

The Floods of 1953

Information for Teachers



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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, 35 in Jaywick 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, the Harwich Society 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).

Canvey Island

(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)

Canvey Island was particularly badly affected by the flooding. The area is very low lying with some ground levels below the level of high tide. In 1953 the area was protected by an earthen sea wall, and this was simply not strong enough to hold the surge. The wall in the Tewkes Creek area was destroyed and the sea rushed in.

The first warning came at 11:20PM when the harbourmaster at Harwich rang the Police office on Long Road. The police checked the Esplanade but at the time there was no obvious danger. A farmer at Waterside Farm also had a phone call from the Essex River Board warning of a high tide and he checked the area around Canvey Road. Water was starting to trickle across the bridge approach which he would go on to protect by using flood boards. Just before midnight a priest visiting a parishioner noticed that the tide in Tewkes Creek was lapping around the top of the sea wall.

In the Sunken Marsh area, two river board employees noticed that water was coming over the top of the wall, filling a dyke behind it, and realised that the wall was weakening. At 11:50PM they started to knock on doors and alert people to the danger. At around the same time a photographer and his son, sheltering from the wind below the sea wall, looked up and realised water was spouting over it like a waterfall. They ran home, knocking on doors on their way.

At around 12:30AM a small breach in the wall began to let water in faster and the dykes which were designed to drain the island began to fill. Flood boards were fixed in place across Canvey Bridge at 12:15AM but water reached the top of them within 30 minutes - a rise of around a metre. Between midnight and 1:00PM police and river board workers started to warn people in vulnerable areas such as the Newlands Estate and the area around Small Gains Creek. The situation wasn't helped by the failure of the phone system and power cuts, presumably caused by flooding.

At around 1:00AM part of the sea wall at the head of Small Gains Creek collapsed leading to the Newlands and Sunken Marsh areas flooding. One by one sea defences collapsed leading to a sudden huge surge of seawater inland flooding land and houses. More than six square miles was progressively flooded.

People escaped up to their lofts and roofs where they could. Helpers were driven back by the water surging across the island and many people had a long cold night waiting for rescue in biting cold winds. Sadly, many of those who died, died from exposure as they waited for help.

Canvey Island was effectively cut off from the mainland, so the initial rescue and support fell to people already there. At 1:25AM a council surveyor, their deputy and other council employees along with Canvey's police sergeant banded together to start the rescue measures needed. They first called the fire brigade and eight part-time firemen turned up at the fire station. They were unable to take their equipment further than the High Street

due to flood waters. The fireman waded into chest high water and started to help people from their houses to safety. They were joined in their rescues by people who had managed to get out of their house before they were flooded, the local police constable and by the council workmen.

The local ambulance service was called out and all off-duty ambulance staff were called in and met at the council offices with the one ambulance that was on the island. Local doctors were called out to help.

Leigh Beck and Long Road secondary school were opened as refuges for people evacuated from their houses and local café owners were asked to open up and make hot drinks. Members of the Women's' Institute and Women's Royal Voluntary Service were called in to provide hot drinks and food.

Calls to the mainland were made asking for help from all emergency services and for boat and amphibious vehicles to be sent to help. The phone system died at around 2:00AM hampering these attempts.

The bridge onto Canvey Island was impassable until around 3:00AM so for the first few hours of this disaster it was up to locals to organise and help themselves as best they could. The bridge was only made passable by the Canvey Bridge keeper clearing up the wreckage from the bridge so when the first ambulance from the mainland arrived there, they were able to cross with care and ambulances started to ferry people to the evacuee centre. Gradually over the next few hours more and more help arrived from other towns and villages across Essex with more police, ambulance and fire services attending.

Many people were rescued throughout the night by rescuers using any boats that they could find. Some of these were just small canoes and dinghies taken from a boatbuilders yard. Some rescue methods were improvised from anything that could float and people were rescued using doors, tin baths and inflatable rubber rafts.

Southend police amassed a fleet of small boats and larger boats were sent from Grays, Tilbury and Thurrock. Transport for the boats was needed and at this stage the armed forces were brought in and the garrison at Shoeburyness and the camp at Orsett were approached for help and large groups of soldiers and airmen were dispatched to help along with equipment arriving by 5:30AM.

