

# The Floods of 1953

## Information for Teachers



## Contents

Introduction .....	3
Background.....	3
Jaywick.....	3
Why did the floods happen?.....	6
Exploring extreme weather .....	6
Word bank activity .....	8
Additional resources .....	8
The Jaywick Flood .....	9
Suggested question and activities.....	10
KS1 Who were the helpers?.....	10
KS2- How did the flood change what Jaywick looks like today? .....	10
KS2 Why were some areas more badly affected than others? .....	11
What keeps us safe today?.....	12
Packing an emergency bag .....	12
Making a flood plan .....	12

## Introduction

This pack looks at the floods that happened along the East Coast on January 31<sup>st</sup> 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 70<sup>th</sup> 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 31<sup>st</sup>, 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 km<sup>2</sup> 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).

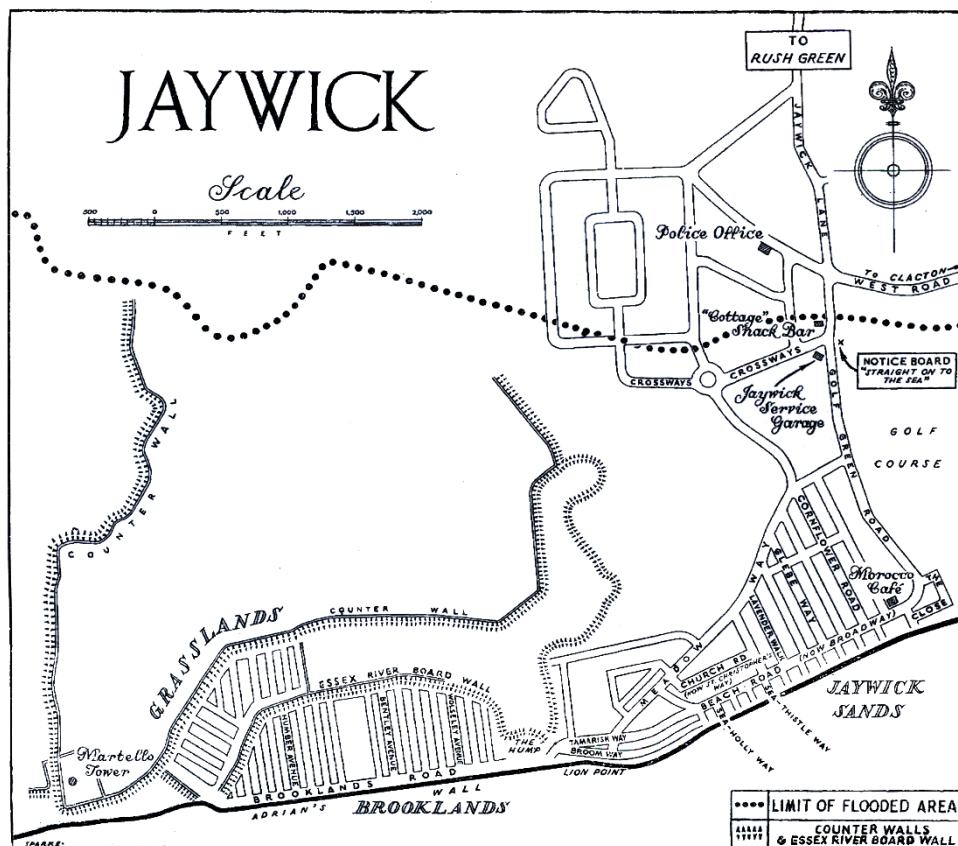
## Jaywick

(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 flooding at Jaywick was unlike the floods in other areas as the sea walls held but the sea found its way via the salt marshes.

In 1953 Jaywick was primarily a holiday resort made up of 1788 chalet type bungalows. In winter some of these were let to families but many were left empty. It is estimated that about 250 of these were occupied on January 31st, 1953.

At the time Jaywick could be divided into three sections: Jaywick Sands, Brooklands and Grasslands.



Brooklands contained 607 holiday chalets, largely unoccupied in winter. Grasslands had 195 chalets and some caravans and Jaywick Sands had 986 more substantial brick-built bungalows, two story houses and shops with flats over them.

At midnight on January 31st a police sergeant from Clacton along with a police constable drove to Jaywick, where they collected the Jaywick constable. They drove on to Brooklands where they found the sea starting to come over the wall and run into Brooklands. The police started to look for a boat so they could help the few people living there at the time.

The people living on Beach Road could see that the water was starting to come over the sea front and they started to warn each other and move furniture up to the flats above

the shops. Between midnight and 1.00 everyone was concentrating on the sea front and the flooding in Brooklands.

The St Osyth marshes to the west of Grasslands were starting to flood as the sea wall along St Osyth beach was breached in about 30 places. Water swept through the marshes destroying about 600 caravans.

A torrent of water headed east across 3.5 miles of St Osyth marshes with 22 breaches of the sea wall between Beacon Hill and Colne Point. The lie of the land channelled it toward the back of Jaywick toward Meadow Way and Golf Green Road - the part of Jaywick farthest from the sea wall where no-one anticipated any danger. The torrent was whipped up by the gale force winds and joined with the water coming in from the breaches in the wall along St Osyth beach.

