

I was there

The weather is improving and as I am writing for the February deadline everyone is hoping that we have seen the last of the snow and ice. During the very cold weather Television Presenters have been raking over the statistics to compare the recent cold spell with record ice and snow of former years. As the days passed the dates became earlier, the eighties passed to the sixties and then we arrived at the dreaded 1947. The younger presenters were at something of a disadvantage when the more senior or ancient, related personal experiences of 1963 but few if any of the people still presenting could remember 1947. Old photographs and old people were produce, by retrieval or exhumation, to tell us how terrible it was but I can remember because I was there.

Weather records can be somewhat misleading because we view them from life as it is today. Let us look at the way things were in the winter of 47. First of all I think we should say how well our council coped with the emergency, working throughout the night with grit spreaders salting our roads.....Back in 47 we had no gritting vehicles or salt but I do remember a snow plough. It did not belong to the council and it only appeared quite late in the winter. It was attached to the front of a bus and the bus company was clearing the routes which it served. There were shovels and they did not belong to the council either because everyone used their own shovel (spade or dust pan) to clear the pavement in front of their house whilst groups of men were organised to dig through the drifts to clear the roads.

All of the difficulties which have recently been shown on television were unknown to us, we had no television. News on the wireless had to be proper news and if you could see snow out of the window you did not need a radio announcer to tell you it was there and of course the BBC in 1947 had no way of getting sound recording equipment to the deepest snow and coldest places.

There was no National shortage of Gas because we did not have a National Grid. Gas was made in Gas Works in the towns and villages and in many villages such as Goxhill there was no gas. Coal was kept in the coal house and people kept a stock of coal so that they did not rely on frequent delivery; it was cheaper by the ton. How did our central heating work? Although there was a fire grate in the best room that only saw heat on rare occasions. Most people had one fire burning in the house, they sat around the fire grate which was the central and only source of warmth and often it had to provide heat for kettles saucepans and ovens as well. Much of the heat went up the chimney. Heating was minimal, in bed rooms there was none and radiators and hot water taps were unknown in the average home.

We were not of course completely primitive, in some places there was water in pipes but inevitably the pipes froze and burst. Pipes were made of lead and so a plumber had to come with a paraffin lamp and after draining the pipe, heat it with solder and using a cloth with tallow he



Digging out a road in 1947

“wiped the joint” a slow and skilled job. Others were not so fortunate and when the pump in the yard froze melted snow had to become the water supply.

Transport was a problem but people did not move about as much then as they do now, few had cars and as long as deliveries were made to the

shops we still “ran errands for mum” so we could survive. The only blockages in the roads were of snow not of vehicles. We went to school on a bus. It was a normal service bus but we children had bus passes and were allowed on to the bus first. (Then you got up and gave your seat to an older person.) I don’t think the schools closed but people from outlying farms and villages just stayed at home. One day when it snowed very heavily the roads were full of snow the busses stopped and it was a blizzard. That afternoon the history master who lived in our village went to each class and gathered all of us together and we walked home through the snow. It was about three and a half miles the road ran north to south the wind blew from the west and my right ear remembers it well.

I do not remember anything about Health and Safety. Health and Efficiency, well possibly I may have heard of that, but definitely not Health and Safety.

Clothing was of course completely different. 1947 was just two years after the war finished in 1945. Food was still rationed and so was clothing. We had clothing coupons and this enabled us to have a choice of garments but only a limited quantity. I had to have a school uniform and this included a blazer coat, flannel trousers, a gabardine mackintosh and a school cap but most importantly for the day of the walk home I had a scarf. This had to be in the school colours and was machine knitted. (Grandma could have knitted a warmer one.) A thick overcoat was not school uniform and coupons did not permit both. I had wellington boots and I carried my shoes. The history master relaxed his normal antipathy towards those with hands in their pockets.

Many people wore a Balaclava helmet which was a hand knitted head cover the like of which if worn today would immediately identify the wearer as a terrorist or a bank robber. These helmets had been knitted for soldiers and sailors during the war and so were plentiful. Hooded garments, coats tops and the like did not exist outside monasteries.

In 1947 I lived in Northamptonshire and if variation of temperatures and depths of snow across the country were similar then to those at present, Goxhill would have been a rather more congenial place to have been. The vast sweep of the river Humber extending around the village keeps us warmer in winter and cooler in summer which is something I have learned to appreciate since I came to live here.

If global warming brings heat, waves or floods and eliminates the joys of winter’s ice and snow, remember the winter of 2009 - 2010 and when you tell the story to the younger people you can say, “I was there”.

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