At this stage it was clear that evacuee centres were needed on the mainland and South Benfleet school was opened. The local British Legion arranged hot drinks and food and collected clothes and blankets from the local population. Hart Road school at Thundersley was also requested as a centre and again, the local residents rallied round to provide clothes, blankets and hot food and drinks.

The full extent of the disaster became clear at daybreak, around 7:00AM. The light enabled more rescue efforts to be put in place and, as the tide fell, some area that were previously impossible could now be reached and survivors evacuated.

The memorial plaque outside Canvey Island library lists the 58 people who died in the floods.

Road	Name	Age
Adelsberg Road	Margaret Blagdon	71
	Dennis Morgan	5
	Phoebe Morgan	72
	Reginald Morgan	37
Amid Road	Alice Lloyd	79
Athos Road	John Laverack	60
Brandenberg Road	Alice Brooks	81
	Daisy Deith	68
	Ernest Deith	70
Church Parade	Elizabeth Jacobs	67
	James Jacobs	68
	Emily Price	88
Corona Road	Emily Carter	75
	Louisa Le May.	63
Craven Avenue	Marie White	65
Denham Road	Catherine Rawkins	87
Derverter Avenue	Rebecca Keymer	74
Gills Avenue	Rose Hindle	68
Heeswick Road	Harriet Coates	78
	William Coates	56
	Alice Farrow	58
Heilsberg Road	Alfred Hagen	60
	Mary Hagen.	60
Juliers Road	Matilda Tearle	66
Kamerwyck Avenue	Nora Dearman	63
Kellington Road	Doris Fairs	46
	Elsie Foster	26
	Ernest Foster	32
Knightswick Road	Catherine Fuller	66
	Walter Fuller	68
Komberg Crescent	Judith Goodman	4
Lansburg Road	Hannagh O'Donohue	60
Larup Avenue	Julia Rennison	76
May Avenue	Ian Nelson	7
Miltsin Avenue	Arthur Hobbs.	65
	Agnes Simkins.	57
	Caroline Smith	69
Newlands Road	Alice Smith	74

	Edith White	60
	William White	62
Nordland Road	Caroline Welham	67
Park Road	Alice B Lloyd	70
Rainbow Road	Gertrude Whines	68
Somnes Avenue	Alan Manser	1
	Gordon Manser	2
	Keith Manser	5
Stanley Road	Charlotte Flight	72
	Henson Flight	76
Strasbourg Road	Peter Weston	5
The Avenue	Arthur Fisher	62
Vadsoe Road	Alice Davidson	63
Waalwyck Drive	Edward Curtis	83
	Harriet Curtis	83
Whernside Avenue	Leonard Starling	12
	Violet Starling	36
	Gertrude Williams	65
Furtherwick Road	James Collins	74
	Elizabeth Collins	74

Why did the floods happen?

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

The PowerPoint gives a summary of the different factors that lead 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 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

A word cloud featuring various terms related to wind. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'Wind' at the center. Other prominent words include 'Blow', 'Gale', 'Breeze', 'Blustery', 'Gust', and 'Hurricane'. The words are in different sizes and orientations, creating a dynamic visual effect. The background is a light blue gradient.

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 Canvey Island Flood

(Links to the PowerPoint Canvey Island Floods)

This PowerPoint shows a collection of photographs from the Canvey Island Community Archive (<https://www.canveyisland.org/>) 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 aerial photographs of the flooding.
- Side 3-6 are photographs of different location showing flooded areas.
- Slides 7-10 briefly describe the events of 31st January 1st February, with recordings of Mrs Rudd and Donald and Thelma Payne talking about their memories of those days. Slide 10 shows the memorials to the 58 people who died. Feel free to edit the text as appropriate for your pupils.
- Slides 11-22 focus on the helpers and show the police, fire brigade, army and air force helping to rescue people the RSPCA and PDSA rescuing animals and evacuees in rescue centres. There are recordings from PC Bill Pilgrim and Geoff Barsby about their involvement in the rescue effort, and from Alan Whitcomb about finding his lost pet.
- Slides 23-26 talk about the clearing up and shows the army and a group of children and young people who all helped with the clear up. The clean up on Canvey Island was helped by an amazing effort put in by Scouts and Guides. The leader of the 2nd Canvey Troop arranged his troop alongside other Guides and Scout groups and over one weekend there were 413 Scouts and Guides helping on the Saturday with 823 at work on the Sunday.

