

## **“That night”: Unlocking the memories of loss on Canvey Island in 1953.**

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### **Abstract**

The need to tell or correct a narrative about a totemic moment in the history of a place is brought to the fore in this article. It tells the story of a series of meetings in 2015 with older residents of Canvey Island in Essex who had asked for a chance to share individual experiences of ‘that night’ of flooding in 1953. A need to seize one last chance to tell the story, or to tell a story for the very first time at the end of life, is found in the recollections of other older people experiencing traumatic events. The article details the gathering of profound and painful narratives that had previously remained hidden and were fragile to loss forever. It reflects on the importance of protecting the older persons’ narrative, particularly those concerned with ‘difficult’ aspects of the event when gathering collective memory. The events at the heart of the narratives occurred in 1953 but their potency is not diminished by the passing of time.

### **Introduction**

In 1953 a storm surge in the North Sea caused catastrophic flooding along the East Coast of Britain, resulting in the loss of 307 lives. The largest single loss of life took place on Canvey Island, Essex where 58 people died as a direct result of the failure of the sea wall. The Island is a small area of reclaimed land in the Thames Estuary. It has a coastline of approximately 14 miles and covers an area of around 7.2 square miles (18.6 km<sup>2</sup>). The island is heavily populated with a permanent settlement of approximately 38,170 people<sup>1</sup>. During the peak summer season the number of people on the island can temporarily increase to approximately 60,000. The island is protected by the current concrete seawall that extends around 12 miles of the coastline of the island whilst the remaining 2 miles of the most sheltered coastline retains the original earthen wall. The island is accessed via two roads from the mainland (A130 and B1014) these converge at a single roundabout at the northern end of the island effectively meaning there is only one regular vehicle access point onto and off the island. At low tide, it is possible to walk across the mud flats to the mainland offering another route off the island if conditions permit, whilst a second service road can be accessed by 4x4 vehicles also across the mud flats.

The majority of the island is located at or up to 1m below normal high tide levels; as a result, there is a long history of flooding. In spite of this there is a long history of human use, with early evidence showing that the Romans used the island as a base for salt production and later agricultural uses<sup>2</sup>. By the early 1600s the island was home to some 4,000 sheep and after a severe flood in 1621 the landowners led by Sir Henry Appleton invited Dutch experts to assess the problem<sup>3</sup>. The Dutch water engineer, Cornelius Vermuyden, agreed to undertake the improvement of the sea defences on 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1623, in return for which he and his Dutch workers would be granted land upon the island by way of payment<sup>4</sup>. In return for the

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<sup>1</sup> UK Census, "Population Density,"

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/2011ukcensuses/ukcensusesdata>.

<sup>2</sup> R. Hallman, *Canvey Island: A History* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co Ltd, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

land the Dutch settlers were charged with maintaining the sea wall, which continued until the 1930s when it became a municipal responsibility<sup>5</sup>.

Over time the wall moved and increased in height often as a result of breaches and erosion from the sea so that in 1953 the island was protected by an earthen sea wall of 14 miles in circumference but still much like the original wall that the Dutch built. According to the 1901 census there were only 307 people permanently resident on the island, living in 60 properties with the majority of adult males identifying their career as Seawall Engineer/Labourer<sup>6</sup>. It was shortly after the 1901 census that entrepreneur Frederick Hester took an interest in Canvey Island and began promoting it as a holiday destination, resulting in the building of hundreds of single story wooden holiday homes<sup>7</sup>. After the end of World War II, many people from the East End of London had been left homeless and wanted to move out of the city, Canvey Island was the destination for many. By 1953 the population increased to just fewer than 12,000, most of whom were families from London now living in the wooden holiday bungalows that had never been intended for permanent settlement. After the 1953 floods the seawalls were repaired and by 1975 replaced by the large concrete sea wall that exists to this day. Heavy rainfall in 2014 resulted in the flooding of most of the islands roads, whilst around 50 properties suffered significant internal flooding damage<sup>8</sup>. Although there was no sea inundation fear of flooding from tidal surges remains high in the community consciousness as seen in press coverage at the time<sup>9</sup>.

