

# The Night The Sea Came

## Memories of the 1953 Floods in Ferry Road

by **Sylvia Barsby** (née Raffles)

*Sylvia is one of three daughters of the late Major Reginald Lovett Stamford Raffles and his Dutch wife, Johanna (née Trost). Reginald and Johanna had leased the building in Ferry Road from Southwold Borough Council shortly after the end of the Second War and named it 'The Dutch Barn'. Johanna planned to run it as an up-market restaurant.*

Nine o'clock, Saturday, 31<sup>st</sup> January 1953. The place - a little seaside town called Southwold on the east coast of Suffolk. It was a stormy winter night. The wind howled outside, and the sea crashed on the beach 100 metres away. The night was pitch black, illuminated only by a full moon. Our family were seated cosily around the log fire chatting, reading or playing games. We felt safe and secure from the raging elements outside. I was nine years old.

All of a sudden I got up and went to peer out of the window, and what I saw made me gasp with horror. 'Mummy. Daddy, the sea is coming over the beach'! As my Parents ran to the window to see what was happening, the grim reality faced them – the sea was rushing forward at great speed across the expanse of beach between our house and the shore and, within minutes, had reached us and sped on to flood the marshes behind it. Then the water started to rise.

We were living in a first floor flat above our restaurant, *The Dutch Barn*, which was now closed for the winter, and would re-open just before Easter. Access to our flat was by a stone staircase, which was

### The ambulance men's story



*Southwold's Red Cross Ambulance was manned on a voluntary basis by two well-known Southwold tradesmen. **Frank Hurr**, the driver, ran a barber shop at 10 Stradbroke Road. His cousin, **William (Billy) Eastaugh**, had for twenty years run his family's bakery at 64 -64a High Street. He had sold the shop to the Lowestoft Co-operative Society nine years earlier, since when he and his wife Winifred had lived in retirement in Park Lane.*

*On the night of the flood, The cousins were answering the distress call from the Raffles family. But, half way down Ferry Road their vehicle received a violent side-swipe from a wave of water and shingle which overturned it.*

*Driver Frank clambered out only to be swept off between the houses. He managed to grab and cling on to a passing timber door. He and this crude surf board were washed inland right across the marshes, ending up on Whin Hill on Southwold Common. Billy, who had been in the passenger seat, was more fortunate. Cold, wet and shaken he was found by a local teacher who took off her fur coat and wrapped him in it. The photo shows the scene in Ferry Road the following morning with the overturned ambulance embedded in feet of shingle (Southwold Museum P1117)*

at the side of the property. We rushed to look, and at the bottom of the steps, steadily rising, was water. The sea was starting to engulf our home. It was too late to leave on foot.



*Drifts of shingle piled up against the front of the Dutch Barn. Picture shows furniture being salvaged via a first-floor window. Southwold Museum P2177*

My Mother sprang into action and called the ambulance service, the only 'rescue' vehicle available in Southwold in those days, apart from the fire engine, and begged them to come and get us. They bravely made several attempts, but eventually were swept away and forced to abandon the idea.

As the water level rose, my parents shepherded us all to the room at the top of the house, which was 'nursery' to my younger sister and me and our nanny. They then proceeded to send rather crude SOS messages by flashing a torch to the people who had gathered on Gun Hill, but by then the sea was so rough that nobody could get to us.

Our restaurant was situated in Ferry Road, which ran between the beach and the marshes to the harbour mouth. The road consisted almost entirely of holiday bungalows, and very few were permanently inhabited. It was low-lying, and consequently filled up like a bath as the sea roared in.

By this time we were all getting frantic, and my elder sister had to be restrained from diving into the raging sea to go and rescue three old ladies who lived up the road from us in one of the bungalows. We later learned that they, as well as a young mother and her child further up the road towards the harbour, were swept away as their homes were destroyed by the fury of the waves. My sister was also frantic, as we could not find Busby, our beloved Manx cat, and presumed that, sadly, he must have been caught up in the flood. We wept at the thought that we would never see him again.

My parents tried to remain calm and console us, as we stared despairingly out of the window and saw the flimsy seaside bungalows being reduced to matchwood, and swept away mercilessly by the ocean. Would our house, which was much larger, and more solid - it had been an old salt factory - survive the onslaught?

The hours passed, and we grew more and more certain that we would perish, as the sea took over our house. The water had by now almost reached the windowsill of the room where we had earlier been enjoying a peaceful family evening; totally unaware of what was happening beyond our walls. The restaurant downstairs was wrecked. We got down on our knees and prayed that we would be spared.

Then suddenly, at about 2 o'clock in the morning, the storm ceased, and the waters calmed, and began to abate. Within a relatively short time, to our great relief, some brave fishermen arrived in their boats, and we were rescued out of the first floor windows of our flat. The feeling that we were now safe was indescribable after hours wondering whether or not we would be going to a watery grave.

