

Dreaming of a White Christmas...?

Snowmen and skiers, romantics and punters all dream of a White Christmas and generations of children have grown up to expect snow on Christmas morning. Decoration and display, carols and cards all bear witness to its perennial presence. The tradition of snow at Christmas is deep seated in English culture - but how often does the annual dream reflect the reality?

In the last 100 years there have been just 4 'true' White Christmases in the Southeast - occasions where the 25th has brought the soothing tranquillity of a fresh fall of snow. 1916's was unremarkable; 1927's brought skiers to the Chilterns and Dunstable Downs and 1938 had snow on every one of the 12 days of Christmas. A deafening clap of thunder just before midnight on Christmas Eve 1970 heralded London's last true White Christmas to date. Bookmakers for once might be considered generous in designating 1976 'white', if only on the criteria that at least one fleck of sleet fell on to London Weather Centre's roof between the witching hours bordering Christmas Day. 1956, 1964, 1968, 1996 and 1999 enjoyed similarly speckled Noels and interestingly, like 1976, all (except 1999) were leap years. The great freeze of 1962/63 doesn't figure in either of these lists. The coldest winter since 1740 froze the Thames at Kingston in January and produced mountains of snow - but not until Boxing Day. Similarly, 1981, where the second coldest December on record produced sea ice off the East Anglian coast but failed to give snow on Christmas Day. 2010 was the coldest ever for the UK; Christmas Day was the chilliest since 1830 and snow lay almost everywhere - but fresh falls occurred only over Scotland and some eastern counties.

With just 10 White Christmases in a century, the tradition of snow every Christmas is clearly a myth. Where then, does the myth find its origins? Well, between 1550-1850 Britain was in the grip of 'The Little Ice Age', a period of much cooler climate than the present and famous for the severity of its winters. During 'The Great Winter' of 1607/08 trees died of frost, and ships were stranded miles out into a frozen North Sea. 'Frost fairs', were regularly held on the Thames throughout the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, and White Christmases were commonplace, more so because up until 1752, the Julian Calendar put Christmas Day 4 days into January - always a cooler and snowier month. The Thames last froze in 1814, but even into Dickensian times, England's winters were appreciably harsher than they are today. The spectacular White Christmas of 1836 became immortalised in Dickens's book, 'Pickwick Papers' and the typical scenes which he describes undoubtedly proved the inspiration for today's association of snow with Christmas. The same White Christmas had tragic consequences for the people of Lewes, East Sussex, where an avalanche demolished 2 houses and caused 8 fatalities. To this day, the disaster is commemorated in the name of a local pub called 'the Snowdrop'.

Last December, the 25th was a disappointment to most - with the entire UK wet and windy. So, what then are the omens this year? Some believe that any prospect has melted away with a memorable hot summer and a mild autumn - for these rarely herald a hard, snowy Yule. Folklore provides little grounds for optimism either: St. Martin's Day, 11th November (traditionally the day which foretells the weather of the winter to come) was wet - and exceptionally mild. Yet all this has done little to quell annual media speculation about 'snowmagedon' (at least it provides some light relief from Brexit!) or to prevent odds from tumbling at the bookies.

The railways are probably right now having nightmares about a seasonal sprinkling; remember the 'wrong sort of snow' which brought the SE network to a halt back in 1991? Most people though will be willing it to snow on Christmas night, and even though fog is more likely, those in the know reckon that this year we just might be in for a little miracle. Finally, if you fancy a bit more colour with your Christmas scene, how about a pink Christmas? Rarely in Britain, but more commonly in the mountains of Southern Europe, atmospheric dust mixes with snow to give it various tinges of orange, pink and even blue.

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