



ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

A Flood of Memories

RECOLLECTIONS
OF THE 1947 FLOODS
IN EAST ANGLIA

Descriptions of events during the 1947 Floods are still powerful reminders of the misery and pain caused by flooding. Fifty years after the devastation, recollections of homelessness, of the unceasing battle against the raging torrents of water, hurricane force winds and bleak dark nights on Fenland banks, stir the imagination and add a personal dimension to the brief statistics of the event.

This collection of memories captures the essence of those dreadful days and nights - of the struggle to overcome the elements threatening to engulf and destroy the most productive agricultural land in Britain; the back breaking work of trying to staunch the breaching of river banks; the heartbreak of salvaging furniture and belongings in the face of rising floodwaters; the wry tales of people coping with the crushing pressures of losing everything.

For the remainder of the region it was a time of watching and waiting as the tragedy unfolded.

Front cover: Rising floodwaters

“We found it was a job to get the bags to hold because the bank was worn away on either side of the fencing ... when we put the bags down you couldn't hold them, you see they kept lifting. ... Water was washing over on to the fen and taking large pieces of the bank right out.

“The report came through that there was another breach forming at the back of us which was going to trap us. We got across to the other side and found that the water was deeper ... it was impossible really to lift your feet off the base of the bank so you were kind of pushing, slushing your way through the water and holding one another up.

“By this time I was drenched right through. I was shivering through exposure to the elements. I walked along ... well you can't say walked because against the force of the wind you could sometimes lay actually right into the wind.”

- Repair gang member

“There was only one bridge. The one on the opposite side of the river had already gone. But we still had the one way out. The water kept rising and rising. Eventually, on the Saturday morning, it came right up and we had - as soon as it was daylight - to make our way out. There was about 18 inches of water in the bottom room; then things were floating around. We had got a rope during the night and tied it from the bridge to the back door to help us get out. He got his few little things together and we made our way across the bridge as best we could.

“I told him to follow me and to keep hold of my coat and keep on the upside of the bridge because the bridge had lifted out of its sockets. The whole lot had gone and it only hung together on parts of the bridge on galvanised sheet and galvanised wire. That's how we made our way across.”

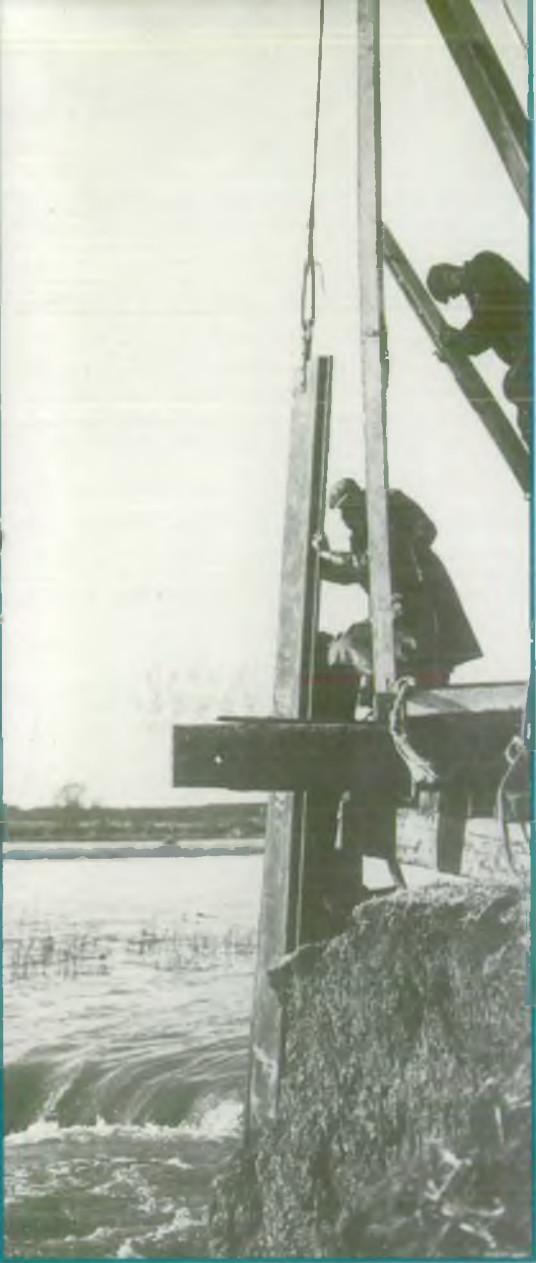
- A rescuer at work

“One stream of people went one way with the German prisoners and the men. The stream coming the other way was the women and children on the lorries with their furniture and, right on top of the furniture, would be a dog or a coop of hens. It was the most pathetic thing I think I've ever seen.”

