

An Inch of Scotch Mist

Part of the satisfaction, or at least my own, when researching your own local weather history, is the unearthing of weather records from past decades and centuries and then being able to compare and contrast it with what is happening now.

All the more satisfying when, for all intents and purposes, those records were lost or at best simply forgotten and I am no longer surprised at where or in what, they might turn up – and what is more, that quest to find out more becomes quite compelling.

To find a study of rainfall from a location (Reagill) that I can see from my kitchen window deep in the Eden valley in Cumbria, with that most iconic rainfall site of all, Seathwaite, from 1873 is as exciting as it is baffling.

My own small village, Maulds Meaburn, lies equidistant between Shap and Appleby, each five miles away and with other such small villages nearby. So when I first set out on my ‘quest’ to find local weather history, I didn’t expect too much, but I have been pleasantly surprised.

But where to find this information and why?

I have already answered in part the ‘Why’, but for myself it is the satisfaction and the sense of just what is out there waiting to be found, my ability to find it, make it available via my website and then to compare with the now.

The Met’ Office library and archive is a good first place to start. Their archive is searchable on their website, but as with all archives, if you find something that you want to look at you are going to have to visit in person.

I am slowly compiling a list of material that I want to see and research for the day when I get to visit them down in Exeter, but in the meantime, the staff in the archive have been simply superb at answering my various requests for information.

To find a 17 year (1931-47) (it is actually 1891-1947 but 1891-1930 is still unaccounted for) temperature series for Appleby that was previously unlisted or to confirm for someone that their dad did operate an official rainfall site for the Met’ Office (and show them a photo’ of his records, in his hand writing) is both satisfying and rewarding.

And as with the letter below, you might also fill in a missing piece of the jigsaw for your local historical society.

COPY46, Iverna Gardens,
London, W.8.

6th March 1947.

To the Director.

137.

Dear Sir,

I am exceedingly sorry, but my house at Appleby has been requisitioned at very short notice, and I am, therefore, unable to take the Meteorological Readings after this month.

I will of course, return to you, all the unused forms. What do you think is my best plan for disposing of the thermometers? Do you think that anyone would buy them? I am compelled to move all my furniture etc. from Castle Bank, and as I am now 74 it is unlikely that I shall ever be able to live at Castle Bank again.

It is indeed a tragedy for me.

I shall be here until the end of this month, when I go North to superintend the sale and transit of some of my things. I shall, therefore, be able to complete the March record, but nothing further.

Yours truly,

(from Lady Holmes).

108

Lady
108

Just entering the word 'rainfall' in the Cumbria libraries archives (CASCAT) on-line search engine brings up numerous items that I want to go and look at and not all are local to myself.

There is a national archive search engine as well, but at least Cumbria's county archive is searchable on-line, not all counties have the facility and even then I just wonder how much material is still unlisted.

To sit in the archives office in Kendal and to have in front of you a pile of meteorological journals from 1826 – 1867 (Samuel Marshall – numerous mentions in the British rainfall Guides) is a privilege and a head scratcher on just where to start. Even a (accurate) study/survey completed by primary school children from the 1930's of their own village (Cliburn) and which included rainfall, is a delight.

You could be looking at something that no-one has cast eyes on for decades and it all helps you to find out more about where you live. Whether you merely research your own immediate locality or even the whole county is up to you.

In the archives at Carlisle I have found a rainfall record for Carlisle for the years 1757 – 1776 (In 'The life of Dr. John Heysham M.D' – Pb 1870 – rainfall readings and general weather observations taken by Dr. Carlyle who '*kept an account of the quantity of rain which fell at Carlisle during 1757-76.*')

This staggered me – this is one of the very earliest rainfall records in Great Britain, only the records of a Mr. Townley (Townley, Lancs 1677 - 1705), Rev. W. Derham (Upminster 1696 -1714) and Thomas Barker (Rutland 1736 - 1794) appear to be older.

George Symons (British Rainfall Guides) in his '*An outline sketch of rainfall investigations from A.D. 1677 to A.D. 1865*' for the British Association in 1865 made reference to this record in Carlisle, but only refers to it having a single year (1767) of data.

And indeed the '*British Rainfall Guides*' have proved to be an invaluable source and which along with the 'Monthly Report' for 1884 – 1993 the Met' Office have made available for viewing/download on their website.

Virtually all my local villages have had someone recording rainfall at some point and the longest record amongst them is 43 years (Morland 1902-44) and the Met' Office even have the 10 year sheets (includes all monthly totals) for some of them, superb.

The Rainfall Guides also occasionally provide tantalizing snippets of information provided by the observers in the sections on 'Notes on the days/month's/years' and other ad-hoc articles, all of which can be invaluable and you occasionally find little snippets like this one from 1873, Crosby Ravensworth being less than a mile from myself.

* JANUARY 18TH.

