



It looks like a mess and - in physical terms at least - nothing may now be done about it. Happisburgh's cliffs are going south and it's just hard luck for those on top.

We are talking forces of nature here, the irresistible sea meeting the eminently movable - or reducible - low cliffs of north east Norfolk. Erosion is the word, the gradual shaving of bits of the coast

which aren't - or are no longer - protected by the concrete sea walls and timber revetments built in response to the disastrous 1953 floods.

It all comes down to physics and geology, for this coast's sedimentary rock - if it can be called rock - was laid down barely 12000 years ago, no time at all to compact into something hard enough to resist a winter North Sea. Add in global warming with its already higher wave profiles and in the long run, the ground looks undefendable.

And to some extent, defence options anyway make a circular argument. Coastal processes, which have become much better understood in the forty odd years since most of Norfolk's sea walls were built, hinge on sediment and, more particularly, how much sediment remains on the beaches. The higher the beach level, the more wave energy is absorbed before waves hit the cliffs.

But sediment for beaches comes substantially from eroding cliffs so that if cliffs are defended from erosion - say by building a sea wall - beaches down the longshore drift are starved and erosion increases.

To which the answer then might be to wall the whole lot, except that at around £5000 per metre for sea wall and £1500 per metre for timber revetment, defences don't come cheap, nor do they last for ever. Mostly built in the late 1950s, Norfolk's sea walls are wearing out. Revetments which are timber frames piled into the beach and sloped away from the waves to deflect them and trap sediment behind, are cheaper but even less durable. And like sea walls, they have vertical steel and concrete foundations which, when beach levels fall, take the battering instead and succumb more quickly.

Which brings us to back Happisburgh.

Happisburgh has - or had - revetments. Bits of them survive but this smallish village with landmark church and lighthouse now has cliffs which are receding rapidly. It began in 1990 when a storm demolished 300m of revetment running south-east from the village. Once the gap appeared, the sea got stuck into the agricultural land behind and has been gnawing away ever since, helped by another storm which later sent six village



edge properties to the beach. Since then, things have been going downhill in just about every respect, especially since revetment maintenance was abandoned under the local Shoreline Management Plan.

Coastal defence at Happisburgh is the responsibility of North Norfolk District Council (NNDC) but long term defence works are hugely expensive which means that such money must come from central government through the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). And DEFRA has evolved a cost/benefit formula which broadly requires the value of property under threat to exceed the cost of protecting it. And that is where Happisburgh comes unstuck because much of the village is far enough back to be not yet in imminent danger.

Even so, until recently the formula was yielding almost enough points. And there was a scheme involving a new rock groyne and granite rocks below the most threatened properties which, according to experts, including apparently DEFRA's local office, would have done an acceptable medium term job for £700,000.

But the funding application by NNDC in May last year got mislaid by DEFRA and by the time it was found and some queries cleared up, further storm damage had removed more property and spoilt the calculation. And then DEFRA anyway changed the rules to favour areas with flooding risk. Flooding won't be a problem in cliff top Happisburgh. True, the sea could theoretically get through farmland into the northern Broads which, apart from anything else, could bring the European Habitats Directive to the calculation under which any country must restore or replace certain habitats if they are lost, and that wouldn't come cheap either. But it probably won't happen just yet and doesn't contribute much to the cost benefit analysis.



There was and remains anyway the problem of objections. Under the Coast Protection Act (1941), protection schemes must be advertised and cannot progress until objections have been resolved. Proposals for all recent defence schemes at Happisburgh have had two consistent objectors. One is Eric Couzens, who rejoices in the title of Lord of the Manor which he reportedly bought at auction. He doesn't speak to the

media but objects on several grounds, including his claimed right to salvage on the foreshore which he feels would be hampered by new defences.

The other is emeritus professor of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia, Keith Clayton. Having spent a career looking at coastal issues, he is firmly against hard defences because they only pass the erosion problem to someone else. But he does favour compensation as a cheaper - and equitable - alternative.

Meanwhile, Happisburgh continues to lose ground. In exasperation, last winter, NNDC spent £160,000 on rock armour at the cliff base in a bid to hold hold the line while something more substantial was arranged. But then the concrete ramp which was the only remaining beach access collapsed and took with it the means of launching the lifeboat. With matters of life and death unable to wait for government

funding, the lifeboat station moved a mile down to Cart Gap while a new (but how long lasting?) beach staircase is being built in an attempt to salvage Happisburgh's tourist season. It might be supposed that with most economic activity in the village - pub, caravan park, shop, b&bs - almost entirely dependent on visitors, the loss of tourism might be worth a few points if not legal action, but the new flood risk priority sees that one off.

But down in Beach Road, the losses are physical as well as financial.

Beach Road has ended in mid-air for some time and is getting shorter, its shortening matched by the collapse - or in some cases demolition in the interests of public safety, for which the owners must pay - of a number of bungalows.

Furthermore, along the cliff-top track which doubles back to the car park, there were, until last year, some small chalets and static caravans. They weren't all architectural gems, built in the interwar period before planning legislation was properly around, but they were gloriously sited, facing the sea in winter storm and summer sunrise. Their 20 metre cliff had been protected by revetments for decades.

But once the revetments began to break up, the earth began to move. They became places where many people wouldn't spend a stormy night. Even their names, though evocative, had displayed foreboding. There was 'Oversand', now sadly under sand, and there was 'White Horses' which, ultimately, couldn't be kept away from the garden. 'Turning Tides' still hopes forlornly but 'Thalassa' is a picture of lassitude. The rest have gone.



Back on Beach Road, a pair of large Victorian semis are edging closer. One is the Cliff House Guest House and Tea Shop run by Di Wrightson since the early 1980s. She is part of Coastal Concern Action Group (CCAG) which, under co-ordinator Malcolm Kerby, has lobbied politicians and organised local meetings. At the last one, on January 30th, nearly 600 people packed the church though Environment Secretary, Margaret Beckett, didn't show, despite being invited. Malcolm Kerby is disgusted with her and with government. 'If we could get to our beach, we would fight them on it!!!' he says.

But the whole issue may come back partly to the question that Keith Clayton - vilified locally though he is - keeps raising: compensation. It would take a seismic shift by DEFRA but those who bought their homes and chalets a decade or two ago when the revetments were sound and maintained expected that maintenance would continue. After all, it wasn't until 1990 that the government's Planning Policy Guidance 14 (Development on Unstable Land) and 1992, PPG20 (Coastal Development) appeared that there was clear development guidance in such places. It may well not be an efficient use of public money to provide hard defences for lightly developed stretches of coast but Happisburgh once had defences on which people came to rely and their abandonment by government means that homes and businesses are now being demolished without compensation.



So perhaps CCAG should persevere with Margaret Beckett. She's a keen caravanner after all, and a Norwich girl to boot. They should invite her to bring the old vardo down for a fortnight, park up on the cliff and take some air to clear the thought processes. She could bring her minister, Elliot Morley, in a tent. They might fall in love with Happisburgh as people do but then with any luck, their last day might catch a big

northerly. And as they move backwards to avoid a sudden trip to the beach along with the next few metres of land, they might reflect on the plight of those whose homes or businesses cannot take such evasive action. And they might consider whether they are morally or even legally liable in some way.