

NORFOLK FLOODS

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY
1912, 1938 & 1953

Neil Storey

"Our house is hardly 200 yards from the sand hills and yet we only had a few minutes warning... My husband and I and my niece Rita threw on our coats and made a dash for the sand hills, with Mr. Cator and our three dogs. As we went I could see the sea pouring over the marshes and racing us, but in the end we got to the hills in time. (an account of escape from the floods of 1938 in Horsey)

Norfolk has been no stranger to floods and inundations by the sea down the centuries. Such constant dangers have helped form both the character of the land and its people. Yet the sea is a fickle as well as a cruel mistress, for she provides families with a harvest to feed generations and yet can turn angrily upon them with storm and flood, claiming her toll in lives along the coast. And not only the sea. In low-lying East Anglia heavy rainstorms quickly fill the rivers and waterways, bringing their waters brimming to the banks and eventually cascading across the flat farmland and into the towns, villages, and the city of Norwich, leaving death and destruction in their wake.

The three floods covered in this book occurred in 1912, 1938 and 1953, and are some of the most severe to be suffered by the county, not just in the twentieth century but for hundreds of years before. In each instance the tragic loss of life was accompanied by the destruction of houses, farms, roads and bridges, many simply disappearing before the unstoppable surge of water.

Here, illustrated with almost 250 dramatic photographs, many of them never before published, the author traces the story of each of these catastrophes, linking a chronical of actual events with personal stories told by those who were there when the flood waters came.

For the first time here is a full and illustrated history of the greatest floods ever experienced in Norfolk.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

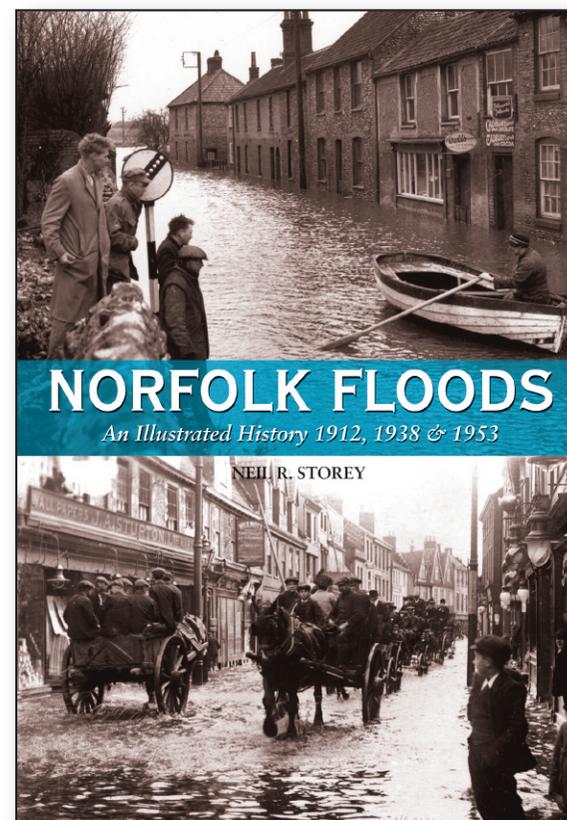
Neil Storey is a born and bred Norfolk man. A graduate of the University of East Anglia and one of the foremost historians of the county specialising in social and military history themes, he has published over 30 books and countless articles for magazines and journals. Undoubtedly a man blessed with a ready wit and ebullient character he is a familiar voice on BBC local radio; he has also acted as a consultant and featured on a number of television documentaries and dramas. Neil is in constant demand by both academic and social audiences for his lectures, talks and legendary after dinner speeches.

