THE HALLSANDS DISASTER – A HUNDRED YEARS ON

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Looking at the gentle sweep of Start Bay on a fine summer's day, it is hard to imagine that its underlying rocks – the geology – and the surrounding landforms – the geomorphology – mean that the coastline will inevitably suffer when extreme weather phenomena occur, though as we shall see it was not only natural factors that brought disaster to Hallsands.

But first the geology and landforms. I should like to suggest a simple model the evolution of the land we see today which is relevant to the fate of Hallsands. From early in the life of the Earth there has been land and sea. Because of movement of the Earth's crust these have not always been in the same positions. And certainly, sea level was constantly changing. But whenever there was a period of stability known as a stillstand, erosion of the land by rain, ice and wind worked to flatten the land and erosion by the sea ate away at the edge of the landmass. This process is called planation.

Two and a half million years ago near the beginning of the Pleistocene Era, that of the great ice ages, sea level was about 140 metres higher than today and during a long stillstand the land was planed flat. The road along which you drove to reach here tonight runs along that level. Look west across the South Hams and you are looking at a Pleistocene land surface.

Subsequently the sea level fell but continued to erode the coastline. In South Devon, bands of different rocks trend east-west and therefore in Start Bay are at right angles to the sea. Erosion therefore left areas of resistant rock as cliffs and softer rocks as bays. Although it is thought that this area was not covered by ice sheets, it was often near the edge and conditions were extremely cold. Frost shattered granite rock from Dartmoor was washed down to the coast by rivers as were flints left over in large quantities from the time when South Devon was covered in chalk. Over tens of thousands of years millions of tons of pebbles were swept into Start Bay. Analysis of the pebbles shows that 73% are flint, 9% Dartmoor granite and the remainder from the rocks of the coastal cliffs.

As the sea level fell there were further short stillstands during which the sea eroded further into the cliffs to create flat platforms know as wave-cut platforms or benches. One of these, formed some 120,000 years ago, can still be seen along the South Devon coast at 4.3 metres above current sea level. After the stillstand the sea level continued to drop and the bench became stranded though it was still subject to sea erosion which wore hollows and gaps in the bench face. These filled subsequently with glacial mud and sand, gravel and pebbles to form a semi-solid but relatively soft composite material.

At the end of the last ice age, a mere 11,000 years ago, the level of the sea began to rise again as a result of ice melting and other factors. The old river valleys of the Dart, Avon etc were gradually flooded and much of the accumulated shingle was deposited along the shore of Start Bay, notably on Slapton beach. The current patterns in Start Bay also laid down the Skerries Bank which was kept distinct from the pebble beaches by deeply scoured tidal channels. As the sea level continued to rise the amount of pebbles deposited declined significantly until eventually no more were added.

And so the broad form of the Start Bay Coast line became as we know it today, cliffs, pebble beaches and a stranded rock bench 4.3 metres above the sea. A fine place to build a village – Hallsands!

There are scant and uncertain records of the origin of Hallsands. There are early references in Stokenham Manor Court Rolls to the 'Poke Hole' and 'Halsande'. 'Hole' was a local name for a cave and there is one at South Hallsands. So the origin of the name maybe 'Hole Sands' or the sands by the cave. There are also references to a chapel in 1611 but we cannot be certain of any significant settlement until the mid-18thC.

As a site it held little promise, a narrow rock ledge with no water supply and backed by 30m cliffs. But it did provide a location near to rich fishing grounds and was sheltered from the south-westerlies by Start Point. The beach was not only very wide in the 19thC – some 30m to the high tide mark - but also had a ridge of pebbles half way up providing natural protection for the village. Water was obtained from a spring in the osier beds in the Lamacraft Farm valley and by the 1850s it was a thriving fishing village of 37 houses and 128 people. The inhabitants lived not only by fishing but also by farming the nearby clifftop fields and practising crafts including tailoring, carpentry and smithying.

Fishing was by seine nets, long narrow nets rowed out in large rowing boats to encircle the shoals of fish spotted offshore. In the early days great shoals of pilchard were taken and subsequently mullet and mackerel. Lines were also used for conger eels and other bottom feeders which provided bait for crabbing. The crabbing pots, known as inkwell pots, were placed in the sea by small boats and periodically raised for harvesting. The pots were made of osier from nearby beds. There was no harbour at Hallsands so boats were hauled up onto the broad shingle beach by men, women and children. Here too were racks for drying some of the catch as well as the fishing nets.

