

THE WINTER of 1940 in Ribblesdale, West Riding of Yorkshire.  
Diary of H.H. Bland, Headmaster at Langcliffe School  
(plus some recollections of my own- M. A. Atkin.)

This was the first winter of the War, a period called "the Phoney War", with black-out and rationing but little fighting or bombing. The first mention of snow is on Dec. 4<sup>th</sup> 1939. but it was evidently not sufficient to interrupt normal evening We normally put snow chains on the tyres when conditions were bad; meetings, school end-of-term or Christmas activities, including a car journey to Harrogate and back the same day.

Our car was a 1937 Standard 9, small but strongly built. It ran throughout the War and went to the scrap heap only in 1952. This car could be awarded "heroic status"! During the War it ferried my father and other members of the Home Guard to provide an over-night guard on places like the head of Crummackdale, or Blea Moor railway tunnel and the Ribblehead viaduct on the Settle Carlisle line. (The Home Guard even deployed it as a stand-in for a tank on one occasion!) It was also used to take Dad, or my mother, to give WEA lectures in Ingleton, Colne and Skipton and also when they gave lectures to Army units in remote parts of Bowland. These were mostly night journeys on narrow, winding, and sometimes unfenced roads, made trickier by the very small slits allowed under black-out regulations for car headlamps at the start of the War. My father also used it for numerous Billeting Officer errands often to outlying farms and houses to sort out evacuation problems. Occasionally this required more than one visit. (He recorded at least 21 visits in dealing with one group of 3 boys during this period.) Dad was also on a rota to take the car to the railway junction in Hellifield to meet local servicemen on leave who were arriving home after the last bus had gone.

Snow is again mentioned on Thurs Dec. 28<sup>th</sup> when he went up to Langcliffe (one mile, mainly uphill), and "Snow. Frost" on Jan. 1<sup>st</sup> when the family went to Leeds. In snow conditions most local cars, like ours, had metal chains fitted round the tyres to give better grip. Further snow is not mentioned for a while though it evidently remained frosty for on Mon. 15<sup>th</sup> Jan. he records a bad skid into the wall coming down Langcliffe Brow which dented the offside mudguard, though it was not sufficiently damaged to prevent continuing the journey. More snow fell the next day, becoming blizzard, followed by a hard frost, and a journey on Thurs. evening to give a lecture was recorded as "Snow. Hard going." It was not however sufficient to prevent a journey to Ingleton again on Saturday.

Next day, Sun. 21<sup>st</sup> Jan in bright sunshine on snow we went to see the frozen Scaiber Foss above Stainforth. The sharp frost held Mon. 23<sup>rd</sup> Jan, but on Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> - "Thick snow begins, then turns to rain. Thaw Begins." And on Thursday it was still thawing, but underfoot and on the roads conditions were bad. The WEA meeting at Ingleton went ahead however.

The thaw was short-lived. On Friday 26<sup>th</sup> it snowed again all day, and with drifting in strong east winds. My mother managed to get to and back from a lecture in Skipton, but needed help to get the car into the garage (The snow was drifting into the narrow back lane which had two awkward bends and then an angled entrance off it into the garage we rented.)

The snow and blizzard continued next day and on Sunday and Monday with snow being driven off the fells by the east wind; he records "Roads blocked. Record

drifts." The snow was relatively dry fine crystals very readily blown in the wind, and plumes of it were constantly lifted from the drifts to be blown over the ground until some solid object interrupted it. Drifts then formed on the lee-side of the obstacle. Roads therefore showed tarmac blown clear here and there while a few yards further on there would commonly be a drift of anything from three feet deep to as much as six feet or even more. Between walls the roads were commonly blocked across completely to the full height of the walls, and as fast as men digging, or snowploughs cleared the drifts they would redevelop. (Snow blowers are very effective in sucking up snow from between walls and blowing it away over the lee-side wall, but I don't think that there were any snow-blowers in our area at that time, and drifts between walls usually had to be opened up by hand digging.)

