



The old man was sat in his favourite chair in front of the fire, the only light provided by a candle flickering on the mantelpiece and the dying embers of the fire that so cruelly mimicked his stage of life.

The wind had finally abated and now the only noise to be heard was the 'tick, tock' of the Grandfather clock and the occasional spit from a coal on the fire – but tonight was different, for a small group of villagers stood before him, high in anticipation as they waited for him to speak.

The old man drew from his pipe and finally asked "You say it came over the mantle in mother Johnston's back room?"

"It did mister Swainson" replied one of the villagers and once again the room fell silent and even the clock paused in anticipation of the old man's reply.

"Well then, I dare say these are the worst floods ever."

The '**Oldest Inhabitant**' had confirmed what the villagers had suspected and the subsequent report in the local newspaper proudly declared the '*Worst floods in living*

memory', but more importantly for us, the role of the oldest inhabitant in weather recording was truly established.

Just a casual glance at reports of severe weather events of the past will soon throw up a reference to the oldest inhabitant, who always seems to remain nameless, but this report from the floods of 1856 in Appleby In Westmorland suggests a slightly cynical reliance on such testimonies:

Appleby.—Tremendous Flood.—Since the memorable Candlemas flood, in 1826, Appleby has not suffered so heavily from the inundations of the river Eden, as on Sunday night and Monday morning last; indeed, the "oldest inhabitant," who is always called into requisition on such occasions, we believe, may without fear of contradiction assert, that except on the occasion named, the river was never known to be so large. The heavy rains on Saturday added to the

But I feel slightly sorry for Messrs. Swainson above, nobody had been to visit him since a great snow storm three years previous, but on that occasion he had sent them home disappointed as he could remember an occasion "*When I was a lad*", that the snow lay deeper!

However, with so many newspaper reports mentioning the oldest inhabitant's verdict, there was obviously a lot of respect and indeed deference to the holder of this position, something highlighted in Appleby in the busy year of 1852.

Called into action in February, the report from the Westmorland Gazette starts with: "*Since the commencement of the present year a greater quantity of rain has fallen than at any other time within the same space in the recollection of "the oldest inhabitant"*".

And then at the end of the year we read the following in the Kendal Mercury: *'The storm of Christmas 1852 will long be remembered here, two such hurricanes as those on Saturday and Monday morning the oldest inhabitant declares he never before witnessed.'*

Now it may be one thing to declare the deepest floods, snow drifts or the worst 'hurricanes', but to declare the *'greatest quantity of rain'* without the proper equipment is surely a leap too far – complete deference or just a good quote for the newspaper?

Reagill is a little hamlet near to Shap in Cumbria and from where the school master kept a log book (he was also a rainfall observer) and he made the following entry for the 12th February 1886 regarding a significant snow storm:

'Mr Christopher Airey of CastleHowe Scar, now upwards of eighty five years of age and who has never lived at any place but Hardendale and Castlehowe Scar, says he has never known so long and bad a storm. We have a similar statement by another old man who has lived upwards of fifty years in this Township.'

I guess that as it is not a newspaper it was acceptable to name the oldest inhabitant, but what makes me smile about it is the need to give Mr. Airey full providence in his ability to make such declarations and if you still had any doubts, it was backed up with corroboration from another chap who was probably chomping at the bit to take over Airey's role.

But then just a year later on 18th January Mr. Airey was at it again:

'This morning the surveyor of Highway for Reagill has had to send men to open half a mile of road, now blocked with snow Mr Christopher Airey of Castle How Scar told the men he had never seen so bad a storm. He is eighty six years of age and has lived at or near his present residence all his life.'

You've been waiting all your life to make such grand declarations and then they come along like buses!

But I can only make the assumption that he died shortly after as on May 24th 1889 we read:

'...We have had remarkably fine hot weather. The oldest people never knew the month of May so fine....'

And I now have visions of those old people having to determine who would now take over Airey's role!

But despite the slight cynicism towards the oldest inhabitants declarations, it doesn't match those heart sinking moments when a present day TV reporter, clad in wellies, places a microphone in front of a randomly chosen flood victim and asks, "Is this the worst you've know it?"

When the follow up question of "...and you've lived here how long?" gets an answer of *"Three years, but the people up the road told me"*

I immediately find myself shaking my head and thinking that they should have gone and found the oldest inhabitant for a more credible verdict, albeit in our more modern times we may get a more official verdict such as this from the floods of 1990 in Appleby:

"A police spokesman said they were the worst floods since 1968"

But in a more mobile and transient population, maybe this most important of 'weather observing roles' is, like those embers on Messr. Swainson's fire, fading quickly.