

Bad Weather

Ewelme News, Apr-May 2010, Feb-Mar 2011

The Ewelme Recorder' was of the Victorian equivalent of the Ewelme News. It replaced the 'Ewelme Gospeller' and when launched the writer hoped it would continue to be supported monetarily - the cost price being 2d per copy but available for 1d to those of lesser means. The weather features large in the monthly reports especially in 1878 and 1879.

In the January 1878 issue the writer reviews the 1877 record and recalls that it was remarkable for two things, the height of the springs in the early part of that year and the fury of the wind at the autumn equinox. Apparently, the Common spring rose and ran well into the summer of 1877 - which flooding, he believed, had not been known for upwards of 20 years. With regard to the latter "*...on the night of 14th October there was a gale, which in fury had seldom been equalled, the road between Ewelme and Benson was a curious scene of havoc the next day, with several large trees among the slain...*" Reference to the infrequency of the Common spring is interesting, as thankfully, now as then, it does not rise very often, although the last occurrence was not so many years ago.

Two weather related incidents are recorded – The first in April 1878 - "*It seems hard to conceive it possible for anyone to be accidentally drowned in our brook, it appears that the wife of W Franklin, thatcher, on that day, fell into the brook in her own garden; it was very windy at the time, which perhaps rendered her unable to regain her footing as easily as she might otherwise have done. At all events, had it not been for the timely assistance of a lad named Stephen Mundy, who fortunately happened to be passing, the poor woman would very probably have been drowned. Great praise is due to Mundy for his promptitude.*" Another incident at Dorchester did not end happily, on January 11th 1879 – "*...Joseph Jones, formerly of this parish, was drowned by falling through the ice. He was only 11 years of age. The body, though visible under the ice, was not recovered for some little time.*"

The winter of 1878/1879 was exceptionally severe...The Ewelme Recorder stated that the intense cold set in from early November, with heavy snow falling on December 22nd and the harsh conditions continued through until the following April. The editor wrote – '*Weather-wise folk are predicting a severe winter. If so, it is to be, let us do our best to help each other through it.*'

Open fires in small dwellings containing large families also proved a hazard. One casualty was three year old James William Keene, who died of injuries received from his clothes catching fire two days before. Two thatched cottages burned down. Further difficulties arose from the loss of wages for casual workers, when men could not work on the frozen ground; and the roadmen were prevented from repairing the lanes under snow. However, a communal spirit prevailed and ensured that a distribution, held at the school, was made in December 1878 of 36 blankets, 126 yards of flannel and 4 pairs of stockings. The cost was covered by a subscription amounting to £9. 2s. 6d., with an additional £6 from the Weldon Charity. Donations from 20 village worthies ranged from £1 given by the Rector Mr Harvey, Mr Rudge, Mr Hampden and Mr Taylor; to 2/6d from Mr Hathaway. There was also a Coal Club which allowed 16 cwt of coal for 11 shillings paid in.

In the period of 91 years from 1788 there were only 4 colder winters, the previous one being in 1829/30. The writer bemoans that - '*In our own immediate neighbourhood the cold has been perhaps more intense than in most part of England.*' Temperatures are recorded as being below the average for the previous 20 years by 6.4 degrees Fahrenheit for the 3 months of December, January and February. The cold and very wet weather (rain fell on 21 of the 28 days in February), lasted through to April, with a biting north east wind broken only by occasional days of spring like weather. In the May 1879 issue the writer was more cheerful – "*...the first swallow seen skimming over the mill pond on April 10th. The poor little visitor little bargained for such a Christmas-like Easter Eve as we had*

this year, with the thermometer down to 25.0 F the first night and the ground white with snow the next day. Cuckoo heard, April 25th.” His optimism did not last. The cold spring with late heavy frosts was followed by a cool, wet summer. The August report says “*Anxious thoughts for the harvest are still forced upon us. Wheat has only come to the blow at a time when in many seasons it would have been ripening off for the sickle. ‘The Prayer for Fair Weather has been universally used in our churches.’*” On August 2nd the whole of the south of England experienced a hurricane type storm more severe than any since 1703!

A few fine days in September allowed the harvesting of an inferior crop, one third below the usual average. The October issue sums up the miserable season as being - “*...long remembered as one of unusual trial to all whose living depends on bright and sunny skies; and the stripling who has entered the harvest for the first time this year, if he lives to be old, will probably speak of 1879 as a year to which his memory supplies no equal.*” The mention of a stripling is apt, as to ensure even the youngest children helped with the ingathering, the School broke up for the ‘Harvest Holiday’ on September 1st until October 6th.

Ewelme Village Archive