The houses were built in two lines either side of the village street, the inner line with some houses built against the cliff. They were built of stone and originally thatched but later many were given slate roofs. The first houses were built on the rock ledge but subsequently some were built across the intervening sand and pebble filled gullies. The gullies were given some protection by the construction of stone retaining walls. Additional retaining walls were even built further out on the beach to provide more space for extending the houses.

The village boasted a shop and a pub – the London Inn – built on a solid rock base but with its stable wing constructed over a sand-filled gulley.

Now we will leave the villagers happily going about their fishing and tell of events unfolding elsewhere.

In the 1890s the Admiralty was planning a massive expansion to Devonport Dockyard in the Keyham area. The main dry dock would be constructed entirely of concrete and this required an estimated 395,000 cu m of shingle. Breaking up local rock was an expensive option so they decided to plunder the inshore shingle banks of Start Bay which were of a suitable quality, cheap, easy to extract and apparently inexhaustible. The application to dredge for shingle was made without the knowledge of the Hallsands villagers.

After going to tender, the docks contract was awarded to Sir John Jackson Ltd in 1896, a company that had been involved in the building of the Manchester Ship Canal and Tower Bridge. Two years later he gained a licence from the owner of the shingle to "dredge and carry away sand, shingle and other materials from that part of the sea bed between high and low water marks at Start Bay and opposite Beeson Sands and Hallsands. And who was the owner? The Crown represented by the Board of Trade. The licence did include a term stating that if any damage was perceived to be caused to the foreshore the licence would be cancelled.

Dredging began in April 1897 along an 1100m stretch of the seabed from Hallsands north to Tinsey Head between high and low water as specified in the licence for the material further out was too sandy. Bucket then suction dredgers were used transferring to barges 1600 tonnes of shingle each day. As the weeks passed the position of the tide marks changed until the low water mark was higher than the previous high-water mark.

This was contrary to another term of the licence which stated that *shingle dredging must be carried on in such a way as not to expose the land above high water mark to encroachment by the sea.* This was ignored, the company stating that the holes being created would soon be refilled with new shingle. But as we have seen, no new shingle was coming into the bay.

In despair, the villagers turned to the Liberal MP for Totnes, Colonel Francis Bingham Mildmay, later Lord Mildmay of Flete. He asked a question in the Commons and this led to the appointment of an inspector who held a local enquiry in the summer of 1897. The villagers maintained that southerly winds would sweep away their beach to fill the holes being dredged along the coast. Sir John continued to maintain that new shingle would be swept in to replace it. Sir John won but nonetheless offered, for the duration of the dredging, a yearly sum of £125 compensation to the village for disruption of the fishing.

Dredging continued until by 1900 the villagers realised that their beach was disappearing and that no new shingle was arriving. They protested and with the support of Mildmay secured a second inspection in 1901. This time, with the villagers on the verge of sabotaging the dredgers, the effects of the dredging were recognised and operations were halted in January 1902. But it was too late. The amount of material dredged has been calculated at over half a million cubic metres. The beach had dropped by 2m and was never to return.

In the winters of 1902 and 1903 severe storms hit Hallsands breaching the retaining walls in several places, causing the infill to be washed out and several houses to collapse including the stable wing of the London Inn. In March 1903 the eminent Plymouth writer, historian, geologist and engineer Richard Hansford Worth was appointed as Honorary Engineering Advisor to the villagers. He was a worthy supporter and worked for them without reward. He conducted surveys, wrote reports and published scientific papers in the *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* demonstrating that the shingle could never be replaced naturally. His measurements showed that the beach had now fallen by 3m and serious measures needed to be taken to avoid the total destruction of the village.

In April 1902 the Board of Trade and Sir John offered £1000 in compensation without admitting liability but insisting that the fall in the level of the beach was a coincidental natural occurrence. They also required that those accepting compensation should sign an agreement saying that they would not ask for further compensation. Many villagers refused to sign and so the offer was increased in June to £3250 with Mildmay adding £250 of his own money. The Western Morning News started a fund for the building of new houses that attracted £650 in donations. This time the villagers signed an agreement undertaking not to make further claims.