This study was initiated by a small number of older residents of Canvey Island who made initial approaches to tell their story to Castle Point Council who in turn contacted the University. There was a particular need communicated by residents to establish the fate of the 58 fatalities that occurred on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> January/1<sup>st</sup> February 1953. Despite extensive local archiving, members of the community had expressed concerns that there was ambiguity over the precise death toll and final resting place for the deceased, and that accounts of their passing had been lost. Early on in the research process it became apparent that the ‘facts’ relating to the fatalities were only part of the motivations for participants’ to reflect on their experiences. Crucially too, a central focus related to the longer-term impact of the flood, not only for those present during the flood, but for the wider community, many of whom were not on the Island at the time.

When survivors of the flood approached Essex County Council, the council offered the University a chance to pair the residents with anthropology students, trained to collect testimonies from civil rights violations, emerged. Survivors of the 1953 east coast flooding were invited by the council and the research team to share their memories of the event but with particular emphasis on their memories of loss and death; something they expressed early on they felt had been expunged from official accounts which had focussed on recovery; the future and good news stories. This type of narrative analysis and comparison of collective memory has been applied most often to the trauma surrounding war and human rights violations. However, natural disasters where there has been significant loss of life can also have a traumatic and lasting effect on communities.

## **Remembering Life Events**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Find My Past, "1901 Census " <http://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-records/1901-england-wales-and-scotland-census>.

<sup>7</sup> Hallman.

<sup>8</sup> Essex County Council, "Flood Investigation Report, Canvey Island," (Essex2014). SFRA, "Strategic Flood Risk Assessment," (Castle Point: Castle Point Borough Council, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> BBC "Canvey Island flood pumps ‘taken out by lightning’" (21 July 2014)

Memory of a major life event is a process that defines how it is placed within the consciousness and conscience of both the person and the community in which that event happened. For the individual, this type of memory often takes the form of reminiscence, which is a process by which a person builds up a life story. Reminiscence has been found to be particularly important in the psychological well-being of older individuals<sup>10</sup>. Life review is a related but more formal and evaluative process where an individual is able to reconcile life events<sup>11</sup>. As we age and approach death there is a need in many to consolidate and understand memories into a life story, this is often coupled with a *need* to tell that story<sup>12</sup>.

In recent years memory research has become more prevalent in humanities and in particular within the remembrance of important historical events such as the holocaust<sup>13</sup>. This has led to an explosion of ‘new histories’ as memory studies may conflict with official versions of historical events that in turn inform the community memory<sup>14</sup>. Community memory is often defined as collective memory, which itself can be influenced by a number of factors. Collective memory can take a number of forms for example through narratives of the event, memorialisation and perhaps increasingly through websites and social media. There can however, be inconsistency between collective memory and individual memory that can leave individuals feeling marginalised or needing to withhold their stories. Enabling survivors to tell their stories in an unrestricted manner even many years after an event can be important both to the individual and to the completeness of the narratives.

Collective memory suggests collaboration of a group or community, regarding the way in which an event is remembered or memorialised and how it continues to have a bearing on that community<sup>15</sup>. It is perhaps one of the most important aspects of a mass trauma event as it provides a shared medium through which individuals can remember the events or articulate themselves through the shared stories<sup>16</sup>. It has been suggested that where there has been collective trauma the sharing of collective memories is essential to the healing process<sup>17</sup>. The formation of a collective memory after trauma could be said to serve a number of purposes, including individual realisation that you are not alone, that this thing happened to others, but also as a means to reconstruct those memories into a form from which it is possible to move on<sup>18</sup>. Much of the work assessing the value of collective memory in the aftermath of a traumatic event has tended to focus on human rights issues such as war, genocide and crimes against humanity. The support offered by the formation of collective memory gives survivors the ability to gain psychosocial support to transform their memories and so move on without

