

# Essex Sound and Video Archive

## Sources on the 1953 North Sea flood



*Rescuers in Jaywick (D/Z 35/15) © Reuters*

The Essex Sound and Video Archive preserves radio broadcasts, oral histories, and videos relating to the 1953 North Sea flood on Essex.

Most of the recordings can be listened to or watched either [online](#) or in our Playback Room at the Essex Record Office. For further information, contact [ero.enquiry@essex.gov.uk](mailto:ero.enquiry@essex.gov.uk).

### Radio programmes

The earliest recordings held in the ESVA are several short interviews recorded for the BBC by Max Robertson and N. Walker in the days following the flood ([SA 1/656/1](#)). The people interviewed include rescuers in Jaywick and evacuated residents of Canvey Island and Foulness Island. The recordings were originally held in the BBC Archive on shellac discs, and sent to BBC Essex in 1988 to use in a documentary commemorating the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the flood, 'Time on Tide' ([SA 1/313/1](#)). Some of the interviews are also included in a BBC Archive Hour programme on the flood, held in the ESVA as part of the Colchester Recalled collection ([SA419](#), 1270).

In 1993, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the flood, Neil Baldock produced another documentary for BBC Essex, 'A Breach in Our Defences' ([SA 1/1285/1](#)). The same year, Anton Jarvis and Ray Clark carried out more interviews with survivors and rescuers for a documentary broadcast on Breeze FM, 'The Great Tide' ([SA 24/827/1](#)). A revised version of this documentary, with additional interviews, was broadcast on BBC Essex in 2003 as 'The Great Tide – 50 Years On' ([SA267](#)).

In 1995 Bill Rollins wrote, produced, and narrated a programme on the impact of the floods in Tendring for Mellow Radio ([SA 24/1867/1](#)). The programme includes a recording of the memorial service and dedication of a name plaque at St Christopher's Church, Jaywick, as well as memories of people who were in Harwich and Jaywick at the time.

Further interviews with residents of Canvey Island were carried out for BBC Music Day in 2015 ([SA763](#)), and in 2022 for the BBC Radio 4 documentary '[Learning from the Great Tide](#)'.

Radio presenter and recordist Dennis Rookard also recorded several interviews with people about the flood in the late 1980s. These were broadcast on various programmes into the 2000s ([SA171](#), [SA229](#), [SA569](#)), most recently on the February 2013 edition of Sounds of Brentwood talking magazine ([SA 2/1/110/1](#)). He also created a general programme on 'East Coast Flooding', broadcast on the British Forces Broadcasting Service in 1984 ([SA 19/1/45/1](#)).

Although the 1953 flood is not the sole focus, it is also referenced in BBC Essex programmes on Jaywick and Great Oakley, broadcast in 1988 as part of the series 'A-Z of Essex Villages' ([SA 1/194/1](#) and [SA 1/281/1](#)).

## Oral histories

There are several oral history collections preserved in the ESVA which focus, in part, on the 1953 flood:

- 12 Foot Under: 6 interviews about the 1953 flood, recorded as part of an educational project run by Castle Point Borough Council between 2004 and 2005 ([SA481](#))
- Resorting to the Coast: 16 interviews about living on the coast in Tendring, recorded between 2017 and 2018 ([SA880](#))
- Tides of Tendring: 7 interviews about the 1953 flood in Tendring, recorded in 2019 ([SA 84](#))
- Memories Exchange: 24 interviews carried out by the Harwich Society about living in the town ([SA 49](#)). Find out more in our [blog post](#) about this collection.

Several of the larger oral history collections include whole life interviews with people who talk about their experiences of the flood:

- Burnham Local History Society
  - [SA 5/372/1](#) Tom Rice: organising defences in Burnham (1987)
  - [SA 5/374/1](#) Bill Goldsmith: working for Essex River Board (1974)
  - [SA 5/376/1](#) Eloise Warwick Smith: distributing clothing for evacuees (1974)

