

Extracts from letters written by Peter Bradshaw, Rector of Colkirk, 1952-1958

February 11th, 1953

Naturally, our chief anxiety has been the floods. All we knew about them at first was a tempest of wind from the North which struck us on the Saturday night and went on howling throughout the weekend.

I fiddled about here on the Monday feeling rather useless but on Tuesday I went to the coast to see what there was to do. I went to Wells first as it is the nearest to us. There was some water in the middle of the town and round the station and when I drove to the quay, I saw that a large naval vessel which is usually moored there had been lifted bodily out of the water and was sitting on the road. I thought I would go on to Holkham but I soon found that the road was under the sea. It is, as you know miles inland but all the area of marsh was ocean and I could just see the trees leading down to the beach sticking up out of water far out.

As I couldn't get anywhere near Holkham I turned back and drove through some water to Blakeney. There was havoc here as all the ships laid up for the winter had been lifted out of the basin and hurled against the fronts of the hotel and other buildings nearby. There were large boats lying in the garden at the back of the hotel and of course the little café was shattered. You will get some idea when you remember how the sea is normally miles away.

There was not much to do there so I drove through water on to Cley. Cley is a fully occupied fishing village and it looked like a shelled town in Flanders. I found my way up to the Manor house where the owner was co-ordinating the relief of Cley. A great number of people had lost everything in one minute. No homes, no clothes, no food, heat or light and no water. The owner had so far got them temporarily housed and fed with free meals from the village school. The next job was clothes so I spent the rest of that day helping to issue outfits of free clothes to everyone and we did it all the next day too. There was still furniture all over the streets amongst the mountains of seaweed. Although the Americans were beginning to bring in a little water, there was still no heat and though the lights returned late on Wednesday and people were beginning to trickle back to their soaking, stinking homes, they had nothing to sit or to sleep on.

So I came back here and we have since sent down as a gift from Colkirk quite a lot of clothes, mattresses, blankets, sheets, boots and so on. We gave the church collection to them on Sunday and now there is a house to house collection going on. I went back to Cley yesterday and things looked much the same. The streets are still full of sand, seaweed, furniture and wreckage. There is still no water as all the wells are polluted. I asked the owner of the Manor whether she thought the place would ever be Cley-next-the-sea again. She said that unless they were very lucky it would be Cley-under –the- sea this coming weekend. On my journeys to and fro, I have driven past the next village Salhouse which was entirely engulfed.

Before I leave this mournful topic I must tell you about the "jolly man of Cley". I met him on my last day as I was driving away and he told me his story with bursts of laughter. It appeared he had been at the other end of the village when the first small flood came and had got soaked to the skin, so he went home to his family to tell them it was rather like a high tide. When he got home and the waters began to go down, he took off all his clothes and hung them round the room to dry. He was standing there warming his behind when the door burst open, the tidal wave rushed in snatching his clothes out of the windows. He swam naked around his cosy parlour for a while but then made a run for higher ground absolutely starko in the midst of the crowds and the whole village. I spent the rest of last week raising things they need and on Sunday preached two sermons about "Why are these things allowed to happen".

February 25th 1955.

Although there has been little more snow since last Saturday's historic blizzard there has been no thaw whatsoever and last night's winds have made the roads worse today than they have been all along.

On our return from my London convalescence, my limited vigour has been spent equally upon funerals and weddings. I was quite unable to follow the reason behind the rush of joyful couples who besieged me to seal their union. After all, it was the vilest time of year. The Church did not approve of nuptials being celebrated during Lent. Spring was coming, etc. etc. But still they came, slithering about in the inky frost to put up their Banns and to submit themselves to the three weeks of instruction on which I insist. I was puzzled as I have said, until I discovered that it is all to do with Money and Income Tax. Apparently, Mr. Butler has so arranged affairs that people of limited means are compelled to get married in the jolly months of Jan, Feb and March. All this, while a new form of flu has swept the parish, terrible throat, swollen glands, nausea and a lasting cough. It has also swept through us while the blizzard raged outside and the Ashtons were visiting on their way back from Sandringham. Finally, on Friday morning after the Ashtons had left, Daphne collapsed into bed, hoping for a quiet weekend.

We were to be disappointed. The first really heavy fall of snow came on the Friday night and we awoke to a deeply white world. This was just the Curtain Raiser! It started again at 11 a.m. and snowed as I have never seen until the afternoon.

All this time, preparations were going on in the Church and Hall for the service and reception of one of these weddings. From noon until three a heroic struggle went on to keep the church path clear for the Bride. At three precisely, it stopped snowing and the sun came out for one hour. At 3.30pm the Groom arrived with his Best Man. Both their purple suits were drenched to the thighs and they brought the news that their entire party including his mother, were stuck in a ten foot drift on the main road at Sculthorpe. They thought they would be there all night.

The Brides sister had for some time been drying out her taffeta dress by the Church furnace and just as it began to snow again, the Bride arrived and was passed hand to hand down the now hopelessly blocked path. I urged them to warm and dry themselves but they were anxious to get on. As we reached the last verse of "Praise My Soul" the great South door burst open and in lurched the Bridegrooms mother and the entire bus party. They had been bulldozed out of their drift by the American Airforce. After the signing of the Register I was invited to the Hall for the Reception where I stayed for a while before cutting a way back to the house to write my Sunday sermon.

I suppose it was about 6.45pm. that I saw a few lights faintly waving as a small party approached the front door. It had been snowing very hard now for many hours and there was no path to the house at all. I was not at all surprised to see them and when they asked to use the phone, I realized much else would be needed before the night was done. We had roaring fires going in every room and after a short chat with the wedding party, I went up to Daphne who was in bed and told her that there would be at least eleven strangers for the night and that Colkirk was completely cut off. While Daphne and Celia sprang into action I went out. Three trees were down in the garden blocking the way from the Hall to the house. We went through the Churchyard clambering over broken shrubs and drifts. Once in the Hall I realized I had underestimated the numbers. There were four children, an elderly man, the Bridegrooms mother and twelve other guests. They were all wearing the most flimsy clothes, satin shoes, nylons and hats. I told them that they would have to march in these clothes a hundred yards through the howling blizzard and in thigh deep snow before reaching The Rectory and when the husbands of those with children looked

reluctant to accompany their families on this operation, my voice took on that of a Sgt Major willing them to chivalry.

So the giggling cavalcade made its way through the wilderness, into the drawing room where Daphne and Celia greeted them. They had somehow moved and made beds up everywhere, while we, the family were all together in our room. The men slept in armchairs in the drawing room. The wedding children stayed up playing until late and I had to go out again to forage for food but I think all twenty-three of us were asleep by midnight. In the morning,, I got the men to wash, shave and have their breakfast first before the women came down in their crumpled taffeta to eat porridge made in the preserving pan and tea in the Mothers Union pot, with toast and marmalade. The men got on with trying to dig out the bus and the ladies helped with the washing up. It was a cloudless day of quite unforgettable beauty and they were all away by 10. We had some very touching letters and White Wedding at Colkirk ran the headline in the Eastern Daily Press.