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NORFOLK FLOODS

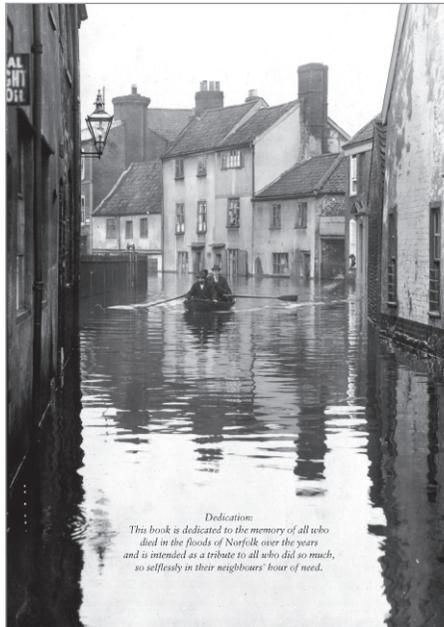


Kindly neighbours assist in the evacuation of Mr. Suckling's furniture and effects from his beleaguered home, Marine House at 'The Dell', Mundesley, 1 February 1953.

Left: Rescue and relief boats on Lothian Street, Norwich.



Heigham Street, penetrated by some of the first flood waters in the city during the 1912 floods.



Dedication:
This book is dedicated to the memory of all who died in the floods of Norfolk over the years and is intended as a tribute to all who did so much, so selflessly in their neighbours' hour of need.

Introduction

From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood; from plague, pestilence, and famine, Good Lord, deliver us.
The Book of Common Prayer

NORFOLK HAS BEEN no stranger to floods and inundations by the sea down the centuries. The sea is a fickle and cruel mistress, for with one hand she can provide families with a harvest in food generations and with the crash of a wave or through violent storms, make beach and flood and claim her toll in life along the coast. While further inland if the season is wet and the rain intense enough the rivers and streams of the country, many of which inefficiently flow along through inflexible countryside can suddenly become raging torrents powerful enough to plough through bridges, burst and overflow their banks, causing floods, destroying houses and claim yet more lives.

The three floods I cover in this book are some of the most severe to be suffered by the county, not just in the twentieth century but for hundreds of years before. Some of the earliest floods in Norfolk were recorded by Holmsted who, when writing in the sixteenth century, told of a great tide in 1236 that inundated the East Coast damaging ships, sweeping away beaches, demolishing houses, uprooting trees, drowning flocks of sheep and herds of cattle in its wake. Monastic chronicler John of Ouseford wrote of unprecedented flooding at Hickling and Honer Gap in 1287 when the sea came at night suffocating many in their beds and 'many, when surrounded by the waters, sought a place of refuge by mounting into trees, but benumbed by the cold they were overtaken by the water and fell into it and were drowned'. Norfolk antiquarian Francis Blomefield wrote of an inundation at Norwich in 1290 when the water came down in such abundance the river overflowed St Martin's (Whitefriars) bridge and gates of St Giles' Hospital and 'washed down many houses by its violence'. As you will see in this volume, there are clear parallels to be found between the earliest accounts of floods across Norfolk to the floods in our own time and, I hope will be found as long as flooding occurs.

Before the floods of 1912, the greatest recorded inundation across the county occurred during what became known as the 'Candlemas Flood' in 1570 when deep snow thawed and drained into the rivers causing 'a great rage of water. Aggravated by high seas the waters smashed into Lynn and Yarmouth, flood waters spilled over the north of the city and Eye Bridge was washed away'. The deepest floods to be recorded in Norfolk occurred on 30 November 1634. Known as the 'St Andrew's Flood', it was claimed the sea penetrated twelve miles inland flooding the city, damaging many churches, houses and places of work. Fortunately no lives were drowned. There would be more floods over the years but the 1912 floods were deeper, more torrential and affected more people than anything the city had seen before or since. In the one hundred years since the floods of 1912 surprisingly little has been published about them. With the century of those events in mind I considered it timely to produce an illustrated overview of what happened both in the City of Norwich and across the county of Norfolk based on the accounts published and written in the immediate aftermath of those events.

The Henry Branch of 1938 is a far lesser known flood but it should not be forgotten. It occurred when an abnormally high and violent tide caused over 500 yards of dunes to collapse and the water poured through flooding 2,500 acres of low-lying hinterland. Fortunately no human lives were lost but many farm and wild animals were drowned. The



Clearing up the wooden bricks road displaced by the flooding on Duke Street, Norwich.

Example of a double-page spread.