- Colchester Recalled
  - [SA 8/1453/1](#) Alice Farthing: the flood (1992)
  - [SA 8/1584/1](#) Jack Everitt: the effect of the flood on the water supply (1993)
  - [SA 8/1662/1](#) Doris Thimblethorpe: the flood at Brightlingsea (1994)
  - [SA 8/1831/1](#) Norman Joscelyne: losing his hut on Mersea (1995)
  - [SA 8/1894/1](#) James Lee: water contamination at Dovercourt and Harwich (1992)
- Headline History
  - [SA 13/6/4/1](#) Donald and Thelma Payne: escaping Canvey Island (1999)
  - [SA 13/6/6/1](#) Marcus Knight: losing a friend at Jaywick (1999)
- Ted Haley recordings
  - [SA 20/1/23/1](#) Albert Jones: Jones Stores, Canvey Island (1983)
  - [SA 20/1/29/1](#) John Nichols: the King's Head pub, Foulness Island (1979)
  - [SA 20/2/25/1](#) William Jones: the ambulance service on Canvey Island (1968)
  - [SA 20/1138/1](#) Geoff Barsby: his role as a part-time fireman on Canvey Island (1983)
  - [SA 20/1144/1](#) Aubrey Stevens: the flood on Canvey Island (1983)
  - [SA 20/1154/1](#) Donald Ronan: rescue efforts in Great Wakering (1980)
- Essex Police 'Sworn to Serve'
  - [SA 25/1/1/1](#) Kenneth Alston: the police response in Harwich (1990-1991)
  - [SA 25/1/9/1](#) Florence Smith: the flood on Canvey Island (1990)
  - [SA 25/2/1/1](#) Leslie Crick: the flood at Rowhedge (1989)
  - [SA 25/2/3/1](#) Thomas Z. Bateman: the flood at Harwich and Jaywick (1990)
  - [SA 25/2/4/1](#) William G. Geddes: the flood at Harwich (1990)
  - [SA 25/2/5/1](#) Geoffrey Bendall: the flood at Jaywick (1989)
  - [SA 25/2/6/1](#) Harry Salmon: the flood in Colchester (1990)
  - [SA 25/4/1/1](#) James Woolnough: the flood in Jaywick (1992)
  - [SA 25/4/3/1](#) Don Harmer: rescue work in Jaywick

#### Miscellaneous interviews:

- [SA523](#) Mrs Gwen Milbourn: the 1953 and 1956 floods in Great Wakering (2009)
- [SA535](#) Leon Dobson: the floods on Foulness Island (2009)
- [SA 6/306](#) Mrs Champion: losing her family on Canvey Island (1978). Find out more in our [blog post](#) about this interview.
- [SA 13/4/6/1](#) Sir John Ruggles-Brise: being Lord Lieutenant of Essex at the time
- [SA 16/759/1](#) George Johnson on rescue work in Jaywick and Audrey and Derek Frost on escaping their bungalow on Gorse Way, both recorded by Clacton & District Local History Society (1988)
- [SA 24/308/1](#) Dennis Lloyd's reminiscences of the flood on Canvey Island (c1988)