As we were deposited onto dry land, the scene of devastation that faced us was one I would never forget. It was like a lunar landscape. Where there had been houses, was now an empty space, and where there had been beach was sand,

## “We are practically ruined...” Major Raffles

This is a letter written by Major Raffles two days after the fateful 1953 flood from the Swan Hotel which had offered him and his family free emergency refuge. You can read more about this on the [Adnams website](#).

My dear Aunt Elsie,

Many thanks for the wire. As I wired, we are all alive and lucky to be so. Financially, we are practically ruined, as the insurance will not probably pay-up – flood damage. Our only hope is that the Government will give us something.

The Dutch Barn, except for the flat, is ruined and one bungalow completely destroyed. The other bungalow is full of water and none of the furniture will be any good. Our car is upside down in the flood. The value of this we may recover. What happened was this.

There had been a tremendous gale for 24 hours and there was also a very high spring tide. At about 9.15pm the sea started to pour over the dune into the road and in five minutes' time it was running like a mill-race right up to the windows of the first floor. Escape was impossible and we could only pray that the house would not collapse.

There were six buildings on the road beyond us – at about 11 o'clock I looked out of our drawing-room window and all except a fragment of our own bungalow were gone.

Five people were drowned. The whole road is a waste of smashed furniture, debris of houses and countless tons of sand and shingle. Our garden is completely swept away – I think it's probable that the Ferry Road will be declared dangerous and nobody allowed to live there.

At about 2.30am, the tide went out and some men came along with planks etc and got us out through a window. The worse night I have ever been through. Bombs were nothing to it.

My Olivia was wonderful and as cool as a cucumber in extremely frightening circumstances – the poor child has since been crying her eyes out for poor Busby, who is missing.

We have been given a v good empty flat by some kind people here and have managed to get the furniture out of our flat into it.

The furniture from the restaurant is lying in heaps all over the place. Also that from the bungalows.

The army are now busy with bulldozers etc. Three bodies are still missing.

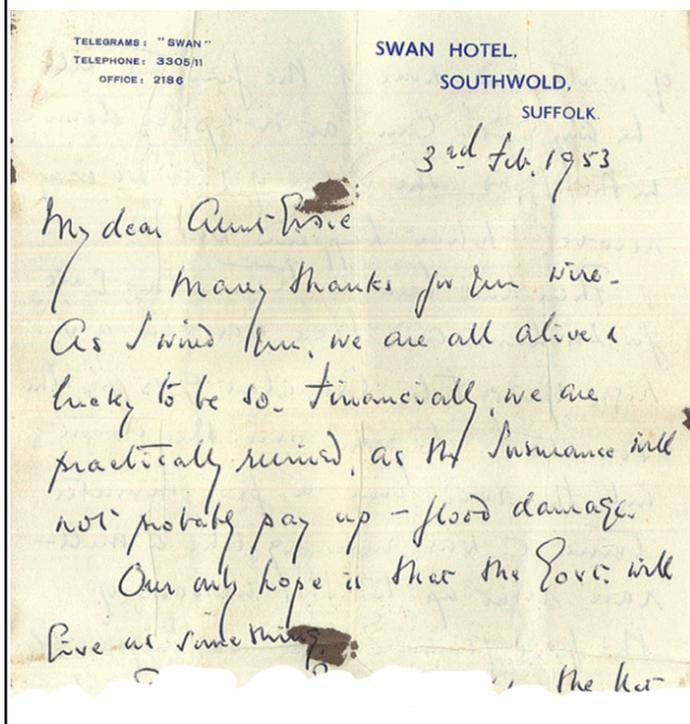
Address me c/o Post Office, Southwold. This hotel has very handsomely offered us free accommodation up to a week, but we hope to have the new flat in order before that.

I think there is a curse on us. Misfortune has never stopped since we have been back in England.

Josie has talked to her elder brother over the phone. There are now one million homeless in Holland and 1000 square miles under water.

The family are all right so far.

Love from us all



water and debris, as well as the carcasses of animals which had been pastured on the marshes.

We were taken to the Swan Hotel in the town, where we were wrapped in blankets, placed in front of a roaring fire and given hot drinks. In the early hours of the morning, weary and relieved, we were tucked up in bed, trying not to dream of the horrors we had witnessed.

Some weeks later, we had a call from friends who lived at the other end of Ferry Road, and who had not been too affected by the flood. 'Busby has just walked into the house'! Our happiness was complete.

Sadly, the waters had barely subsided when the looters stepped in, pillaging our belongings and those of the other residents. The road was eventually cordoned off, not only because of the thieving, but also because several World War II mines had been swept in, and were lying on the beach. These would have to be disarmed or detonated, so that the beach would once more be safe.

I, along with many others, will never forget that night. We mourned those who perished, and thanked God for our survival. When I saw how the iron bars on our huge industrial refrigerator had been twisted by the force of the water, I never more took the sea for granted, and to this day have the greatest respect for the immense power of the ocean.

#### **Some of the 'Celebrity' guests who dined at the Dutch Barn**

- **Benjamin Britten**
- **Peter Pears**
- **Anne Todd—film actress**
- **Robert Dougall - BBC newsreader**
- **Kenneth Robinson - broadcaster**
- **The parents of actor Michael Kitchen**