



## Midwinters

The English may be renowned for talking about the weather, but what a fascinating subject! We have had a harsh winter this year, but I thought it would be interesting to make some comparisons with the winters of 1947 and 1962-3.

### **1947 6<sup>th</sup> January - 16<sup>th</sup> March**

January 1947 began mild and wet, but the snow arrived on 6<sup>th</sup> and continued falling on at least 16 days of the month. The depth of snow was 18cm. but strong winds gusted up to 50mph causing drifting to 6 metres in rural areas.

In February conditions worsened. This is the coldest February on record. Snow levels reached 23cm. The temperature rose above freezing for just 48 hours and the sun peeped through for an hour on 15<sup>th</sup>, for the first time for over a month. However if the weather had not been so cloudy the temperature would have been even lower! It became pointless trying to keep roads and railways clear of snow. In many places drifts reached the windowsills of upper floors and people dug tunnels from their front doors to the road. They struggled to work or school suffering from the severe wind chill factor. Factories, shops and schools remained open. Post war rationing meant that food was still in short supply, as was fuel. One room was generally heated but the bedrooms remained icy cold.



Waiting for the Oxford-Chipping Norton bus somewhere along the A34 in 1947.(3)

In March there were blizzards, more snow and gales. Then freezing rain, and more snow. This created such a solid layer that it was possible to walk on the surface of the snow. On 16<sup>th</sup> the thaw set in, with rain and high winds. The flood levels in many places have not been exceeded since these floods in March 1947. This was possibly the harshest winter since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **1962-63 26<sup>th</sup> December - 6<sup>th</sup> March**

“The Big Freeze” began on Boxing Day 1962. Blizzards caused snowdrifts up to 8 metres by the end of the month. Telephone lines were brought down, roads and railway lines were blocked.

In January 1963 day time temperatures rarely rose above freezing and a night temperature of -16c was recorded. Lakes and rivers became frozen, the Thames was frozen over from Windsor up river. The sea at Herne Bay froze over for half a mile out from the beach. Freezing fog followed. At the end of the month a thaw began, but only for 3 days. Snow soon set in again.

In early February there was a 36 hour blizzard with wind speeds reaching 81mph. People conscientiously struggled in to work. Most children lived within walking distance of their schools, though there were problems with the toilets and heating. Few houses had central heating, and gas and electricity were restricted. Cold water tanks froze and pipes burst, so corporation tanks delivered drinking water. Even diesel fuel and anti freeze froze! Most country roads were impassable for weeks, as were the canals which were still relied upon for transporting many commodities. Food prices rose: a pound of apples or tomatoes now cost 6d (2.5p), a dozen eggs cost 4/6d (22.5p) and potatoes went up to 7d (3p) per lb.

Early in March the thaw finally set in and due to 6 months of dry weather previously, the ground was able to absorb much of the melt water and floods were not too much of a problem. However the roads had been badly damaged by the ice and the diggers clearing the snow. This was probably the coldest winter since 1795.

### **A few memories from Steeple and Middle Aston**

**1947** Eugene recalls that the front of their house in Heyford Road all but disappeared from view and how they dug a tunnel for access. He can't imagine how his parents found food for the family, even the potatoes in the clamps were frozen. Supplies of coal and food were trapped on stranded trains. Electricity was off for most of the day and they would tramp off to the woods for firewood. They dragged sledges to the bakery at North Aston. When the thaw came the ice pond (or the Big Green) down the Beeches, which provided Rousham House with ice, burst its banks covering the road with thick mud. The pond has never been repaired. The people in the Toll Cottage returned home to find the Cherwell flowing through their house and their terrified dog floating round the room on the table!

At this time Ron lived a few miles away in Swalcliffe and he would walk to Epwell for bread. He could earn 6d an hour clearing snow. He helped clear a track to a farm where the family hadn't eaten for 3 days. They ate the food as fast as they could grab it! Ron remembers that the Alcan works bus was completely buried in snow. Hazel visited a sick relative in the Churchill and was about to leave to catch the 6 o'clock bus home when a "snowman" entered to tell them there was no chance of anyone leaving that night. The trains kept running through Heyford and Hazel got up at 6am to go to work in Oxford, even if she didn't arrive until 10am nor return home until 10.30pm. Her father cycled to Kidlington daily. It was wonderful that Town Well kept flowing and she and the other youngsters from Fenway would put a bath on a sledge and collect water in it for themselves and others. Everyone helped each other and worked together, sharing what produce they had and shopping for each other.

**1962-3** Eugene: Many local roads were impassable and alternative routes home had to be found. An American airman trying to find his way back to Upper Heyford had travelled along the top of a hedge instead of the road, as was discovered after the thaw.

Janet remembers her dad taking her for a walk and him asking her if she realised she was walking along a hedge. It was weeks before the road from Middle Aston was cleared, and how happy she was not to be able to go to school!

Evelyn: We kept our farm animals close by, but the hill farmers lost much of their stock.

So maybe the winter of 2010 wasn't such a harsh one after all!

There must be so many more stories, we'd love to hear them.

Diana Gardner