

The 1953 North Sea Storm



Illustration Courtesy of TEP Photo

Councillor Ray Howard

On the night of January 31st and February 1st 1953 the worst natural disaster of the British 20th Century left more than 300 dead along the East Coast. The 60th Anniversary of this event is in 2013 and **Adam Guy** went to meet Councillor Ray Howard in the worst affected UK location, Canvey Island.

The Flood in Canvey Island

Essex County Councillor for Canvey Island West, Ray Howard was 11 years old when the 1953 North Sea Storm struck his home. A combination of low pressure, high spring tides, and winds of record-breaking velocity caused a massive tidal surge to travel southwards along the East Coast. Many of the communications systems that we take for-granted were not in place then and few coastal residents were aware of the magnitude of the storm coming their way.

Though Canvey Island had been the fastest growing seaside community in the UK between 1911 and 1950 Ray points out that the nearest main police station was in Brentwood, there were rudimentary telephone and telegraph connections, and the population of about 13,000 people mostly lived in poorly constructed buildings. The island had regularly flooded before 17thC reclamation by Cornelius Vermuyden, after whom one of the local Canvey schools is named. In 1953 the sea-walls were still effectively those built of clay, chalk and Kentish Ragstone by the Dutchman over 300 years earlier and were not more than a metre or so taller than mean high water.

That night over 1,600 km of Eastern coastline were to be devastated but it was on Canvey that the largest single loss of life occurred. Breaching of the sea walls began in the north at Sunken Marsh at around 1 am on February 1st when the 4.6m high surge arrived. Of the 58 people who died on Canvey that night 53 died here as water rushed in so fast that few had time to escape while their single-storey pre-fabs either filled to the ceiling or were smashed by the rush of debris-laden water.

The whole of Canvey is on average 1-2m below high water and almost everywhere was flooded before the authorities even knew that anything was wrong. The next day though the response was rapid and major, involving many acts of individual bravery, and the entire island was evacuated. Ray spent the next six weeks at King John School at Thundersley which had been due to open on the Monday.

The Flood in the Netherlands

Across the North Sea the situation was far worse. The path of the storm led directly towards Zeeland and the surge of 5.6m was even higher in some of the south-western estuaries. Following a 1928 surge a national flood warning scheme had been introduced but few of the local 'Water Boards' subscribed to the telegrams, and the radio had been



off air for hours when the surge struck at 3am. As in Canvey, many of the effects of the storm were exacerbated by its arrival in the middle of the night on a weekend.

Nearly 2,000 people died that night, most in just two villages, but the extent of flooding was massive. Recent studies have revealed a combination of local indecision, poor understanding of the nature of a breach, and dykes that were in an appalling state after WWII. There were tales of heroism however, and one mayor ordered a barge driven into a dyke breach, preventing a flood that might have affected over 3 million people.

As in the UK, the Dutch disaster was due mainly to poor local preparedness, a lack of co-ordinated national planning for such inevitabilities, and poor quality post-war house building and sea-wall maintenance.

After The Flood

All around the North Sea coast there was a race to make immediate repairs before the February 1953 spring tides. Large numbers of national and international soldiers were

joined by huge numbers of volunteers as people took trains to affected areas to help with the clean up. Rapidly the biggest problems became logistics and fresh water supply.

In both the Netherlands and the UK, the consequences were significant and governments pledged that such a disaster would never be allowed to happen again.

The Dutch centralised control over the water boards, freed up national funds, and began a massive project to string barrages across the mouths of the southern estuaries, the Delta Project, completed in the 1980s.

Defences throughout the Thames Estuary were upgraded.

organising next year's 60th commemoration.

On Canvey the 1953 flood is not forgotten. Ray introduced me to local MP for Castle Point, Rebecca Harris, who recounted a recent Canvey school visit when children happily told her of the warning signs of a flood (water coming out of toilets and up through manholes) and used a model house to show her how to escape from rising water.

The Environment Agency (See p13 This Issue) stresses that with an annual sea-level rise between 2-3 mm a year the current defences should still be viable until 2070, given adequate maintenance. However, the scale of risk on the Thames flood-plain has increased. For example in Canvey the population is three times more than in 1953.

Councillor Ray Howard admits that he would love to see Canvey covered again in the fields of his youth but he knows that realistically expansion will always occur. To end our trip Ray took me to the Ove Arup designed



Illustration Courtesy of Dave Billock, The Canvey Community Archive

The 18.5 km² of Canvey is now ringed by 24km of 4.66m high concrete walls, is protected by barriers in Benfleet and East Haven, and has an extensive system of internal drainage with 14 pump houses to remove accumulating ground water.

Once shipping had moved from the Docklands to Tilbury, the Thames Barrier was constructed at Woolwich to protect Central London. Few realise that it is entirely due to this system that London is viable as a capital city. In 1953, the Thames had lapped only millimetres below the tops of the river walls. Without the barrier, huge swathes of central London would have flooded many times since.

Canvey Island since 1953

From 1975 to 1983, Councillor Howard sat on the panel responsible for upgrading the sea defences from the river Mar Dyke to Leigh-on-Sea. With a budget of £104 million, they led the tendering and completed on time and to budget, the Canvey works costing £34 million. In 2003 Ray visited Holland to mark the 50th Anniversary and is actively

Repairing the breached sea-walls, Canvey Island 1953

Labworth Café and then for a glass of wine in the Island Yacht Club. Both lie outside the flood defences, and both have had to fight for their continued existence, a fight that Ray has assisted.

Ray points out that the people of Canvey are not keen on managed realignment. His sentiments remind us that on both sides of the North Sea local people are often loathe surrendering hard-won land, for whatever reason. ■

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