

Ten deadly weather events that shook Britain

Video transcript: 1953 Storm of the century

Matt Allwright, Britain Under Threat, BBC One 2007 with archive footage from 1953: On the night of 31 January 1953, a massive swell of water swept down the entire length of the north sea. Known as a storm surge; a combination of gale-force winds, low pressure and high tide, it brought havoc to over 1,000 miles of British coastline.

By dawn the following day 306 people were dead and 30,000 were facing evacuation. Canvey Island in Essex was one of the hardest hit spots. As a five meter storm surge raced down the river Thames, few of the 13,000 residents – mostly living in single story buildings – had any idea what was about to happen.

John Lawrence, rescue boat skipper - 1953 archive: It was really rough with waves coming right across the top of the boat. The first thing we encountered was a bush, a large bush, with two bodies hooked up in it.

Rod Bishop, storm survivor: All you could smell was this horrible smell that was coming up from everything. That's something that's always stuck with me – this vile smell that I've always associated with death I suppose.

Presenter, Matt Allwright: The reason Canvey was unable to resist that night's storm surge was due to the state of its flood defences. This is one of the last remaining stretches of the original sea wall here at Canvey Island. You can see when you look at it why it breached in so many places, because fundamentally it's a big mound of earth and that's it. But what was a disaster for Canvey Island and its inhabitants, was a blessing for the capital. If the sea defences here hadn't breached and in a thousand other places up and down the east coast of the UK, then London without a doubt, would have been engulfed. So well before climate change was even an issue, plans were put in place to construct a huge flood barrier to protect the capital from the next storm surge.

Queen Elizabeth II officially opens the Thames Barrier on 8 May 1984: London has now been made free from the threat of flooding.

Matt Allwright: So some 30 years later the Thames Barrier was complete. For the last 24 years the Thames Barrier has protected one and a quarter million Londoners living down here from the threat of serious flooding – not to mention several occasions when the waters were almost up to the same level as the 1953 floods.