On the last day of January he recorded that Settle was totally cut off in all directions both by road and rail. ("Record drifts.") and travel hereafter was on foot. Fewer than half the children (infant to 14 years) managed to get to school on Monday and only a handful more next day. (Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup>. Jan.) Some of them had to travel over a mile to school from home. No register was taken either day nor on Wednesday and time was spent in trying to clear snow from entrances, only to find them blocked up again by the still strong east winds. It was difficult to tell whether more snow was falling as the strong easterly winds constantly blew plumes of snow into the air from the great drifts.

On Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> Thursday the school register was taken, but the bitter east wind was still blowing and new drifts had built again. Extra blankets were issued where needed to households that had taken evacuees and I recall at this time that my father was wearing a balaclava under his trilby hat to keep his ears from freezing when he went out, as did many other men in the district. The "Knitting-for-the-Forces" garments (scarves, mitts, gloves, balaclavas, and stockings for seamen) that many households were at work on, were hastily finished off and temporarily put to use in the local area! The terrace house in which we lived faced east, and despite fastening the front door with locks and bolts the snow got in and formed two small drifts **inside** the hall where the hinge line and door opening allowed the wind to whistle through. Coal fires (losing much of their heat up the chimney) could do little to counter the effects of wind-chill and meant that we wore as many warm garments as possible and huddled around the hearth in the evening, toasting our knees and faces, but still chilly at our backs! Children rejoiced in the sledging, snowball fights and snow houses and the activity kept them warm, though mothers were less enthusiastic about the wet socks that came home in wellingtons filled up with snow!!

Farmers too found nothing to rejoice about. Many sheep were buried in drifts for days at a time, and men and dogs were worked to exhaustion in the efforts to find them and dig them out before they starved to death or suffocated. One farm at Ribbleshead had barns on the opposite side of the road from the house, and in the gap between them a great drift built up to the height of the eaves. They are said to have made a tunnel under the drift to link the house with the farm buildings so that they could tend the cattle in the shippon. Some farms were cut off completely for weeks, and fodder in some places was in short supply since outlying barns containing hay could not be reached. In some cases hay was dropped from the air.

During this period of huge drifts my brother and I dragged a sledge over the fields above the villages from Langcliffe to Settle, having no problem crossing field-walls because they were completely drifted over, and the sledge could be hauled across them. We also made a series of snow houses by tunnelling into the side of a

drift in the field opposite our house. They were deep and high enough for several children to get into them.

On Saturday night 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb there was an electricity black-out. Throughout the week however some evening meetings went ahead - a Field Day Committee on Tues, a school Panto performance on Friday, and a WEA meeting on Thursday, but more distant ones (Ingleton, Skipton.) were abandoned.

After nine days of drifting snow in the bitter easterly winds a thaw started on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> Feb. ~~there was a thaw~~ which continued next day making lying snow sloppy and generating a fog which lasted through Tuesday.

On Wednesday of the following week 14<sup>th</sup> Feb, instead of games (still snow lying) he took the scholars up Cow Close to the Fourth Gate on the Langcliffe to Malham Tarn road where great drifts still remained. The ~~Malham Tarn road above Langcliffe~~ passes here through a fairly narrow gorge between 15 to 20 feet cliffs and this was filled with snow almost to the height of the cliffs. The road men had struggled to open this road many times during the blizzard only to have <sup>it</sup> blown back in again and again. The cuttings for the road through the worst drifts were over 15 feet deep. It was still possible to slide on snow down the face of the 20 foot cliff on the great drift which reached from top to bottom. There was another fall of snow that evening, and it continued to freeze next day.

Bitter cold was still reported on Feb. 27<sup>th</sup> but slowly the snow disappeared. Although a new snowfall in a bitterly cold wind is recorded as late as Friday 29<sup>th</sup> March it was evidently not in quantities that would make travel difficult.

M. A. Atkin 1997.

THE (EVEN WORSE) WINTER of 1947 in Ribblesdale, West Riding of Yorkshire.  
from the diary of H.H. Bland, Headmaster at Langcliffe School  
(plus some recollections of my own- M. A. Atkin.)