At Jaywick the tide had turned soon after 1:00AM but the sea remained abnormally high with the gale force winds whipping it up. People were still focused on Brooklands and the sea front but, with the walls holding and the tide starting to ebb, it was hoped that things would improve shortly.

Shortly after 1:00AM, Police Inspector Barnicoat with PC Joe Burgess and PC Don Harmer arrived at Tamarisk Way in the radio car to see what the situation was there. The Inspector turned to look at the marshes behind Brooklands and noticed a 'wide river of turbulent water' racing through the floodwater from inland. They realised that this was a new danger.

They stopped to help an elderly couple and intended to drive to safer ground but had to stop when more water surged around the car. The car was abandoned, and they had to swim with the elderly couple on the policemen's backs – the water was so strong it swept them along but, luckily, they eventually reached shallower water and could escape. The situation was dire and the only police car with radio equipment had been washed away. PC Don Harmer managed to struggle to the sea wall and crawl along it for a mile until he reached a phone box and could call to report to Clacton Police Station.

A huge surge of water struck Jaywick in the back at 1:45AM and the area filled in some places within 15 minutes. The force of the water was so strong that people were knocked off their feet, furniture was knocked over and buildings smashed through. There was nowhere for people to escape to in many of the small bungalows so the only option was to get out if they could. Some climbed onto roofs or out onto windowsills or hung on to eaves, chimneys and guttering waiting for help.

Thirteen-year-old Harry Francis remembered a terrifying night:

*'Father smashed a hole in the ceiling and pulled the whole family up into the roof space. It was cold and pitch black. Dad then punched a hole in the end of the bungalow and*

*called for help. At daylight we saw caravans and dead cows floating by. And then the next-door bungalow! Then our bungalow floated off its base and started to move. By the afternoon there was still no sign of any rescuers, and the house was still moving. It came to a halt wedged against a brick build shed.'*

Rescue attempts started at first light with any boat found being used alongside more regular rescue boats such as the Clacton lifeboat. Conditions were hard with strong currents making rowing difficult but time and time again the emergency services and local residents went back to help people. Clacton hotels helped to house refugees and 120 people were given free rooms, baths and meals.

Sadly 35 people died in Jaywick and two in Point Clear. There is a memorial to them in St Christopher's church where candles are lit for them at a service each year.

Helena Bangle	Lillian Crosswell (Point Clear)	May Eva Ketley (check)	Ernest Henry Rogers
Edward bishop	Michael J Crossman (Point Clear)	James Ketley	Dorothy Lilian Hamilton Ross
Florence Bishop	Michael Darville (11 years)	Kate Josephine Lacock	Rose Hannah Saward
Florence Brookman	Sarah Ellen Dempster	Lavinia Lambert	Emma Elizabeth Scott
Hilda M Brookman	Harriet Elizabeth Fox	Herbert Steedman law	Florence Weatherburn
Joseph Brydson	Jessie French	Margarita Mary Law	Lucy Wilson
Lilian Brydson	Esther Mary Jew	May miles	Samuel Charles Wilson
Florence Caroline Buckle	James Charles Jew	Marry Ann Payne	
Harry James Buckle	James William Jew	Reginald Clyde Payne	
Nellie Burnett	Ada Muriel Kendall	Maude Payne	

## 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 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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_f5WiB524Sw)

BBC news [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fao\\_dQX-pf8](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.

Blustery

Hurricane

Gust

Gale

Blowy

Wind

Breeze

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 Jaywick Flood

*(Links to the PowerPoint 'Jaywick Floods')*

This PowerPoint includes 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.
- Slide 3 and 4 are photographs of different locations showing flooded areas.
- Slide 5 shows chalet bungalows in Jaywick Sands before the flood.
- Slide 6-7 briefly describe what happened on the night of January 31<sup>st</sup> /February 1<sup>st</sup>, with a recording of Derek and Audrey Frost describing waking up to the flood in their bungalow.
- Slides 8-15 focus on the helpers and show the police and fire brigade helping to rescue people, the RSPCA and PDSA rescuing animals and people being evacuated to hotels in Clacton. There are recordings from Don Harmer about his involvement with the rescue effort, Malcolm MacGregor about rowing to safety, and Derek and Audrey Frost about the rescue centre in the Old Hall Hotel.
- Slide 16 shows some of the damage caused by flooding.
- Slide 17 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 Jaywick during the flood on Historic England's Aerial Photo Explorer site [https://historicengland.org.uk/images-](https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/)

[books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/](https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/)

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48264>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48275>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48265>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48268>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48270>

<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48272>

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<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/record/EAWo48282>

## 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?

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.

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 17 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 Jaywick looks like today?

The photographs in slides 8 and 10 were taken near to the junction of Crossways and Golf Green Road. Using Google Street View you can compare the area to look for differences.

