

Two Very Hard Winters

The summer of 1946 was very similar to all the previous summers for me that I could remember, well not quite, as in July I had left Dinton School as a senior boy of a junior school forever and was looking forward with some apprehension of starting a new school in Aylesbury as a very junior boy of a senior school. There was one task in the summer holidays that couldn't be ignored and that was the gathering of the coming winter fuel and by the end of August our shed was again brimming full with logs and fire lighting twigs gathered from the woods and spinneys around Dinton. In one corner of the shed was a few hundredweight of coal, just enough to last us through the winter. The wood came free but the coal had to be paid for. We were now ready to face the forthcoming winter just as we had been in the previous years.

School started again in September and Christmas 1946 came and went with the New Year being celebrated in the usual manner. There was no indication or warning of what was to come. During the last week of January 1947 on the 22nd it started to snow, lightly at first followed by very heavy downpours and it continued almost daily until the 17th March. Snow up to 9ft deep was recorded in the Chilterns. It was bitter cold, the coldest since 1814 and caused chaos on the roads. The Oxford bus didn't always arrive to take us to school which gave us an extra holiday! The wind whipped the snow into drifts and some were very deep. At the weekends and on our extra holidays we made ice slides in the roads especially on the roads with a built in slope and one of our school boy dreams was fulfilled and that was to reach the small island on the Biggin lake. The Biggin was soon frozen over and the ice was then strong enough to support our weight. During the coming weeks we visited the island many times. We didn't lose many days from school but it was fun and many friendly snowball fights were organised.

At home in the cottage in Dinton the paths had to be cleared regularly as the toilet was at the bottom of the garden and the paths around the house were cleared to allow access for us all and the local tradesmen supplying us with milk, bread and meat etc.. Throughout the long cold period the food supply was maintained much to the credit of these tradesmen. There were very few motor vehicles in the village at that time and most of the working population relied on the local bus service to Aylesbury for their work. Our wicket walled house was kept very warm thanks to the coal and large stock of logs. We then realised how important that wood collection had been last summer.

The hard cold weather went on through February and into March and at last the big thaw began. Our slides quickly disappeared and the ice melted from the ponds denying us further access to the island on the Biggin. I never ventured to the island again. The thaw also brought floods causing the farmers even more problems as many of their fields were flooded. The flooding gradually subsided and spring arrived and life returned to normal.

By 1962 we were married and now living in Stone with our two very young daughters. All the winters after 1947 had been 'normal' and fairly mild but now we were about to experience yet another really cold winter. In fact the coldest winter of our lives. Winter began just before Christmas 1962 and the snow reached the south of England on Boxing day and lasted until the first week in March 1963. It was to be the coldest winter for 223 years.

We woke that Boxing day morning to find that we had been engulfed in deep snow during the night. Luckily we had access to the shed where the tools were kept and after breakfast I dug out a pathway to the road. Two of our close neighbours were fairly elderly so the snow clearance continued around their paths to allow tradesmen to bring in their essential supplies. Our neighbour on the other side of the house had unfortunately not closed his front door properly the night before and the blizzard had blown his door open. When he opened his bedroom door in the morning he was confronted by snow that drifted in and had filled the hallway, stairs and nearly all the landing. It was much later in the day before he emerged!

In the days that followed we realised that the baker from Dinton would not be coming. I trudged around and made a list of what bread the people living immediately nearby wanted and as I had a small light car I managed to drive to Dinton bakery to pick up the required bread, bring it back to Stone and deliver it to all around. We did not have central heating in the house, there were two coal fires downstairs but no heating upstairs. We would often wake up in the morning to find that the inside of the bedroom windows were thick with ice. The main roads were soon made passable but the side roads around the village remained snow covered for quite some time. After the Christmas and New Year holidays were over most of us were able to continue to get to our work place in spite of the intense cold and snow. Again March arrived and the snow and ice melted. There was some flooding again but not as bad as 1947. The winter of '47 had been the snowiest but the winter of '63 had certainly been the coldest.

The two hard winters had certainly been very similar both with lots of snow and intensely cold except that in the winter of 1947 I had been just a boy having lots of fun with little or no responsibilities. In the winter of 1962/63 I was now a man with a family to provide for with no time for snowball fights or visits to the island on the Biggin. Work was a priority and because the local authorities kept the main roads fairly clear and open most people were able to get to work with little difficulty. I did not lose one days work. In both winters we were well fed and we kept warm and in general most people looked out for each other and provided help where necessary.

Since 1963 there hasn't been a winter like it.

Gordon S Weedon 2008