- A WVS worker



The savage torrent breaches a road



Above: Closing a breach with steel piling

Above right: Homeless - but life has to go on

“We were asked by a farmer to save his valuable bull which had been in three feet of water for over 48 hours. It was about two and a half miles over difficult country which was under about six or seven feet of water in places. Having secured the bull, with a rope through the shackle at the back of the ‘duck’ we pulled away, the bull pulling behind. But he was really very worried because he didn’t like the swirl of the water from the propellers and swimming in the very cold water.

“As a result of the weight of the wheat we had in the ‘duck’ and the old bull pulling from behind we found ourselves bogged on a shelf of ground about 40 yards from land. We were stuck there for about three and a half hours... we pulled ourselves in at about 11.30 at night. The bull was getting very worried, very excited but we managed to get a pole on him and he wandered down the street very happily with his owner who was very grateful to get him back.”

- An Army Captain involved in livestock rescue work



“I had lumbago but I muddled along. I packed all my things; I rolled them all up and got everything ready. My best things of course; you know, the tea service and all that sort of thing. My linen chest was packed, and the wardrobe. I tied a rope around that so that they took it away with the things already in. I tied the drawers up and got it all ready so that all the men had to do was take everything out in a big lump.”

- A fen worker’s wife

“It was dark and cold as we carefully picked our way along the narrow top of the bank with the flooded river just below the crest on our right and the black fen fifteen feet below us on our left. ... Once again my imagination wrestled with the certain knowledge that anywhere along hundreds of miles of fen river banks the awful pressure of this water might prove too great and that it only needed one failure for thousands of tons of black water to pour into the fen and ruin the rich farmlands and crops.

“We came to a place where the top of the bank had slipped downwards towards the fen, leaving the front slope and a narrow width of the top of the bank to withstand the pressure of the flood water. Already it was squirting and trickling through. There was not a soul on the spot, no barges of clay, no bags, no tarpaulins and I realised that in the time it would need to assemble them this bank would have long since breached. ... I felt stunned and helpless in the presence of a disaster which I knew would take place within the next few hours or maybe even minutes.”

- A District Engineer



Above: River structures were unable to cope with the amount of water



Right: Closing the gap. Using redundant amphibious vehicles to seal the major fenland breach at Over

“The water was seeping badly through the cracks in the bank. We stood for a few minutes and he said ‘Can you hear anything?’ I said ‘Yes that’s the bank going. We’d better get back.’

“In the light of the hurricane lanterns we could see the water was seeping badly, small pieces of clay began to come, getting larger and larger ‘till there were lumps coming up as big as cartwheels. The water began to get stronger and stronger and as both waters met - there was a clap and water spread on us.”

- A Catchment Board foreman

“Straggling columns of homeless people are making their way along what roads and tracks remain above the water. First comes the farmer leading his horses; the livestock, tied nose to tail, is in the charge of his wife; the children bring up the rear pushing prams with belongings in.”

- Radio broadcast

“By the time I arrived work was in full swing. The road itself looked very much like a battle ground, and the enemy was already at the gates. Lapping against the base of the sandbag barrier with a sinister rustle it could be heard against all the other sounds of the frantic activity going on. I remember thinking how the battle-like atmosphere was heightened by the noise of the mechanical forces engaged.

“There was a tank-like clanking of bulldozers biting great lumps of clay out of the rising ground nearby. There was the roar of lorry engines as the vehicles passed in continuous procession bringing more and still more materials for the last ditch fight.

“As I watched the barrier rose slightly faster than the rising floods. Watching with me were groups of evacuees from the threatened fen - women and children mostly for their men-folk were all at work on the defences. Their faces bore the typical anxious look of the dispossessed.”