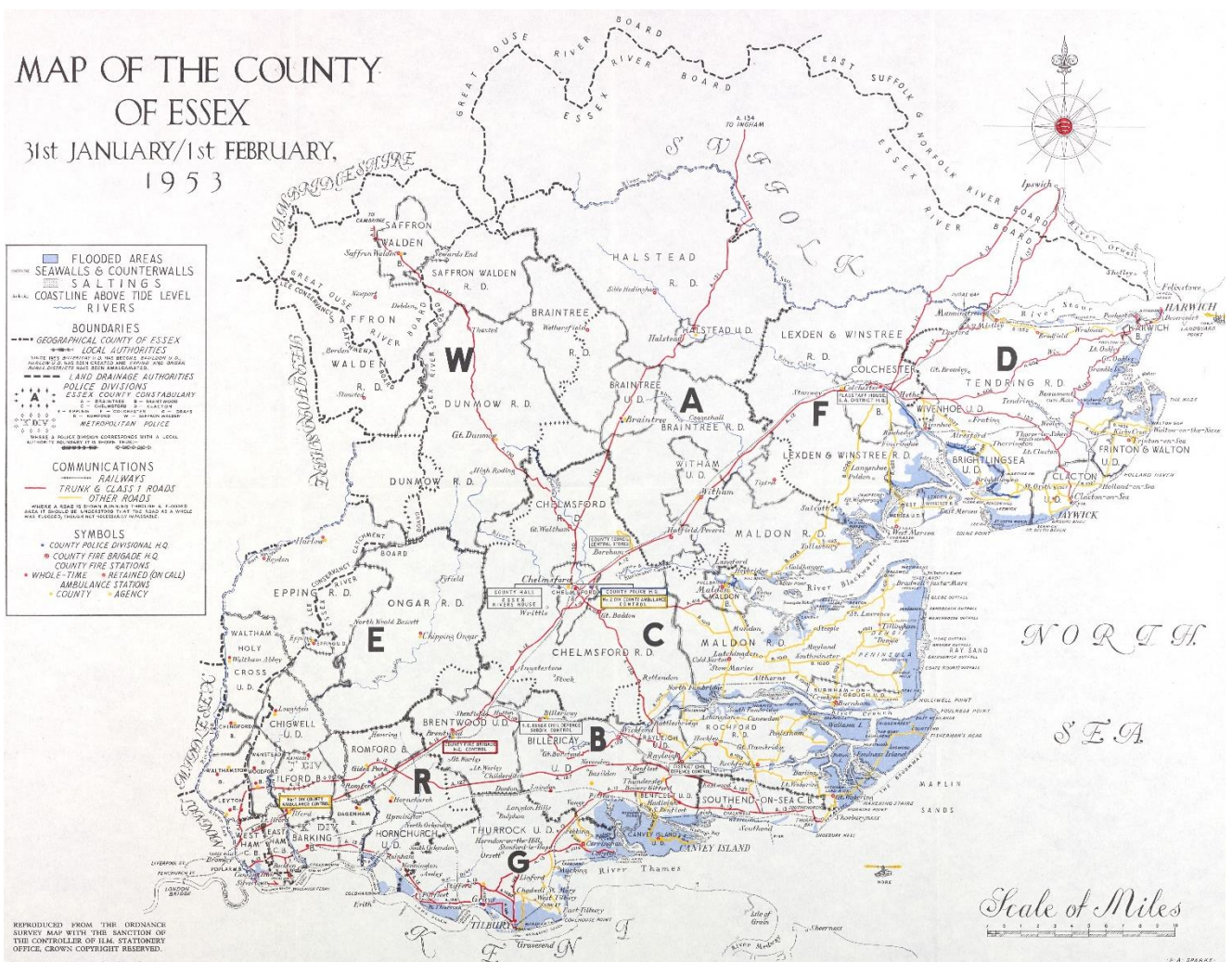
# Video

In 1953, Essex County Council's Educational Video Unit produced 'Essex Floods', a documentary film about the impact of the flood on Canvey Island and across Essex ([VA 3/8/4/1](#)). It includes narration as well as footage of the floods, the evacuation centre, and the clean-up work afterwards. The version preserved in the ESVA is a VHS copy of the original film.

In 2004, the films 'Fragile Land' and 'Borrowed Land' were commissioned by ESCAPE: European Solutions by Co-operation and Planning in Emergencies ([SA349](#)). The films provided information about the consequences of flooding, shown by the impact of the 1953 flood in eastern England and the Netherlands, and advice about how to act during a flood.

We also hold a film of the events held on Canvey Island to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the flood in 2013 ([SA750](#)).

For more films about the flood across the region, search the [East Anglian Film Archive](#).



# Other sources at the Essex Record Office

## The immediate impact

- Miscellaneous records of the 1953 flood ([D/Z 35](#)). These include: logs and reports produced by the county fire brigade and police service, the army, and the Essex River Board; correspondence, papers, and ‘case cards’ compiled by the Women’s Voluntary Services (WVS) welfare centre in South Benfleet; maps comparing tide levels; newspaper reports on the flood; and photographs.
- Aerial photographs following the flood ([D/DS 261/387](#) – [D/DS 261/392](#))
- Correspondence between Canvey Island Urban District Council and the sub-divisional controller, Civil Defence, S.E. Essex Sub-Division, including letters of thanks for assistance ([D/UCI 1/3/2/9](#)).

## Hilda Grieve’s *The Great Tide*

- Grieve’s typescript notes for *The Great Tide* and P.A. Spark’s original drawings for the maps ([D/Z 35/28](#) and [D/Z 35/21](#))
- First edition of *The Great Tide*, published in 1959 ([C/DR 13/13](#))
- Typescript notes for a lecture given by Grieve on the flood ([A12142](#))
- Script for a talk on ‘Hilda Grieve’s People’ given by Beryl Board at Chelmsford Cathedral in 1996 ([T/Z 474/1](#))
- Grieve’s OS Map used for field research and photographs of her during her wartime Civil Defence service and in a canoe during a flood ([A14391](#))

## Coastal defences

- Copy of report to the Engineer of Essex River Board regarding reconstruction of sea walls in March 1953 ([A15385](#))
- Copies of photographs taken of repair work to the sea walls on Canvey Island in 1953 ([A12821](#))
- Oral histories on the 1958 floods in Basildon ([SA 13/7/7/1](#) Andrew Nichols, 2010) and at Butlins ([SA 13/2/2/12](#) Mrs Malby, 2007)
- Advice booklet issued to residents of Canvey Island in 1979 and Issue 11 of Canvey Island Tidal Flooding Precautions ([D/XCa 1/1/1](#) and [D/XCa 1/1/2](#))
- Recording of the opening of the Benfleet Barrier and the Anglian Water Authority Flood Defences in 1983 ([SA 20/1537/1](#))
- BBC Essex programmes about a conference on flood defences in 1991 ([SA 1/844/1](#)) and a proposed coastal defence scheme at Clacton in 1992 ([SA 1/832/1](#)), as well as floods in 1987 ([SA 1/209/1](#)), 1993 ([SA 1/1091/1](#)) and 1998 ([SA272](#), Disc 3, 14)