

Geoff Barsby, a part-time fireman, recalls the rescue effort on Canvey Island. Geoff lived on North Avenue at the time of the flood and describes rescuing other residents with canvas dinghies and boats sent by Peter Pan's Playground in Southend-on-Sea.

We had house-bells in our houses, and it went promptly at about half past one. We jumped on our bike– or I jumped on my bike and rode round to the fire station.

Where were you living at the time?

I was living on North Avenue, which is about two minutes away from the fire station.

Did you have any idea what you were going to?

None at all. We didn't know it was going to be a high tide or anything about a tide at all. When we got to the station, the surveyor was standing outside, that's Major Stevens. And he said, 'I'd like you to take your pump up to the Newlands area, we think the wall might be going'.

What were your feelings when he said that?

Horror - you didn't want to be the first there! Couldn't believe it, you know. As a kid, you'd see the water lap over the wall and you used to laugh. Like it was nothing, you know. Anyway, we went down to Rainbow Road and Chamberlain Avenue, and the wall had already broken, and the water was rushing down the wall– you know, rushing down the road at such a speed you could hardly stand up. So we reversed out and we went up to Smallgains where there is an old barn where they was making some boats. And we broke the door open of this old barn, and all that was in there was three collapsible canvas dinghies. So we tried with these boats. I got two families off, down Elder Tree Road. And the third family, the father slipped through off the roof straight through the bottom of the boat. So of course we all had– they all had canvas bottoms, these boats– so we all had to walk home then.

How deep was it then at that point?

It was about three or four foot in this particular road– then, that was the first tide. By that time the water was coming down the High Street. So we had a little Land Rover and another fireman and myself, we went round the estates ringing a bell shouting, 'everybody out'. And then we finished up at William Read School. By that time there was wet people walking about who had

been rescued from Newlands with nowhere to go. So we broke the door open to the school so that people could go in there. Then we went back to the fire station. A lorry had come over with some little boats from I think Peter Pan's Playground in Southend. They'd taken these little–

So the news had travelled?

The news had travelled. And they'd sent these– these was the only boats they could get hold of then. And we all grabbed a little boat, each fireman, and we was going down the roads getting as many people out as we could, with these little boats. By that time it was getting daylight. Bearing in mind we've had no sleep and we're wet. And we all had families. So in my little boat I rowed home. And I had a wife and three children then. And all I had was three wet pound notes in my pocket, which was a lot of money in them days. I heard Canvey was going to be evacuated, so I put them all in the boat with a pillowslip with their belongings in– didn't have a case– and rowed them to the corner of the road, which is outside William Read School, where an army lorry was there picking up people to take them off Canvey. And that's the last I saw of them for a week, because I didn't even know where they was going or how they got there because there was no telephones or–

So between the time of you getting out of bed and getting back to your home the water had got to your place?

It had got to my place, oh yes. My wife sat upstairs and watched it come down the road.

The interview with Geoff Barsby was recorded in 1983 by Ted Haley [SA 20/1138/1]