- A local journalist



Above: Army personnel inspecting the devastation

Right: The battle of the banks - fighting to save a few belongings and stem the flood

“I looked in the direction of the breach and I could see the water coming through something like Niagara Falls. The foam from it, as it was plunging into the fen, looked terrific.....terrifying. Every time I looked the breach was getting wider. All the low parts of the land began to fill; soon it was our road covered and the next thing we was watching it come up around the house.”

- A farm labourer

“The most difficult part was to get the fellows to lay the bags properly because if you didn’t crush your bags and bind them the water would wash them away. And to make matters worse the fellows were inexperienced and laid them anyhow which spoilt a lot of good valuable time moving the bags and putting them right again.”

- Foreman in charge of a repair team





Above: Rivers and channels burst their banks

Below: Where to begin - flood fighters confront another daunting task

“I saw some women going down the road with some drawers out of my chest of drawers. I spoke to them and said ‘You’re doing your usual good deeds then?’ And then I tore after them like mad because I saw some small bundles tied up with pale blue ribbon. They were letters my husband had sent to me when he was in the Army. Of course they were going to go to the public house next door to read them and I thought ‘You’re not having that fun’ so I tore after them and rescued the letters and brought them back.”

- Local flood victim

“I looked out of my son’s window and thought ‘Whatever’s up’. They were tearing about down there. People coming down the road and running up the hill. There were hundreds of people about it seems.

“They could see the weakness. The water was blowing up through our garden on the outside just as if it was coming out of rat holes - you know like a fountain. That shows weakness. Well the longer that run and the force, the bigger the hole got until bang! The lot went.

“I had to get out of the house as quick as I could because I didn’t know what would happen next. I was just about boot top in water. Before I could get out of the door it came straight through the front door and out of the back. It was just a huge rush. I had some trees along the drain; they were huge. They went like pea sticks.”

- A Fenland smallholder

“The first thing I did was to go and look at the breach. It was a terrifying sight. Black sinister water was tearing through the flood bank and pouring into the fen. It was about 90 feet wide and getting bigger and bigger.”

