage them to look at are the topography of the area and the proximity to water.

You can find a map here <https://en-gb.topographic-map.com/map-jt818/Harwich/?center=51.94352%2C1.2879&zoom=15>

which shows height above sea level. It is interactive, so you can click on areas and the measurement is given.

The low-lying topography of large areas of Harwich makes it vulnerable to flooding and once the sea walls were breached large areas were at risk. The next section looks at what has been done since to protect the Essex coast and how children can plan to keep themselves safe in case of flooding.



What keeps us safe today?

(*Links to the PowerPoint 'What keeps us safe today?'*)

The PowerPoint explains that Tendring Council and the Environment Agency look after sea defences which were strengthened after the floods in 1953. Tendring Council has a rolling programme of work renewing sections of the defences each year.

One of the challenges in 1953 was the lack of warnings and the situation is much better today. Slide 3 talks about how these warnings are managed.

The Environment Agency has provided the activities below.

Packing an emergency bag

If flood warnings are issued, it's a good idea to have an emergency bag ready in case the flooding gets worse.

Use the cards in the *Emergency bag activity cards* to encourage children to think about what they would need to pack. They could sort the cards into three piles:

- What do they really need?
- What would be nice to have?
- What can they leave behind?

You could focus this activity by giving children a maximum number of items to take.

Older children can consider practicalities. Is it really sensible to take a television in an emergency bag? How will they carry it? Would it be safe to use something electrical in a flood?

Making a flood plan

The Environment Agency also provide a flood game to help children think about what to do in case of a flood.

The template *My Flood Plan* can be used to support children to feel in control by making their own flood plan. There is also a template for *My School Flood Risk Plan*.

This information is issued by

Essex County Council, Essex Record Office

You can contact us in the following ways:

By Email: ero.searchroom@essex.gov.uk

Visit our website: www.essexrecordoffice.co.uk

By telephone: 033301 32122

By Post: Essex Record Office, Wharf Road, Chelmsford, CM2 6YT

Read our blog at <http://www.essexrecordofficeblog.co.uk/>

 facebook.com/EssexRecordOffice

 [@essexarchive](https://twitter.com/essexarchive)

 [@EssexRecordOffice](https://www.youtube.com/@EssexRecordOffice)

Published January 2023