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 Air Force for example)

What helpers can they see in the old photographs?

The uniforms look a little different and children may find it hard to spot the firefighters in the photographs as they aren't wearing a uniform familiar to them. Slide 13 and slide 24 have photographs of fire fighters wearing flat caps rather than helmets.

There are photographs of modern-day Police, and firefighters in the document 'People who help us' along with an image from the 1953 floods. Pupils could list what is different in the photographs.

Do they help people? Slide 25 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 Canvey Island looks like today?

There are photographs of some well-known areas such as Jones Corner 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.

Although many house 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. In some cases, damage didn't become apparent for some time. For example, Jones Grocery shop had to be demolished in 1963 as it was discovered that the flood 10 years earlier had damaged the foundations. The changes around that that area in the 1960s and onward are linked to the damage from the flood.

You can find more photographs of the area before the flood on the Canvey Community Archive

https://www.canveyisland.org/people-2/6-wellknown/albert_jones/jones_corner

https://www.canveyisland.org/history-2/oldphotos/collections/jones_stores-2/jones_stores_postcard

https://www.canveyisland.org/history-2/oldphotos/collections/jones_stores-2/jones_store

https://www.canveyisland.org/category/history-2/oldphotos/collections/jones_stores-2

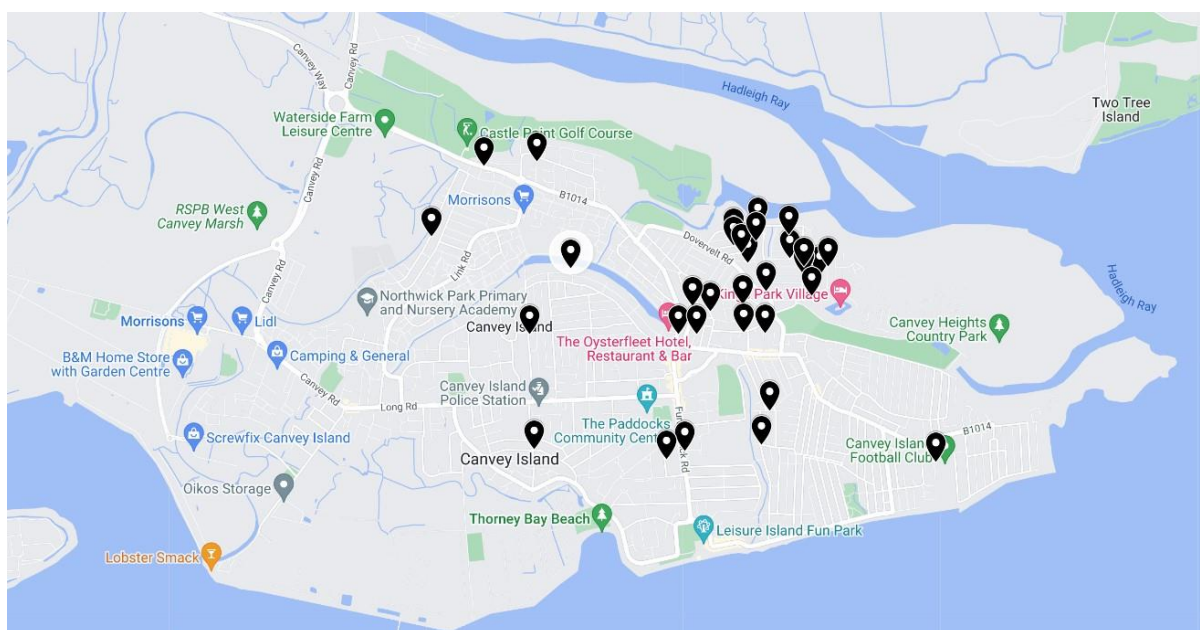
https://www.canveyisland.org/history-2/oldphotos/collections/jones_stores-2/two_advertising_postcards

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?
- Are there many really old buildings on Canvey Island? Where are they?

KS2 Why were some areas more badly affected than others?