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<sup>10</sup> Ernst Bohlmeijer et al., "The Effects of Reminiscence on Psychological Well-Being in Older Adults: A Meta-Analysis," *Aging & Mental Health* 11, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>11</sup> Gerben J. Westerhof et al., "Improvement in Personal Meaning Mediates the Effects of a Life Review Intervention on Depressive Symptoms in a Randomized Controlled Trial," *The Gerontologist* 50, no. 4 (2010). David Haber, "Life Review: Implementation, Theory, Research, and Therapy," *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 63, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>12</sup> Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>13</sup> Blight, David "The Memory Boom: Why and Why Now?" in *Memory in Mind and Culture* Boyer, P and Werch, J.V. (eds) Cambridge University Press p. 238 (2009)

<sup>14</sup> Tamm, Marek "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies" *History Compass* 11 no. 6 (2013).

<sup>15</sup> William Hirst and Gerald Echterhoff, "Remembering in Conversations: The Social Sharing and Reshaping of Memories," *Annual Review of Psychology* 63, no. 1 (2012). William Hirst and David Manier, "Towards a Psychology of Collective Memory," *Memory* 16, no. 3 (2008)

<sup>16</sup> Malgorzata Kalinowska, "Monuments of Memory: Defensive Mechanisms of the Collective Psyche and Their Manifestation in the Memorialization Process," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 57, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Sharon K Hom and Eric K Yamamoto, "Collective Memory, History, and Social Justice," *UCLA L. Rev.* 47 (1999).

the stigma of being labelled with a psychopathological condition and the drawn-out therapy that this may involve<sup>19</sup>.

Conflict arises however when collective memory is incomplete or where it is subject to influences of individuals or governments<sup>20</sup>. This can lead to individuals feeling marginalised and unable to effectively share their stories, especially if they feel their testimony conflicts with the overarching mood of the collective response. In post-genocide Rwanda, there is an official narrative that discouraged contentious views, as result of the fear that allowing contending memories a voice would only serve to rekindle the dreadful violence from which the country had just emerged<sup>21</sup>. However, with technological advances and the burgeoning use of social media there is now an outlet for these previously unheard voices that could as a result of their marginalisation become a dissident voice<sup>22</sup>. It is this conflict between collective memory and individual memory that became apparent on Canvey Island especially where those that were more directly involved in the traumatic events of the flooding were at odds with those who did not suffer direct losses, as one participant stated,

*“..... yeah it was 1992 and you know the Echo had some articles about it and it was years in the past. I hadn't taken much notice but I was reading and I was thinking – what are you talking about? It was obvious; it was almost like people talking about the blitz that had never lived in London, or Liverpool or Coventry. You know that sort of thing; the bomb had dropped twenty miles away. And I just got annoyed....”*

(Interview Transcription, 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2015).

This was further expanded by another interviewee who said,

*“But you know you hear people now glorifying things. If you didn't see it you didn't see it. Like my neighbour she was staying in London and she was asked the year before last to give a talk about the floods to the children. And she wasn't here, so how can you? So she just gave a talk from the bits she had read in the newspapers, it was a waste of time.”*

(Interview Transcription, 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2015).

Throughout the field work there was an overwhelming sense that residents felt this was a last opportunity to set the historical records straight.

## Method

This project, developed with the local council and residents, sought to listen to and record narratives of the long-term impact of the night of the event and the time that followed on the older residents of Canvey Island. An interview team composed of postgraduate Forensic Anthropology students from the University conducted the interviews. The students recorded the narratives of the remaining survivors with a particular emphasis around the stories of the deceased and then compared these narratives to existing collective memories and the archives held. This is an important aspect of the study and a novel, replicable aspect of the methodology we go on to discuss; many participants reflected that they had been put off from ‘dwelling’ on the sadness within their narratives and particularly moved on from discussing

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<sup>19</sup> J.D. Villa Gomez, "The Role of Collective Memory in Emotional Recovery of Political Violence in Colombia.," *International Journal of Psychological Research* 6, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Winter, Jay "The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the "Memory Boom" in Contemporary Historical Studies" *Canadian Military History* 10, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>21</sup> Cori Wielenga, "Healing and Reconciliation after Violent Conflict : The Role of Memory in South Africa and Rwanda," *Acta Academica* 45, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

the fatalities; with a strong sense that this aspect was 'distasteful'. Utilising forensic researchers from the outset created a space that allowed for the recounting of narratives relating specifically to death and the tragic aspects of 'that night' rather than having to be 'jollied' by the collective memory.

Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis whereby participants self-selected by attending the interview event that was extensively advertised locally. Prior to the one-to-one interviews a visit was arranged to a community club as an information sharing session; this served two purposes i) to introduce the project to the community and ii) an opportunity for people to ask questions. At this first session individuals were also able to share their memories with the group; these were general memories of the night and were mostly from the younger members who would have been small children at the time of the floods. The sharing of memories in the group setting gave rise to the method for obtaining narratives from individuals in the form of one-to-one interviews, which took place in the summer of 2015. During the group discussions, it was quickly apparent that not everyone was happy or wanted to talk openly in front of their peers and also that when group discussions occurred they too would lean towards the positive narrative; those that did get up to speak talked about the "jolly times we had" or the "great adventure" of being evacuated.

The interviews were conducted using a largely unstructured format whereby the interviewees were simply asked to recount their memories of the night. Unstructured interviews allow the participant to have control over the topic of the interview and over how much information they choose to reveal<sup>23</sup>. Prior to the interview the participants were given an information sheet and asked to complete a consent form. At the start of the interview they were reminded that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable with and that they could stop the interview at any time. Notes taken during the interview were then used as prompts for further questions and to develop themes throughout the individual interviews. This meant that each person was able to recount their life stories in their own way without the constraints of specific questions, allowing an honest and open narrative to be formed.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. In total 9 interviews (10 individual participants) were undertaken over the course of the two-day interview period between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2015. The respondents were aged between 67 and 88 years of age, which equates to an age range of between 5 and 26 years at the time of the floods. Whilst the participants were not purposefully selected to give a wide age range being able to assess the differences in memories across different aged participants was an interesting aspect of the research. The majority of interviews were undertaken individually with the exception of one that was a husband and wife who were interviewed together.

In addition to the interviews the researchers received an extract from the 1953 diaries of a woman who had recently passed away. The daughter of the diarist was keen that her mother's memories should also be included in the narratives. This along with the transcripts of the interviews, were then analysed by the Principal Investigator using a form of narrative analysis whereby not only were themes identified but also contextual information was assessed. This could include information on the age of the person at the time of the floods and how this could influence how they remember the events or the way in which they may choose to tell their stories. Contemporaneous newspaper articles and the official report commissioned by Essex County Council were also used to help set the context of the memories.

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<sup>23</sup> Juliet Corbin and Janice M. Morse, "The Unstructured Interactive Interview: Issues of Reciprocity and Risks When Dealing with Sensitive Topics," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 3 (2003).

## Narratives

During the analysis of the transcripts it became apparent that individuals remembered events differently depending on a variety of factors such as their age at the time of the floods or their location in relation to the worst affected areas. One of the youngest interviewees was only 5 years old at the time of the floods and whilst he had memories of being woken and leaving the house with his mother and siblings to go to the evacuation centre in Benfleet his most vivid memory was of the loss of his toy train:

*“And it was my birthday on 30<sup>th</sup> January, and I had my first clockwork train. And when we came back all my toys were kept under the stairs in this little basement. And it was all full of mud and so all my clockwork train had gone rusty and I’d only used it once.”*

(Interview Transcript, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

Another who was 6 at the time remembered being woken by his cousin (who was staying with them at the time) and sitting on a floating wardrobe in his Nan’s bedroom. He recollects being rescued in a canoe and ending up in Benfleet though he had no real memories of staying there or who was there with him. For him his most vivid memory was the loss of his dog:

*“I know me dog, we had a dog, he was on the wardrobe with us waiting to be rescued. And he got lost somewhere, I don’t know if he jumped in the water or what. But he turned up about 3 weeks after we had gone back home. We thought we had lost him.”*

