

The Holbeck Hall Hotel Collapse - Described by Janet Jefferson.

Interviewer and transcriber: Huw Roberts

Today I'm talking to Janet Jefferson about a moment in Scarborough's history, which made a small part of the town the focus of attention all around the world. In June 1993, the garden to one of the town's historic clifftop hotels started to move. Within 24 hours severe cracks started to appear within the hotel itself. Not surprisingly, with summer rapidly approaching, this four-star hotel was well occupied with tourists, all of which had to be rapidly evacuated at breakfast time without even the luxury of returning to their rooms to grab any of their possessions.

Born in York and having moved to Scarborough in 1978, Janet was a witness to the events in more than one sense. She was able to view the live coverage on her own TV, but she also had a direct line of sight to the hotel from her home. Janet is a former Mayor and was active at the time in many community organisations. I'm asking Janet to take us back to that event.

Janet, how did you first become aware of the problem which the Holbeck Hall Hotel was experiencing. What were your feelings when you realised the seriousness of what was happening?

I remember it vividly. It was a Friday morning the 4th of June and we have a six storey building in Eastborough which we run as a train shop but overlooks the bay and we sleep or did at that time on the 6th floor. I drew the curtains at about between 6 and 7 and I just shouted at my husband. I said part of the cliff has gone. It was as if somebody had taken a knife, like cutting a cake, and it was gone. And it was with horror, and we normally went down to the Harbour Bar for a coffee, and we went at about half seven to eight o'clock and it was just the talk of everybody. Everybody was just staring at this slice that had been chopped off, and was cascading down into the sea and it was frightening. I think everybody obviously were concerned for the stability of that area and also for the consequences for the people that were actually staying in the hotel because, as I recall, it had vast gardens to it and there was a marquee already assembled, tables set because there was going to be a wedding the on the Saturday and it was so frightening. All this had gone down into the sea and unheard of, really. So yes, it was a disaster for the whole of the town.

When you got to the site, I presume you were able to get fairly close. What was the state of the hotel at that time?

Well, it was creaking and it was groaning and things were moving. In fact as public you weren't allowed to go so near. I mean the owners of the time, the Turner family, were busy with staff trying to save some of the priceless paintings and everything that was there. And I suppose they were risking their lives. I mean, people couldn't even check out and pay their bills so you can imagine what it was like on that particular morning. And it was how it would eventually pan out. My husband was a videographer and he set his video camera up out of one of our windows and he actually caught it on camera and made a film of the east side of the hotel coming down on the Saturday. It was monumental within the town. I mean people came from all over the country, all over the world to see this and I can even remember people wearing T-shirts with pictures of the Holbeck Hotel. It was quite amazing. The town was busy, in South Cliff, the roads were gridlocked. We had a business at the time and yes, the place was buzzing with all these visitors coming to see a tragedy really.

Of course it wasn't just those people coming to see a spectacle. The world's press and media was arriving in the town to cover the event. What issues do you think that this kind of attention caused.

Well, in some ways, the loss of this four-star historic hotel, it was built in 1879, was an end of an era. It was the town's one four-star hotel. I can remember going often as a child because Scarborough was a second home to us and my dad was really keen on walking, and we would walk, say from Cornelian to Holbeck and stop at the hotel and have a glass of orange. My dad would probably have half a pint of beer or something and it was on our map to do this. And of course it was captured all around the world. People wanted to see it; people like to see a disaster. And you know, we've had continuing disasters over the years with floods and things like this, but for such a large amount of a cliff to go, taking a hotel with it was history in the making and people wanted to be part of it, I think. They wanted to see how this disaster happened and what the future held for that part of the town.

A million tonnes of soil as well as the hotel would eventually be mobilised, with most of it ending up in the North Sea. The press and media after the event, of course, disappeared, but the town and the Council was left to deal with the aftermath. Now I think you became a Councillor a few short years later. Can you tell us how this whole event affected the way the Council worked?

Well, it was a warning so when things were going to come in for planning and we had development and regulation within the reports, this would be a caution as to what could probably be built on the cliff. I can remember a big development, the Montrosa site in the late 90s and that took a long time to get to planning because people were cautious of the way it would be on the building and as a result. There were other large hotels within walking distance of the Holbeck which developed cracks as well, so there was a very cautionary period after that. Also it was how would the Council deal with rectifying this at this site? Make it a lasting memorial to what was there and in protecting the coastline itself. Because having been round there some months before, the cracks were visible in the area. It was Holbeck and I don't know whether the pattern of checking things had changed, things needed to be checked thoroughly to make sure that this disaster if it was going to happen, people would be prepared. I don't know how prepared you can be with coastal defences because, even in the 21st century, things can happen overnight and people don't know.

Do you think it's had any lasting impact on, you know, we're a great retirement centre here in Scarborough? Did that create any issues for people who might have wished to come to Scarborough to retire?

I think if you're building new properties, people will be very cautious about it, but the South Cliff where the Holbeck was situated is very much a retirement area, lots and lots of flats, but probably built a little bit further from the sea. I mean you've only got to go up further round towards Cayton Bay and what was the old Filey Road was moved inland. So that's sort of an example of how things have been affected.

My understanding is that if a property is at risk anywhere else on the cliff tops and it's likely to fall into the sea, the owners are requested to demolish the house before that sort of event can come to pass. Is that the way things work?

Well, an example of this is the Knipe Point development. Many years ago it was a sort of a holiday park and they built these bungalows on what was Knipe Point and there we had an erosion and that was thought to come from an underground water reservoir. And they were getting very, very near to the edge of the cliff and yes, they teetered right till the end, but they had to be demolished and it's only recently now that there was a plot of land that was earmarked for these people if they wanted to rebuild the properties, that land would be made available. Nobody took advantage of it and, as far as I know,

it's probably going to become available to be sold, but the Knipe Point again was an iconic example of how part of a very small estate went into the sea.

There are lots of properties that are in jeopardy. From Knipe Point and further round from there, from Cayton Bay. There was a row of about six cottages in jeopardy. They're still there and they're getting nearer and nearer to the edge. And there's one iconic detached house on Filey Road, it used to be quite a long way off. It is now part of what the road used to be. So it has just changed the whole topography of the area. So people, yes, will be cautious, I would imagine as to where they build, and if you purchase, what you would purchase? But we've had coast erosion in 2001/2002. I was heavily involved because it was part of my ward on the corner near the castle. There we had a massive landslide and we had to do abseiling to correct it. And further out on the North Bay, there was another erosion there but we must have secured it to the best of everyone's ability because there's a children's playpark beneath it now. I think everybody who is on the edge of a cliff has a concern and I would imagine having been a valuer at a local Scarborough estate agent you would have to be very cautious because some properties will not be mortgageable because you won't be able to get insurance.

Scarborough, throughout its history, has found itself in the thick of news events over centuries. And this, the Holbeck Hall Hotel collapse was yet another. The coastline erodes at an average rate of around two metres each year but it doesn't do so consistently across the coastline, and what happens is that dramatic events take place with large parts of the cliff falling into the sea. However this one was a catastrophic loss, and I'd like to thank you, Janet, for providing your recollections of those events today. Thank you.

Janet Jefferson (now Councillor Jefferson)
Interviewed in November 2023