

Donald and Thelma Payne describe escaping from their bungalow on Canvey Island. As Thelma was seven months pregnant at the time, she couldn't fit through the trapdoor into the loft, so the couple found refuge in their neighbour's house. Donald then pulled Thelma up Larup Avenue to safety in their bathtub.

Donald: We first heard— I heard this slapping noise, banging noise, and I thought what's going on. And I looked out the window and it was about one o'clock in the morning. And I thought it had been snowing 'cos the moon was so bright— it was so bright that moon— and it looked like snow. And then I saw the water coming under the windowsills and I looked out and it was coming through the floorboards. One minute I was up to me ankles and then a couple of minutes it was up to me stomach. That's when we had to get out of that bungalow. Because whoever built that bungalow that we was living in— I pushed the trapdoor back in the loft, but somebody had put the gas pipe right across the middle. I could've got up there, being skinny, but my wife was seven months pregnant. No chance. So well I thought we've got to get out of here because the water was rising so fast. It was so fast, that water coming in. And it was so cold as well. It was so cold. 'Cos I only had pyjama trousers on, or something like that, and you only had your nightdress on, didn't you love?

Thelma: Oh yeah. 'Cos we've just jumped out the bed, straight into the water.

Donald: Anyhow, so luckily, there was an old house next door, and it had old rickety wooden stairs on the outside. By that time then we could hear people, like, shouting for help and that, you know. Anyhow we managed to get to that place didn't we, and we got up the stairs, you know, we went in there. We stayed there til—

Thelma: I suppose it was about eleven o'clock—

Donald: No it was later than that—

Thelma: I said to you, I wondered if the bath was still hanging on the wall—

Donald: That's right. We see this— She said to me, she said, I'm getting pains, I got to get out of here. Because, although the army— they came over and they had lorries. But the lorries couldn't see— 'cos there was a lot of ditches on Canvey, you know, where they used to drain the water away— and they kept going down these ditches, you know. So, I see our old bath, floating off the hook, and it was jammed between our outside toilet and the fence. And I waded next door and brought it to the bottom of the stairs— those old wooden stairs— put her in it, and pushed her up Larup Avenue. And they took you off to the rest centre, didn't they?

The interview with Donald and Thelma Payne was recorded in 1999 by Stephen Hussey as part of the 'Headline History' oral history project [SA 13/6/4/1]