(Interview Transcript, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

These quotes succinctly highlight the priorities of a 5 or 6-year-old, although both participants as adults reflected that it must have been a terrible time for their parents, they themselves felt relatively unaffected seeing the event as something of an adventure. It was not only young participants that held a somewhat different attitude. One interviewee lived at the time in the area of the island that was perhaps least affected by the inundation, he was about 17 at the time of the floods and spoke of waking as normal at around 8.30 or 9 am. The first he and his family knew of the floods was hearing about it on the radio and then looking out the window and seeing some water in the garden. He spoke about going to help with the evacuation in the Winter Gardens area of the island (to the West of the most hit Sunken Marsh area) as he was able to row a boat. Perhaps because he and his family were unaffected he did not feel that the evacuation was warranted:

*“I finished up taking people out of council houses just down here. But there was a council house estate on the right-hand side and the water was about 2 or 3 feet deep in their houses. But they were OK ‘cause they could all go upstairs. Nobody died there. But they were all wanting to get out of there to go to the school. Cause for some reason they all thought it was going to flood again.”*

(Interview Transcript, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

The narratives recounted so far are in stark contrast to those of two interviewees from the worst hit area of the island. One interviewee was 20 at the time of the floods and came home late after the dance at the Memorial Hall, his family had recently converted the attic into a little room and he managed to help get everyone up there before the water rushed into the house. He describes the water bursting open the back door and only stopping two stairs from the top. In the morning, a neighbour arrived with a rowing boat and the two went out to see what was happening they came across a young couple on the roof of their bungalow.

*“They had had some of them small holiday bungalows, with no, with more or less flat roofs. And there was a chap up there with his wife and she had a baby. And they was waving and he said we’ll see if we can pick them up. Anyway we rowed across it wasn’t far. And the chap got in the boat and the woman gave me the baby. [His voice breaks here and after a pause]. At the time I thought the baby had gone because she was completely cold and wringing wet. But I held her and the woman got in.”*

(Interview Transcript, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015).

Afterwards he searched through the lists of the deceased published in the newspaper and found no account of a baby dying.

*“I heard that there was no baby had lost its life so obviously there was still a spark of life in that baby, which was wonderful because as I say when I took her her shawl was wringing wet and she was cold. I thought I was just carrying a body but fortunately she must have been OK.”*

(Interview Transcript, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015)

An interview with a man who had been a 10-year-old boy in 1953 was one of the longest given and began with an account of his early life and arrival on Canvey Island a few years prior to the floods. He then goes on to recall the night in question:

*“I don’t recall too much about it because at that stage I was 10. It’s all a bit well what is going on? If you know somebody well further on if either of you have ever lost somebody close to you if they have died. Sort of parents, siblings, good friends and they die you will be aware that there is a veil that the mind has this ability to put a screen up that allows you to see but the impact the reality doesn’t ....”*

(Interview Transcript, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015)

He paused for a moment here and then after gentle prompting continued to tell in graphic and painful detail of witnessing his father dying.

*“Death by drowning they said. And you knew it but the reality wasn’t there, but you knew it. And I can still hear the splash today. And that was it.”*

(Interview Transcript, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015).

It was profound when he stated to researchers that he had never spoken to anyone about the events, not even his wife; he did not attend any of the commemorations and found the reporting of the events at subsequent anniversaries bore little resemblance to the night as he remembered it. It was this interview more than any other that underlines the juxtaposition between the collective memory (of rallying together and winning through) and that of the individual memories of those that suffered direct loss on the night. Whilst he spoke of remembering the events as though through a veil he was also able to give vivid descriptions of the sounds, smells and colours of the events, in particular the changing colours of the water. He had little memory of being rescued and taken to hospital; his next real memories were of a Red Cross worker who cared for him whilst his mother was in hospital. When asked whether he received much support in the months after the event he spoke of not wanting to talk about it to anyone but of how he became friendly with a neighbour who had lost his wife during the floods. They did not ever speak about the floods but the shared experience made it a comfortable relationship. They were not offered counselling and on this subject he said:



*“I don’t know, I mean don’t know that not having counselling necessarily did me any harm, whether it would have done me any good who knows. I suppose in some ways it’s the sort of character that I am that you just get on with it. What else can you do? I just stayed on the island ever since.”*

(Interview Transcript, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015).