The teachers' notes have a list of those who died in the flood alongside the road that they lived on. Many of these roads are in the same area of Canvey Island.



Locations where people died

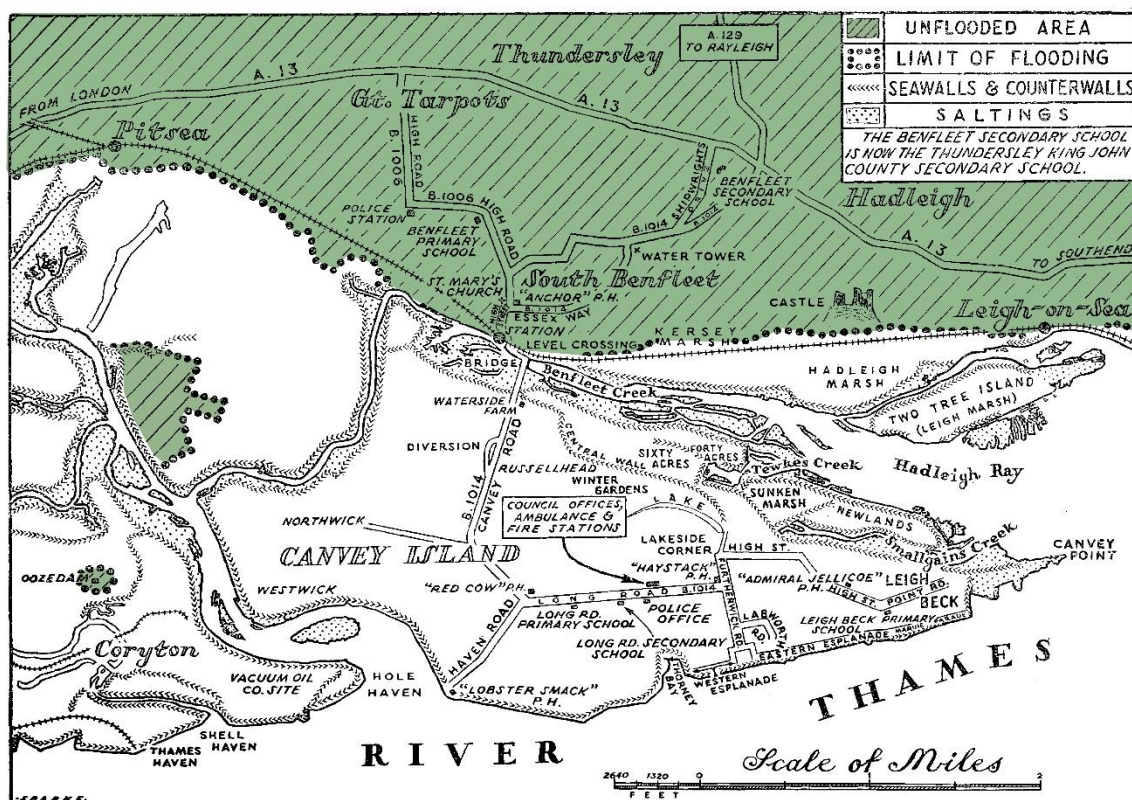
Pupils could use a street map of Canvey Island and plot out these addresses for themselves.

Ask them why they think some areas were more badly affected than other.

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

You can find a map here <https://en-gb.topographic-map.com/map-5651/Canvey-Island/?center=51.52241%2C0.58594&zoom=14> which shows height above sea level. It is interactive so you can click on areas and the measurement is given.

A simpler version of this activity which focuses less on the deaths could use the map below adapted from Hilda Grieves 1959 book 'The Great Tide'



The low-lying topography of Canvey Island 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 Island and how children can plan to keep themselves safe in case of flooding.

What keeps us safe today?

(Links to the PowerPoint What keep us safe today?)

The material provided for this section comes from the Environment Agency.

The PowerPoint shows immediate work undertaken to repair and strengthen the sea walls and also has some photographs of more work in the late 1970s. Slide 4 shows how a typical sea wall is constructed on Canvey Island.

Work is currently planned on the island over the next 2.5 years to future proof the defences against sea level rises. You can find more detail here

<https://consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/east-anglia-c-e/canvey-southern-shoreline-project/>

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

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