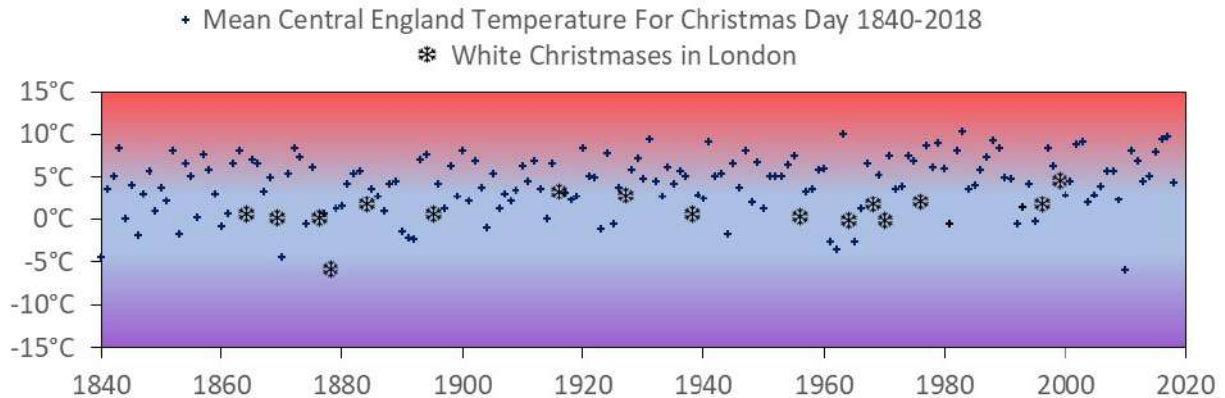


Dreaming of a White Christmas...?

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 10 occasions when snow has fallen on London between the witching hours bordering Christmas Day and on only four of these did snow settle, creating a 'true' White Christmas.



Surprisingly, the great freeze of 1962/63 (the coldest winter since 1740, and which froze the Thames at Kingston) only produced a White Boxing Day. No White Christmases arose from the two coldest Decembers on record (1981 and 2010) either, despite the former producing sea ice off the East Anglian coast.

With White Christmases so rare, 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 - with most of the UK cold and soggy. So, what then are the omens this year? Some believe that any prospect has melted away with a year of record temperatures and a mild autumn, which 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 mild and sunny. Yet all this has done little to quell annual media speculation of 'snowmagedon' 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.