At the end of the interview whilst being escorted out he stopped abruptly and thanked the interview team saying that he felt a weight had been lifted.

This in some way confirms the importance of a safe and sensitive environment for older people to be able to tell their stories and underlines the often immediate benefit of reminiscing<sup>24</sup>.

### **After the Floods**

Maps of the flooding show that only 3% of the land area of the island covered the worst affected part of the town. This would tend to indicate that a comparatively small percentage of the population of the town were amongst those that would have witnessed the most traumatic events of the night. The evacuation was somewhat slow to be put into effect and most people were evacuated due to lack of amenities and fear that the drinking water may be contaminated due to overflowing sewage rather than due to fear of further loss of life<sup>25</sup>. This is reflected in the testimonies of many of the participants for whom it was seen either as an inconvenience or as a bit of an adventure.

One interviewee described being taken to the newly built school in Shipwrights Drive, Benfleet:

*“Yes we loved it. We could go anywhere, running up and down the corridors. But the first thing we wanted was clothes and of course the WVS [Women’s Voluntary Service] had got all this so you went into a classroom and found clothes.”*

(Interview Transcript, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015).

She went on to describe the time in the reception centre as great fun with visits from entertainment personalities such as the BBC radio personality Wilfred Pickles and the Queen Mother. This account is more in line with the collective memories shared at the scoping event at the community club. A full evacuation of the island was called on the morning after the flood and whilst many initially chose to stay the lack of electricity and gas meant that most chose to leave the island on Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> February<sup>26</sup>. There appears to have been little control over how people evacuated. Most of the participants spoke of being evacuated, some recounted being able to wade through the flood water to the High Street that was a raised road where lorries were waiting to take them off the island. Others from the hardest hit areas of the island spoke of having to wait for rescuers to come and take them out of their flooded houses, but this was not without hazards as one participant recalled:

*“The following day the soldiers came in collapsible dingies [sic] and were taking people out of their homes and off the roofs. We had to invent a way for us to get out of the house through one of the fanlights, and up into the dingy as the water outside was higher than inside ... and ...and I rigged up some planks we had rescued from the green house which was*

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<sup>24</sup> B Trentham, "Life Storytelling, Occupation, Social Participation and Aging," *Occupational Therapy Now* 9, no. 5 (2007).

<sup>25</sup> H Grieves, *The Great Tide: The Story of the 1953 Flood Disaster in Essex* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1953).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

*accessible from the dining room sun bay. We laid them across the tops of fallen wardrobes and showed everyone how to crawl along them.”*

(Copied from Memoires received, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2015)

Once in the boats safety was not guaranteed and there are several stories of boats sinking, one interviewee recalled hearing of a woman so desperate to leave the roof of her house that she jumped into the boat and went straight through it causing it to sink. Another participant recalled:

*“... and I, a soldier and the cat left last. We were half way across the field making for the Central Wall Path, which was an inner sea wall built when the Dutch had reclaimed the island, when our boat collapsed and we were thrown into the water. Somehow we managed to swim to the bank, although I didn't know I could swim until then, and the cat jumped onto ...'s back.”*

(Copied from Memoires received, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2015)

The majority of those evacuated appear to have been taken to the newly built King John's School on Shipwrights Drive, Benfleet. Many of the memories of those evacuated to the school spoke of it being a great adventure.

*“Although we had Wilfred Pickles came down to entertain, I had a go at that. And the Queen came down..... In the daytime there used to be an ice cream van come but it weren't serving ice cream it was giving out hot chocolate. So us kids we got the hot chocolate but it was there every day for the people to have the hot chocolate. People were so good.”*

(Interview Transcript, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015).

Again, these memories were at odds with those whose families were more directly affected. One participant spoke of his father who was a fireman.

