



The 'Long Winter' in the North Yorkshire Moors

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The winter of 1947 is remembered by all who lived through it. There had been some cold weather in December 1946 but this was followed by an unseasonably mild spell. However, on 22nd January 1947 the temperature dropped like a stone and the snow began in earnest. The severe weather was not to relent until mid-March: from 22nd January until 17th March snow fell every day somewhere in the UK.

Although more snow was to fall during the winter of 1962/3, that of 1947 was much colder, with biting winds that drove the snow. Drifts were up to seven metres deep while, at its lowest, the temperature plummeted to -21°C. There was also very little sunshine, with only 17 hours recorded at Kew for the whole of February.

The drifting snow caused widespread transport difficulties: 300 main roads became unusable, and over 100,000 British and Polish troops, as well as German prisoners-of-war, were drafted in to clear the railways as the disruption was seriously affecting the coal supply to power stations. Domestic power supplies were reduced to just 19 hours per day, which continued until the end of April. Industrial supplies were cut completely and all external lighting was switched off. Radio broadcasting was limited and the television network suspended altogether.

Flocks of sheep and herds of cattle were buried and froze or starved to death. Nationwide, as much as a quarter of the sheep stock was lost and it took farmers six years to recover from such losses. Vegetables became frozen in the ground. War-time rationing was still in place and the winter of '47 saw even more stringent measures to eke out what was available.

In the immediate aftermath of World War 2, the UK was facing serious economic difficulties. Britain was still involved in post-war defences which drew considerably on the public purse. Added to this, the Labour government had undertaken a substantial programme of nationalisation, including the railways and the coal-mining industry. Alongside all of this was the need to fund the new National Health Service. There was not a lot to spare. It was this that caused as much hardship as - if not more than - the snowfall.

On the North Yorkshire Moors, where the wind-chill factor can be appreciable in any winter, the snow filled the roads and lanes, cut off villages and caused considerable difficulties for farmers. The loss of the electricity supply, however, made no difference as electricity supplied by the National Grid only reached here in the early 1950s. Instead, folks simply soldiered on with their paraffin lamps and

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stoves and used peat on the fire or in the range for cooking. For those who needed coal for heating, when paraffin refills were necessary or when food supplies began to run low, people acted as in Westerdale, where they hitched their horses to sledges and, with the lanes completely blocked by snow, made their way across the fields to Castleton. Coal could be obtained from the railway station here and limited food supplies were available in local shops - but it took a long time to get there and even longer to get home.

Newspaper headlines declared that Scotland was 'cut off' and England was 'cut in half'. Villages became completely separated from one another and remote farms entirely isolated. Moorland folks, however, were used to hard work and harsh conditions and simply ploughed on with life. Largely self-sufficient – and certainly self-supporting – the communities of the North Yorkshire Moors managed as best they could. Used to helping each

other, everyone rallied together and made the best of it.

Sadly, even once the snow abated, worse was to follow as the mid-March thaw and additional rain caused widespread flooding. It was the wettest March for 300 years. Thirty-one counties across Britain and at least 100,000 properties were affected by the floodwater, and the army was once again called in to help. Red Cross parcels arrived from Australia and Canada and it took ten days for the flood waters to subside.

Throughout the difficulties, over two million people were forced to claim unemployment benefit because of the loss of income, but there was little unrest and no major public disorder. However, following such hardship some decided to strike out for a different life and many people emigrated, in particular to Canada and Australia. In Britain, taxes were raised once more - but the country then basked in a glorious warm summer.

(With grateful thanks to the late Emma Beeforth of Westerdale for help in preparing this article.)



Find out more

Blog posting from the Met Office -

<https://blog.metoffice.gov.uk/2017/01/26/winter-1947-brought-a-freeze-to-post-war-britain/>

Rare film footage of a family's experience of the 1947 winter in West Yorkshire -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUcAfHD1BAY>



Sid Beeforth and god-daughter Audrey Shaw, Westerdale



Ivy Holme, Westerdale



The Stothard brothers, Mount Pleasant Farm, near Lockton



Feeding sheep at Mount Pleasant Farm, near Lockton



Rosedale after the blizzards. 1947