No Risk Please: We’re British

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5 components of vulnerability

- Livelihood strength & resilience
- Wellbeing & base-line status
- Self-protection
- Social protection
- Governance

7 contexts to vulnerability

• total vulnerability
• economic vulnerability
• technological (technocratic) vulnerability
• social vulnerability
• newly generated vulnerability
• delinquent vulnerability
• residual vulnerability

“Most government agencies...generally still deal with disasters as though they are equivalent to the natural hazards that trigger them; the principal object is the hazard, and the range of underlying reasons for the dangerous situation may be regarded as peripheral, or even irrelevant and immaterial. The factors involved in linking root causes and dynamic processes to vulnerability are seen as too diffuse or deep-rooted to address” (p.61)
What is the historian’s role?

1. Patterns of past hazards/disasters
2. Uncovering nature of inequalities
3. How people coped with hazards in past (resilience)
4. Re-examining “court” or official histories
5. Encourages us to look comparatively across cultures
6. Reminds us disasters are processes as well as events
7. Role of hazards/disasters as catalysts of change in society
Inherent vulnerability in UK

So-called Dogger Bank Earthquake in North Sea off Hull, 1931
Mapping vulnerability—Uplands

Areas marginal for oats cropping in the British Isles (after Parry 1978)
Mapping vulnerability—Wetlands
Rapid subsidence

Holme Post, Cambridgeshire showing peat wastage
“As a general rule there is nothing very much that can be done in England to prevent floods from natural watercourses...It would be far cheaper to pull down the buildings in areas liable to flood and build them elsewhere than to attempt any scheme sufficient to control the river.”

Building in resilience

Nottingham from the east, by Jan Sieberechts c.1700
Holderness Coast showing its retreat since Roman times
Mapping vulnerability—Seismicity

Historical seismicity since 1832
Source: British Geological Survey
Culture of complacency?

Indices of multiple deprivation (rank) for each constituent country of the UK

Deprivation within each country

E - England (2007)
W - Wales (2008)
S - Scotland (2006)
N - Northern Ireland (2005)

Source: Social Disadvantage Research Centre, University of Oxford
“Background vulnerability” – Predictive

Houses of Parliament, London