*“I can remember in the school when we was evacuated we actually slept in the gymnasium and because my Dad was a fireman we never see him for oh I think it was like days if not weeks. And then he come over and he was absolutely exhausted 'cause they worked non-stop and we've got family photographs and that. And that sticks out in my mind seeing him so tired.”*

(Interview Transcript, 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2015)

The participant had a newspaper clipping with a photograph of two firemen (one of whom was his father) in full uniform (including helmets) asleep on what appeared to be a pile of sandbag sacks, clearly having passed out as soon as they sat down. Whilst the main rescue centre was at the school in Benfleet not everyone passed through there and there appears to have been little or no coordinated effort by the authorities to record survivors. Two of the interviewees spoke of not going to the rest centres at all but simply getting on a train for London to go and stay with relatives. Volunteers at the rest centres wrote lists of the names of those that had passed through on blackboards, but as one interviewee pointed when asked if lists were kept:

*“Well they did if you went there but if people went to their families you didn't know those. So if you had family in Rayleigh you would just go there someone's looking for you but your name is not on the list. We found my Nan after a couple of days and they had taken her further out still. You just went where they said to go.”*

(Interview Transcript, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015).

For others being separated from loved ones added to the trauma of the events:

*“Here they erected blackboards where they had been putting the names of all the people who had been rescued and passed through. We found the names of ... and Mum but there were not names for .... and .... I can’t begin to describe how we felt. Our babies were lost. I thought their boat might have collapsed too and how could they have survived that icy water. A gentleman offered to take ... to all the schools where people had been taken in the hope of finding the girls. They returned about 10.30pm but had found no trace of them. They went off again and were told that some children had been taken to Rayleigh. Here they found them. A teacher had taken them to his home where his wife had given them all a hot bath and food and put them to bed. They had been told we had been drowned...”*

(Copied from Memoires received, 25th July 2015)

This highlights the importance of coordination between respite centres in an emergency evacuation, but also the difficulties faced by emergency services and local authorities when it comes to the control of mass evacuations such as this. The apparent lack of co-ordination led to confusion and misinformation as the newspaper reports from up to a week after the 1953 floods stated that the police and fire service were still searching for 1,000 missing people from Canvey Island alone (Daily Sketch, 1953; News Chronicle, 1953). All these people were found to be safe having simply left the island to stay with relatives and friends, yet local authority resources were still being used to find them a week after the event.

### **Placing the narrative in context.**

All of the participants were older people (>65) and several spoke about the fact that very few people that actually witnessed the events were left on the island. They all felt that it was important for their stories to be formally recorded and that *“it now felt like the right time”*. It is interesting to note that more than one of the participants said that they had not spoken about their experiences before. They mentioned a number of reasons for this such as the fact that fewer people are now here that lived through the events but also that they saw this project as something different. They felt more comfortable talking as part of a research project where they felt that their views and stories would be respected and ‘processed’ for a purpose rather than focussing an attention on them as individuals in the way that media engagement may have done. Weight was placed on this being an ‘outside’ research project, and the use of forensic anthropologists used to dealing with traumatic testimony, and again led to reflection on their exclusion from ‘upbeat’ community/collective memory of the events, which they felt were at odds with their own memories. One of the participants said that this was the reason he had attended the interview as he felt that he would be able to talk to a ‘death’ professional as part of a research project but did not feel comfortable talking about his memories in any other context.

The project set out to gather a picture of events from multiple sources, particularly those relating to the final collective burial place within a cemetery, this allowed the forensic anthropologists to utilise their training to support the older residents of Canvey. The anthropologists more generally learn to interrogate archives to build a picture and with much assistance from local archivists they were able to provide answers and potentially reassurance on ‘missing’ residents. This was an aspect that had endured from the night itself, troubling several, and drawn out through the interviews. This study finding had particular utility for the local council and emergency responders who supported the study because it acted as a reminder that when planning for long term response and recovery to major events there was a need to remember that people may have multiple views, concerns and perspectives on what had happened: *Stories of floods are often highly localised; situated in one place, one reality*

*and often narrated amongst only one group of people. Unlike the official narratives these are partially invisible, experiential, blurred and not time-limited.*<sup>27</sup>