This was the first heavy rain for the year which was at all general. It was the M at about one-twentieth. of the stations, the counties in which they were situated being Wiltshire, Devonshire, Cornwall, Somersetshire, and Gloucestershire; in none of these, however, was the fall excessive, seldom amounting either to 2 in., or to 4 per cent. The fall was heavier in South Wales, and in the neighbourhood of Keswick and Penrith; the highest per-centage being at Appleby in Westmoreland :—

X. Kielder Northumberland	2.09=4.5	X. Appleby	2.66=9.2
„ Keswick Barrow House .	2.46 3.6	XI. Llanfrechfa Grange.....	2.57 6.3
„ „ Dear Close.....	2.13 3.8	„ Aberdare	2.25 4.2
„ Bridge End	3.17 3.2	„ Treherbert	3.05 3.6
„ Elterwater	2.98 3.3	„ Mardy	2.61 4.5
„ Crosby Ravensworth ...	2.20 5.4	XII. Kirkpatrick Juxta.....	3.10 4.8
„ Reagill.....	1.74 5.0		

The remarkable coincidence that at Crosby Ravensworth precisely the same amount fell on Jan. 17th, 1872, as on Jan. 18th, 1873, and that in that case, as in the present, it was the heaviest fall in the year, is perhaps worthy of notice.

One such example is that of Reagill, mentioned above and which is about 1 ½ miles from my house. From the Rainfall Guides we find a rainfall record for 1872 – 1889 (18 years), but with one year missing and also the occasional comment in the 'Notes on the month's', some of which make reference to temperature records.

The records from Reagill have to be classed as lost, but from the Rainfall Guides I knew that the observer was a William Wilkinson at High Green and then an idle chat with a local historian revealed that Wilkinson was the headmaster of Reagill School (High Green) and that he had in his possession the school logbook that Wilkinson kept and what is more "There's loads of references about the weather."

I now have all those weather related entries and we have firsthand accounts of the severe storms of 12th December 1883 and 9th December 1886 that were equated to the effects of an earthquake in Appleby in 1871 and the storm of 7th January 1839 and then an account of snow in July amongst others.

And then bless my good luck! A reference to an average of rainfall for a number of years that included the missing year, even my rudimentary maths could work out the rainfall for that missing year!

Then one day, as you do, I just happened to be reading the 1873 edition of British Rainfall and there found a curious report entitled '*Scotch Mist*', which examines '*some peculiarities in the rainfall of hilly districts as compared with that experienced at ordinary stations.*'

Submitted by Rev. F. W. Stow. M.A., F.M.S., who was the then vicar at Aysgarth in North Yorkshire and which compared the rainfall of Seathwaite, Durham, Greta Bridge and much to my amazement, Reagill.

And to that end he produces tables for 1872 and 1873 listing all the days on which one inch of rain fell at Seathwaite during the two years along with the daily fall at the three other sites.

Baffled, why chose Reagill, how did Stow get hold of the daily rainfall records for each site? Maybe Symons provided them, who knows, but now, using my own data and that for Seathwaite kindly provided by the Environment Agency, I can resurrect the study – not much has changed!



I've not yet fully tapped into local newspapers (all on microfiche in the library), The Gentleman's Magazine, personal accounts (people who may have old photos) and others, so much to go at.

The one thing that I have encountered which is frustrating but challenging, is to find a reference in a newspaper of '*...the wettest for 40 years*'. So now I need to research what happened 40 years ago, do that only to find yet another, '*...the wettest for at least 30 years*' and so on – are they working from memory or actual records?

Back to Dr. Carlyle and his entry for 1784 -

'commenced and ended with severe and long continued frosts ever remembered since 1740 ...'

Ok, now I give in, I've got back to 1784, 1740 is beyond me!

What we do like is his entry for 1783 – no need for further research on this one!

'Summer and autumn extremely hot and sultry and more thunder and lightning then ever was remembered.'

I've also stumbled across two publications, '*Enjoy Cumbria's Climate*' (Pb 1972) and '*Report of the Land Utilisation Survey*' (parts 49 Cumberland and 50 Westmorland) (Pb 1943 – and one for every county in the UK) – the first entirely penned by no other than Prof. Gordon Manley and the second with a section on climate of those counties by Manley.

They both have information useful to myself and which helped me to go back to the Met' Office and confidently state that they must have some temperature records for Appleby! They did and they found them, perfect.

I have met the family of observers, now sadly deceased and heard how dedicated they were to the keeping of a meteorological record for many years, from the same location, only to be told

“We don't know where they are.” when I ask if they still have their dads records.

So sad, so frustrating and one of those gentlemen only died three years ago!

Now Scotch Mist may be a persistent drizzle with poor visibility, but it is also an idiom meaning something that is hard to find or doesn't exist, so please don't let your own records go the way of this gentleman's or that of Reagill and the many others – you never know, someone like me might come along in 150 years time and want to make use of them.

But finally the most poignant and thought provoking piece of historical data that I have unearthed so far doesn't involve the hard data of say rainfall totals or averages of temperature, but is simply a descriptive account contained in a personal diary.

Personal diaries are the one other potential source of information, but which in probability only give a brief description of the day's weather.

One such dairy was kept by our local vicar, the Rev. George Williamson (1747 – 1783) who included a few words on most days about the weather and which is so old that the first half is written in Latin!

But the period covered some of the most extreme and coldest winters and his entry for the winter of 1779-80 describes just how cold it was. He makes many references to *'very keen frost'* and on Christmas Day 1779 we read *'Thank God of cold.'*

The harshness of winter continued in January 1780, but whilst it might appear that there is nothing too unusual about this, a check of the parish records reveals that in January 1780 there were five funerals, three of which were of children.

That's not Scotch Mist, that's hard fact and hard to comprehend in such a small village, but nonetheless a historical context of our weather and its impacts.