

Don Harmer, a young policeman at the time of the flood, describes being one of the first to arrive on the scene at Jaywick, and crawling back along the sea wall to telephone for assistance from Clacton, for which he received a commendation from the Queen.

We must've had nearly 300 people. A lot of them were wet, and a lot of them were very old, as well. And we needed blankets and things like that. Because most of these places were really only occupied for the summer. So we just went round breaking open buildings and anything that they could use— clothing, blankets, anything. And that's what we did. And we literally covered the place in stolen blankets, as I suppose.

At this point it was quite clear we were going to run out of people, because there was only Joe and my inspector. We were going to need a lot of help. Mr B said 'I suggest we try and get to Clacton and get some assistance'. And I said, that's right, we'll try along the sea wall. Joe and I started to get through the flood. We managed to get onto the wall— of course, waves were coming over the top. And we met the local police sergeant. We had no idea that he was there. And he said, 'where are you going?' So we said, we're going to try and get up onto the wall to Clacton. He said, 'have you seen what it's like— I don't see the point of two of you going'. And I suddenly realised who it was who was going to Clacton.

And I got up on there, and it wasn't that bad. I mean, the water was coming over the top, but as long as you could cling onto the brick part of the thing, and when the waves— when they departed, you could see where you were going for a bit. And you would hang on, realise that, you know, you could know another fifty yards. And this was alright, but in parts, it was quite deep. It wasn't that comfortable and it was extremely cold. And I stayed up there 'til I could see these Martello towers. And I felt, well that's alright, there's not very far to go from here at all. Unfortunately, I never didn't realise that there's a mile and a distance between the two Martello towers. I kept thinking, you know, sooner or later, I'm going to get to the end of this.

And of course, I got all the way along the wall. Although there was a lot of water tearing past me then at that point, going back into the sea, I thought, providing I didn't slip, that I could probably get along. And I eventually got up to the telephone box. And I thought I was doing really well at this time, so I telephoned Clacton and started to tell them how I was doing— well, what was happening, how many people there were, what we required. And they said great, well go back and find the inspector. Well I was twenty years old, and if someone gave you an instruction that you were to go back, then that's just what you did.

So I went back. As I said, I was lucky, I could see the water pouring out, but I knew the way I'd come in, so it was easy to carry on. So I went back to the wall and I found my way back to Jaywick. I was a little bit finished by then. I was a bit tired, and a bit cold.'

The interview with Don Harmer was recorded by Breeze FM radio station. An excerpt from the interview was broadcast on Breeze FM in 1993 as part of the programme 'The Great Tide', produced by Anton Jarvis [SA 24/827/1]