Memory was also an important feature of this study, one of the aspects of memory that became apparent through the interview process was that people will remember events differently depending on their age/status at the time. This was particularly evident whereby those that were older at the time of the floods showed a different level of understanding of the serious nature of the events compared to those that were younger. Previous research in this field has found that in children younger than 8 years' memories tend to be influenced by adults around them, whilst older children were able to retain vivid snapshots of traumatic events known as flashbulb memories<sup>28, 29</sup>. There was also a distinct difference in the type of the memories between those that were in the most flooded areas compared to those that were furthest from the flooded area. This seems to reflect the impact of time and external influences on autobiographical memory.

All of the interviews serve to highlight how memories of traumatic events can differ widely depending on the point of view of the person whose memories are being recounted. The telling of these stories can be stifled by collective memory that seeks, perhaps without meaning to, to aggrandise the event focusing on the positives of community and the heroes of the events. Being able to tell their stories in a neutral environment was an important and perhaps unexpected outcome of this research and is perhaps an area that requires further exploration. Additionally, it highlights that confusions about loss and traumatic suffering can endure for decades. The study was initiated because the community had continuing questions about unaccounted residents. 'Recovery Management' from disaster often tries to tidy up the post disaster narrative and squash the ambiguity and messiness, and place the after effect of disasters into neat phases, leaving lone voices to feel alienated:

*Disasters are approached as if they have a clear beginning, middle and end, an approach often found for example in disaster management. But the experience of being in a disaster often isn't like this – it is messy, it may resonate strangely with previous events and experiences which don't 'count' as disastrous, and it may only be generations later when a disaster reaches its grim potential<sup>30</sup>.*

## **Conclusions**

There had been previous archiving events on Canvey Island but this was the first time that some older people felt able to tell their stories and a number expressed that they had never spoken about their experiences in public before. This coupled with the unique aspect of weaving into the discussions the circumstances of the fatalities on the night offers a new perspective. It also allowed the resident narrators to deviate from official 'good news' collective memory and talk specifically about the fatalities on 'that night'.

This project set out to provide the space for a small group of older residents to discuss the impact of the floods in 1953 on the community of Canvey Island. It employed a novel

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<sup>27</sup> Lucy Easthope, *The Recovery Myth: Plans and Situated Realities after Disaster* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Katie S. Dawson and Richard A. Bryant, "Children's Vantage Point of Recalling Traumatic Events," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 9 (2016).

<sup>29</sup> Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin, "Flashbulb Memories and Posttraumatic Stress Reactions across the Life Span: Age-Related Effects of the German Occupation of Denmark During World War II," *Psychology and Aging* 21, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>30</sup> Mort M. Convery I., Baxter J., Bailey, C., *Animal Disease and Human Trauma* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

approach and has shown the effectiveness of ‘deploying’ forensic anthropologists to collect delicate narratives in the UK; something that is common place in many other nations, scarred by conflict, but much less practiced in the UK. In spite of the fact that these events took place over 60 years ago it has become apparent that their memory still remains high in the consciousness of story tellers. This is attested to by the extensive and visible memorialisation of the event and the importance placed on it within the collective memory of the community.

The telling of experiences, sometimes for the first time, highlighted the importance of context in the formation and recall of memories surrounding traumatic events and also how much influence collective memory can have on how these events are commemorated by the community as a whole. Many of the interviewees had not spoken about their memories of the night, one case not even to close relatives and yet claimed to find it ‘a relief’ to be able to finally tell their side of the story. This was a humbling aspect of this project and corroborates the importance this type of narrative research can play in the aftermath of traumatic events with a specific relevance to older people. Crucially it once again underlines the importance of opportunity; space; place for older people to reminisce and tell their life stories and also to correct pervading narratives. All of the participants in this project were older individuals who expressed many times to the young anthropologists before them (average age 22) that this was possibly their last time to leave behind their memories. Memory is the way in which we define not only ourselves but those around us and researchers, clinicians, policy makers and communities would be richer for ensuring that older peoples’ narratives of totemic events are aired, included and protected.

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