This year provided even worse conditions than had been experienced in 1940. This was partly because the period of blizzards, drifted snow, bitter east winds and hard frost lasted two weeks longer; six weeks in all. It was also made worse by the shortages which continued beyond the end of the War. Fuel was in short supply and Langcliffe school was without coke for the boiler for some days, and my parents ran out of coal at home too. For many people warm clothes had worn thin during the course of the war and with rationing it was difficult to make replacements. And everyone was a bit jaded and worn down by the previous seven years of hard conditions.

Like 1940 the worst weather started relatively late, the first biting cold setting in on Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>. with blizzards blowing in a strong east wind next morning, and continuing every day until on Wednesday. Feb 5<sup>th</sup> Settle was cut off. Blizzard conditions continued with little intermission and always very cold until 12<sup>th</sup> Feb. On that day too, Settle Girls' High School was closed for want of fuel, and Langcliffe School also, having used the last bit of its coke for the boiler which heated the building, was officially declared closed and it remained so until the following Monday (Feb 17<sup>th</sup>) when the coke was delivered. The temperature in school however on that day was only 42 degrees Fahrenheit (6 degrees C.) in the Seniors' room.

Some stretches of road had been opened and trains were running on the Settle Junction to Morecambe line, and my father managed to get to an evening class at Bentham by catching the train at Giggleswick Station (a long walk away). He couldn't get home that night, and stayed with a member of the class, but caught the 7.20 train at Bentham next morning to get (later in the morning) back to school. He reports of the walk back home and on to school as "Lovely snow (because of sunshine) but a bitter wind".

Hard frosts kept the snow drifts intact for the next two weeks, often with sunshine effecting a slight thaw in the day, but freezing again at night, until there was another blizzard started on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> and continued next day. Roads which had been opened were blocked again, but on Thursday a thaw started, making the snow wet and heavy and causing horrible conditions on the roads for walking or driving.

This thaw didn't last. The next day, Friday 29<sup>th</sup> Feb saw a return to bitter frosts with sunny days effecting some thawing where the sun fell on the snow, but in the shade there was little reduction in the big piles of drifts. It was announced by the Meteorological Office on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> March that it was the coldest winter for 107 years! And still the cold continued... On Wednesday. 5<sup>th</sup> Mar there was yet another blizzard with drifting and another on Friday, and once again drifts began to form. This day was the worst of the winter for attendance when only 5 children managed to get to school.

Yet again thaw started but with intermittent fresh falls of snow. Then on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> March came the final fling of winter with another blizzard, and on the Thursday what proved to be the start of another thaw. The roads however were piled with wet heavy snow from the previous day's fall and the school dinner van couldn't get through. Faced with 40 hungry people, the staff and older pupils took sledges to the local shop and bought potatoes, soup and bully (corned) beef and tea to provide a drink and carried them back to school to be cooked on the great gas stove in the lobby. Even on the following day, there was no possibility of wheeled traffic up the Langcliffe road from Settle, but for the second time during the long period of snow the boys took sledges down to the road junction by Brassington's timber mill and met the School dinner van, transferred the containers and brought back an excellent dinner for the whole school (only 5 children and one member of staff were absent) The school later received a letter of congratulation from the local Education Officer E.J. W. Douglas for their enterprise and effort.

The final thaw started on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> Mar - the day that the clocks were put forward one hour - Summer Time! On the Monday for the first time in weeks Dad cycled to school

over roads clear for traffic, but lined on either side with melting snow, and with streams of water pouring from them as they melted. By Wednesday great floods were reported from all over the country (no television at that time, just graphic descriptions on the radio.)

I (M.A.A.) had spent the previous week on field work based at Dalton in Cumberland, and towards the end of the week the party had been taken by coach up the road from Melmerby to Alston, one of the earliest vehicles to get over the Hartside Pass to reach the little town from the west. Only short stretches of the road showed tarmac, but the drifts were small enough to pass through and everywhere there was water running. The landscape was a patchwork of white where deep drifts had not yet gone, and black where the earth and miserable-looking grass had emerged from its long snowcover, but had not yet started into green growth. It would be a long time before the hill sheep would get much pasturage, but spring was in the air, hedgerow birds were flitting about, larks were singing and peewits calling, and it was officially "Summer Time"!