[https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@51.7814984,1.120266,3a,75y,222.96h,85.47t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sJqDBNvfXvCjwXWaH2Sgc-A!2eo!6shhttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DJqDBNvfXvCjwXWaH2Sgc-A%26cb\\_client%3Dsearch.revgeo\\_and\\_fetch.gps%26w%3D96%26h%3D64%26yaw%3D60.832718%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656](https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@51.7814984,1.120266,3a,75y,222.96h,85.47t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sJqDBNvfXvCjwXWaH2Sgc-A!2eo!6shhttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DJqDBNvfXvCjwXWaH2Sgc-A%26cb_client%3Dsearch.revgeo_and_fetch.gps%26w%3D96%26h%3D64%26yaw%3D60.832718%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656)

Similarly, you could compare the style of chalet bungalows shown on slide 5 with the more substantial buildings that are now built on Midway in Jaywick.

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

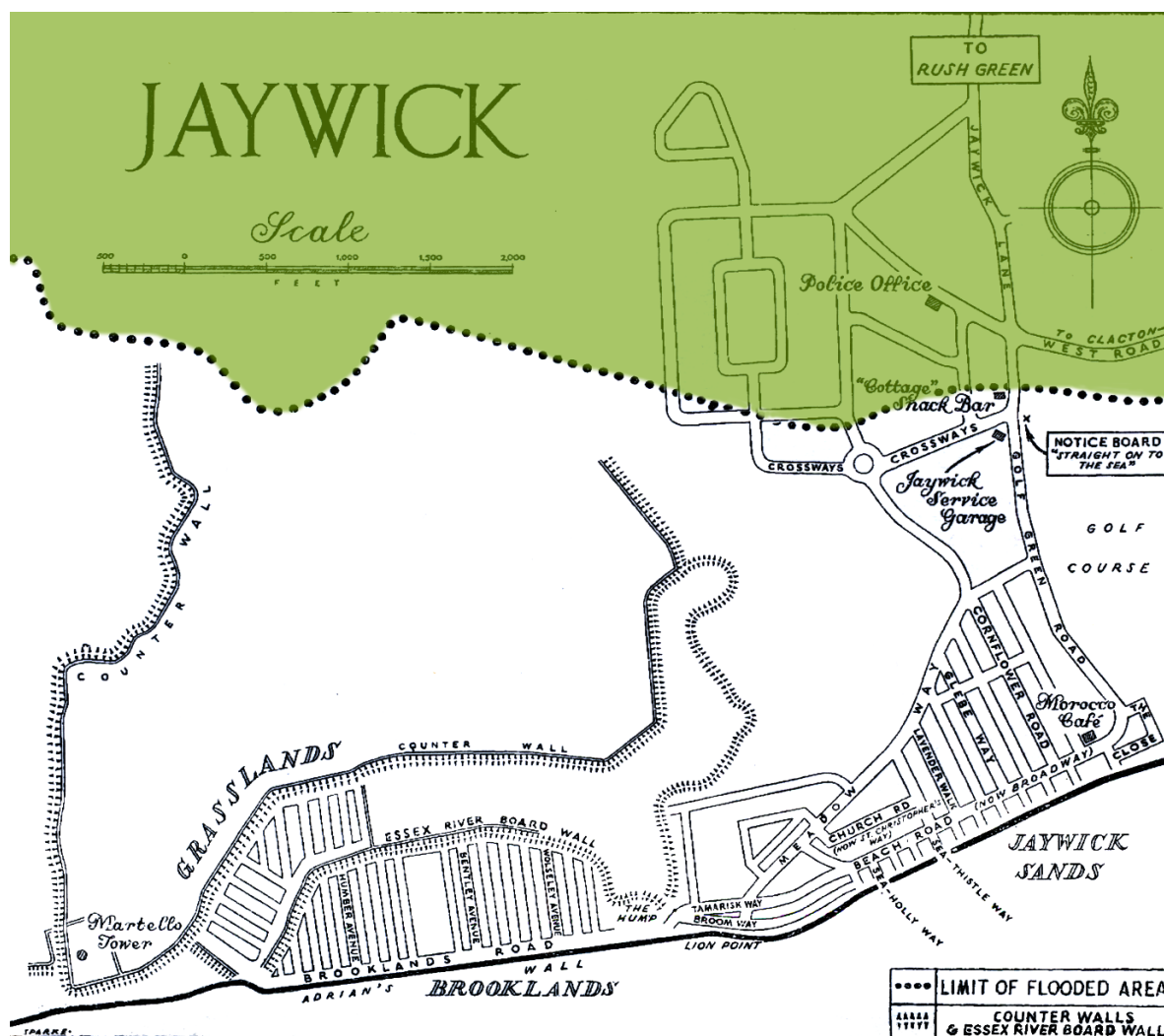
Destruction of the chalet bungalows at Jaywick led to changes in building there.

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



The area in green was above the water, everything else was flooded.

You can find a map here <https://en-gb.topographic-map.com/map-rhjtf/Jaywick/?center=51.77627%2C1.12454&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 Jaywick meant that once water found a way through, 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 keep 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.

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

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