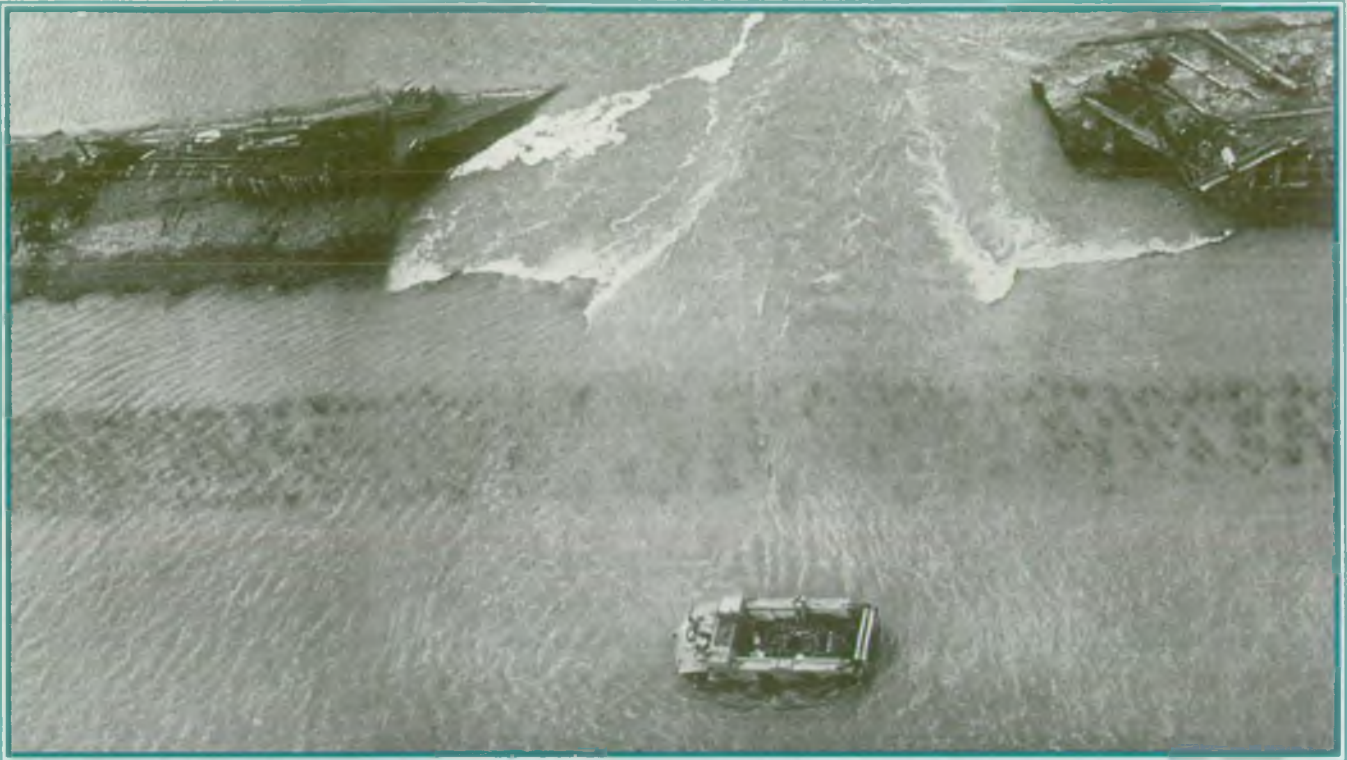
- A Catchment Board engineer

“This was really hard work and at first the troops I had working under me hated it. The weather was windy and the work wet and at the end of the first day no fewer than 30 shovels were missing. The theory of course was ‘no shovel, no work’, and it was all too easy to lose a shovel in that river.

“They looked upon this job as some kind of fatigue. They really had no idea of what it was all about. So I got them all together and explained how important it was; that the gap should be closed as soon as possible and that until it was we couldn’t pump out the fen. Once they got the idea they really did work well. For two weeks working three eight-hour shifts a day we continued pouring clay into the gap until, at last, the first bags appeared out of the water. It meant the river bank was whole again. It was really quite a moment.”

- Foreman of a repair gang





Above: Helplessly watching the endless flow

Top: Testing the waters - an amphibious Neptune checks whether similar vehicles could be used to fill the gap

“We slowly moved forward parallel to the floodbank and began to feel the current trying to sweep us through the breach. The Neptune was pushed sideways but stayed on the ground. We edged forward until we were dead opposite the middle of the breach and still the tracks gripped. Just at that moment the engine spluttered and stopped.

“The sudden absolute silence, except for the noise of the water, was a little awesome and I wondered whether the Neptune would capsize if it was washed through the breach. We had lifejackets on but the water looked cold, uninviting and dangerous. But the Neptune remained as firm as a rock and I knew that my idea was possible.”

- An engineer testing the use of Neptunes to seal a breach

“Below me lay what looked like a choppy inland sea bordered by a green grass beach. Land on either side and ahead was visible in the hazy distance only as a grey smudge, barely distinguishable from the muddy flood waters below. Yellow islands were the tops of almost submerged corn stacks; feathery patches were the higher branches of tall trees sticking up from the surrounding waters.

“Lines of telegraph poles rising from the floods like outside mooring posts marked the route of inundated roads. Half submerged farms - grey and lifeless - dotted the landscape below emphasising the sense of cold desolation which this vast sea of water so grimly evoked. The only movement in this grey scene came from the white flocks of wheeling gulls.”

- Description of an aerial reconnaissance

“We went down there in the boat. It was a rough day and the waves were high. We managed to get down there and collected his chickens. One little bantam we could not get was left. We couldn't get down there no more until the end of June. When we got there we found the bantam in the horse's manger. It had brought up a lovely little brood of chickens - about ten I suppose - still alive and all right after three months.”

- A smallholder

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FLOODING INFORMATION

Dial and listen for information and advice on flooding in your area

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For general enquiries please call your local Environment Agency office. If you are unsure who to contact, or which is your local office, please call our general enquiry line.

ENVIRONMENT AGENCY
GENERAL ENQUIRY LINE

0645 333 111

The 24-hour emergency hotline number for reporting all environmental incidents relating to air, land and water.

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0800 80 70 60



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