

# Furious floods put east England in the Channel

**T**HE nightmare that could come back time and time again to haunt a 17-year-old army cadet was that of a crying baby, lying on top of a door which was swirling down a flooded street under more than 2m of water.

The young soldier had been rowing to safety a family he had rescued from their isolated home during the devastating floods which hit England during the first weekend of February, 1953.

Seeing the crying child, he immediately dived into the water to save it, but was hit by some passing driftwood and badly injured. The floating door with its pathetic cargo was pulled on by the surging waters and disappeared. Some time later the baby was found, dead.

This was perhaps one of the saddest of the many tragi-heroic stories that emerged after the floods which swamped the east coast of England. In one of the worst storms to hit the island, 307 people drowned and more than 32,000 people were evacuated from their homes. The final repair bill totalled more than 40 million pounds.

The weekend of destruction began soon after 8am on Saturday, January 31, as the Princess Victoria, the car ferry from Stranraer in Scotland to Larne, Northern Ireland, was battling a howling gale and ploughing through giant seas off the coast of Wigtownshire.

Suddenly, it was belted by a particularly fearsome wave which buckled the stern's loading doors. Within moments, water was surging through and the crew was racing to do emergency repairs.

But by 1pm the ferry was drifting helplessly towards the coast of Northern Ireland and at 1.57pm the order to abandon ship in the midst of this fierce gale was given.

The 177 passengers and crew began what was described as an orderly evacuation. The women and children were launched in the first lifeboat and were safely clear when the next disaster struck.

The immense weight of the water pouring into the Princess Victoria's engine room caused the ferry suddenly to turn right over, tipping most of the passengers into the boiling seas or simply taking them underneath with it.

Then, as the women and children watched this in terror from what they thought was the safety of their lifeboat, a great wave surged across their path and tipped all of them into the water as well.

None of the the women and children survived the terrible seas and only 34 passengers and 10 crew escaped this dramatic introduction to one of the worst weekends in British history.



Rescuers negotiate a fence around an isolated house on flooded Canvey Island during England's great 1953 flood

That night, as the nation slept, ferocious north-east gales whipped the coast of Britain, but it was the huge spring tides which peaked in the early hours of Sunday morning which turned the storm into a full-scale disaster.

Before dawn, coastal defences where shattered in 1200 places from East Riding to Kent as the sea swamped towns and farmland and swept away hundreds of men, women and children, as well as thousands of animals.

That Sunday morning, the nation awoke to learn that 70,000ha of the east coast of Britain were in the English Channel, in some places 7m deep.

By Sunday evening, news came through from Lincolnshire that floods extended from the Humber to the Wash and that near what had been the town of Mablethorpe, a stepped wall had failed just as dramatically as King Canute to stop the seas. Now 29km of the coast had moved inland as far as 2km.

That day, almost 5000 people, practically the whole population of the area, had to be evacuated by boat.

At Great Wakering in Essex a wave 5.5m high breached the sea wall. At Margate, the lighthouse crashed into the sea.

In Essex, almost all of Canvey Island in the Thames was under water. By Monday, more than 50 bodies were recovered by rescue workers, including six children from a family of 14 who had drowned in the torrent.

One of the flood's heroes was 22-year-old US airman Reis Leming who saved 27 people at Hunstanton, in Norfolk. But another 60 people from the town drowned.

On Monday, when the gales had subsided somewhat but the waters were still rising, police, army and rescue people went from house to house in row boats, edging their way through hedges and fences, floating through windows and doorways, pushing aside bobbing pieces of wooden furniture and trying not to hole their boats on the furniture that was still submerged.

In many of these homes they found the bodies of elderly or infirm people who could not get out of their beds or houses in time as the water surged through, sometimes several metres high. More tragically, they found the bodies of babies still in their cots.

They marked each house they checked with a white cross. Behind them came a solemn procession of boats carrying coffins.

**B**UT the disaster wasn't over yet. More big tides were expected and thousands of servicemen were given the task of plugging the gaps in the sea defences to stop more water coming in.

All that Monday and through the night with the help of giant searchlights, more than six million sandbags were filled and stacked along the coast.

By Tuesday morning the death

toll was 255 people — 95 in Essex, 83 in Norfolk, 34 in Lincolnshire, 34 in Suffolk, six along the Thames between Tilbury and Putney and three in Kent. Several hundred people were still missing and more than 30,000 had lost their homes.

Then news came that three trawlers had been lost in the fury of the North Sea storms and that all 38 crew members had drowned.

People were still being rescued from their homes four days after the first flood. There were found perched up on top of their wardrobes, stuck in their attics, shivering, wet and starving.

Then slowly the waters began to recede and people began to count the cost. England was still suffering from the war, ration cards were still in effect and the cost of the rescue and mop-up would be enormous.

Offers of help came from all over the world, including 100,000 pounds from Australia, 90,000 pounds from the Soviet Union and 50,000 pounds from South Africa.

It took another three weeks before the full extent of the damage could be calculated. The final figures were that 307 people had died, including 17 Americans from the US base near Hunstanton, 32,000 people had been evacuated and 25,000 homes had been flooded, 400 of which were beyond repair.

As well, 20,000 poultry, 15,000 pigs, 8000 sheep and 1000 cattle had been lost. In all the cost was put at a minimum of 40 million pounds, a fearsome price for a fearsome storm.