Using £1000 of the compensation and another £500 from Mildmay. Hansford Worth designed a series of concrete walls to protect the most vulnerable parts of the village though even he had doubts as to whether the walls would endure. Even during the period when the walls were being built the sea made inroads causing further collapses in 1904.

For the next 13 years life resumed in the village with some semblance of normality though greatly inconvenienced by the loss of the beach. Boats were dragged up onto the village street and some villagers coped with living in houses with missing walls.

The apocalypse feared by Hansford Worth came on 26 January 1917. A combination of very high seas and a ferocious easterly gale led to the breaching of Hansford Worth's walls. The gravel behind them was sucked away and any houses built over the voids collapsed into them. Houses on the solid rock were battered by seawater and shingle. Several houses were completely destroyed, others were wrecked when waves crashed down through the roofs and burst the walls outwards. Even those on the inner side of the street were battered by waves which smashed through the front doors. After sheltering against the inner cliff face the villagers finally decided to abandon Hallsands and retreated during a slight lull when the tide dropped after midnight. It is extraordinary that no lives were lost. The next high tide in the morning destroyed all the remaining houses except one. Ironically Hansford Worth's sea walls held or the destruction of the terraces would have been so great that lives would have been lost.

The villagers were now homeless and went to stay with relatives or take shelter in nearby barns. Mildmay once again led claims for compensation supported by other local dignitaries, the Western Morning News and the Devon Sea Fisheries Committee. The Board of Trade and Sir John Jackson, by now a Conservative MP for Devonport, denied responsibility and quoted the villagers' agreement not to claim further compensation. Shortage of money had not prevented the Treasury from repaying the

royalties Sir John had paid the Crown. Pressure eventually secured a further enquiry in September 1917 the report of which remained undisclosed at the time but a sum of £6000 was offered in compensation in June 1918. Sir John died of a heart attack in 1919 on a visit to his mistress – there is justice! But the political wrangling continued until 1922 when it was agreed to build ten houses in Bickerton. These were not occupied until 1924.

In 2002, Steve Melia, a Guardian journalist, found the unpublished 1917 report in the Public Records Office as well as Treasury minutes. The report accepted that the dredging had been responsible for the disaster at Hallsands and recommended the building of new houses based on a compensation figure of £10500. In a memo an assistant secretary to the Treasury wrote: *If we offer at once we shall only be pressed for more - the Hallsands fishermen, as past history shows, are past masters in squeezing. One sympathises with them in the disaster which has overtaken them, but a year or more has now elapsed, and it is probable that by now they have managed to get homes and a livelihood.* In fact, most were still homeless and some were trying to live in the ruins of their houses.

Other houses were built independently by some villagers including the famed Trout's Hotel on the cliffs north of Hallsands. The Trouts had been an important fishing family and two of the Trout sisters, Patience and Ella, laboured on farms, fished and took out loans to raise money. They then dug the foundations by hand and made the concrete blocks from which the hotel was built. Their first hotel opened in 1925 as Prospect House and was extended to become Trout's Hotel in 1933. It was a great success. Sadly, Patience died in 1949 and Ella three years later. Their younger sister Edith struggled to run the hotel but closed it in 1959. She became a recluse, living behind the shuttered windows until she died there in 1975. The hotel became holiday flats and today holiday apartments.

Some still maintain that it cannot finally be proven that the dredging brought about the demise of Hallsands, but the opinions of investigators and academics from Hansford Worth onwards make it 99.99% sure. And certainly, the stolid fisherfolk of Hallsands had no doubts and they knew all about their tides and currents. Villains emerge, the self-interested and subsequently proven dishonest Sir John Jackson, the Board of Trade and an indifferent Treasury as do heroes, Lord Mildmay and Richard Hansford Worth. But above all we should remember the villagers and the courage and tenacity they showed throughout the tragedy and its aftermath.

The few remnants of the village still bear witness to what occurred. It is even possible to gaze at the ruins from a £20000 viewing platform. Despite the changed values of the pound there is some irony there.

Is the story over? North Hallsands, Beesands, Torcross and Slapton Sands have all suffered damage particularly in 2014, 2016 and 2018. Large sums of money are spent to repel the sea's advance. Let us hope the defences last at least another hundred years, but surely in the end the sea will win.