

Whatever the Weather

Welly with a snaa-lug

You just cut the feet off and pulled them on over your wellies, and then you put your wellies in, tucked your trousers in your wellies and pulled them up and right up over your knees. That stopped the snow going inside your wellies.

Jean Foreman, born in 1943 at Uswayburn Farm, ten miles north of Alwinton.

Wet feet

'My parents always used to make us wear wellies as soon as they saw snow. You've got to put your wellies on! So me and Louisa would do that and skip out the house with our wellies on and go about 20 yards down, kick the wellies off into the bushes and put our little flimsy trainers on and go to school and have soaking feet all day!

Richard Mason, who went to school in Rothbury in the 1980s

Well wrapped up

'To be properly dressed was essential to feed the out-bye ewes... The dreaded combinations; liberty bodice; hand-knitted jumper; stockings; helmet; gloves; welly socks; green school knickers; ancient jodhpurs; thick coat; scarf wrapped over the head, crossed over the chest, under the arms and tied at the back with a huge kilt pin; and finally, wellies with de-footed old socks over the upper part, onto and over knees.'

Joyce MacDougal, who grew up on a farm at Windyhaugh

Schools in the snow

Hepple School Logbook 19th December 1916

Registers not marked, present two boys and two girls, none sent home. Snowstorm but really the roads, being in a highly dangerous state yesterday with slippery ice, were rendered doubly treacherous by the covering of snow.

Alnham School Logbook 17th December 1917

Very heavy snowstorm. Snow from three to six feet on the roads. No children present. Attendance Officer abandoned.

Stocking up for winter

Each household started with 30 stone of flour, 1 hundredweight of sugar, 2 rolls of Irish bacon (33lbs each), 14lbs each of tobacco, rice and pot-barley. Fresh yeast was delivered every two weeks and passed from house to house.

Each farm had two cows and their followers, needing 5 hundredweight of Bibby's or Catton cake to keep them up during the winter. The cows provided milk, cream, butter, buttermilk and cheese. The old hens were eaten during the winter months. Two pigs were kept until they reached 30 stone, then killed and cured.

Lizzie Robinson, local postwoman from the 1930s to the 1960s

Working out the weights

30 stone = 190kg = 1 pig

1 hundredweight = 50kg

33lbs = 15kg

14lbs = 6kg

Starved for news

Starting in October, I filled my cupboards, I filled my freezer and we filled the coal for the winter months. But there was one or two occasions when we got snowed in and they had to bring hay up from New Bewick to feed the sheep. In the winter, if we were snowed in, the farm manager used to phone up before he came, and ask if we wanted anything. I used to say mainly fresh fruit, things for the kids – and a newspaper!

Hazel Wilson, who met her husband Alan, a shepherd, at a dance in Whittingham

Forward planning

Each winter, in about September October, a wagon would go up to Kidlandlee with flour and sugar and whatever else the family that lived up there would need to see them through the winter. There wasn't a shop to go to and nobody could get to them half the time. They got their supplies in the autumn and that lasted them through.

Keith Lee, born in 1942, whose family owned remote Kidlandlee Farm when he was a child

Saddle hand warmers

On a stormy day on a horse, even in a whiteout, you could get off and shelter behind it until the storm was passed. Winter times your hands got cold holding the reins, you know. You could slide your hands below the saddle and get your hands warm on the horse. It put new life into ye!

Jon Short, who shepherded on his horse Trampas in Upper Coquetdale in the 1970s

When the burn sings

An old shepherd told us, "When you hear the burn 'sing', there will be no more hard weather". In the winter of 1963, a very severe and long winter, I noticed a different sound. The water was chuckling and chattering as it flowed... and we knew, although the snow lay thick in the gullies and on the tops, that the dreadful storm, when we were cut off for twelve weeks, lay behind us. We were free!

Hannah Hutton, who lived at Rowhope just below Windy Gyle for seventeen years

Marshmallows and Big Macs

I remember watching a group of local men hand-casting [shovelling] snow just around the bend from Alwinton, cutting great square marshmallows, like igloo blocks, which retained the shape when thrown up at the side of the road. This was the beginning of opening the closed valley, preparing a way in for the enormous V-shaped snowplough, known locally as the Big Mac.

Helen Richardson remembers Alwinton in the 1960s

Floes and floods

I remember hearing and seeing great angular ice floes, inches thick, cracking and squeaking in the river above Alwinton, piling up at thaw-time after the hard winter.

And the Coquet rising as the melting snow came down the valley, lapping the garden wall at Low Alwinton. And the vicar Renwick wading in, to carry out elderly Mrs Scott in case it rose higher.

Helen Richardson remembers Alwinton in the 1960s

The winter of '63

In the harsh winter of 1963 there were storms and heavy snow for many weeks, but we had great fun. I remember going with my father on my sledge – a traditional wooden toboggan – and walking all the way up past Craggside to Debden Cottage to see the great drifts of snow, and to lean against the tops of the telegraph poles poking out. And then of course sledging all the way back down the bank!

Andrew Miller, who grew up in Rothbury in the 1960s

Dedicated doctors

I can remember our local doctor, it was a Doctor Richardson. He was a great man on skis, and he would ski all the way from Harbottle up the valley to see somebody and ski home again. You wouldn't see that now. He was a dedicated man. And the man before him, there was a Dr Bedford, he was exactly the same, he would walk to patients in fair weather or foul and think nothing of it.

Robert Bertram, born at Blindburn on 23rd January 1947, the first day of a big snow storm that lasted until April

The midwife next door

It was a long way to get to a doctor, and it was a nightmare if the roads was blocked. That's why everybody that I can remember was born at home, because the next door neighbour, she would probably be a midwife. Maybe not a trained one, but she knew all that there was to know about these sort of things. So she came around and helped out with lots of things and that's the way it was.

Robert Bertram, a shepherd who was born at Blindburn in 1947

Extreme conditions

My father's medical practice was the biggest in England at the time, not because of the number of patients but the area he covered. He had patients just over the border on the way to Hawick and down to beyond Morpeth. He did [his rounds] mostly by walking. He and the local nurse had to walk in these extreme conditions, going through fords and things to get to places. They had sledges in those days for winter, and he had snow shoes.'

John Smail, whose father was the doctor at Harbottle in the 1940s

Emergency operation

One of my aunts became ill one night. She had this terrific pain and it was appendicitis. So the doctor came and he had to take her appendix out, because there wasn't time to get her to a hospital. So she was operated on the kitchen table by a local doctor, probably with someone holding up a hurricane lamp so that he could see what he was doing. Yes, it's a different world.

Margaret Beech, whose family lived at Starmyres in Elsdon

Battling over the border

During this bad snow storm, my father got a call from just over the border from a lady who thought she had appendicitis. It sounded urgent, but the roads were all blocked, so he called the local police and they said they'd help. They had to dig the snow to get the police vehicle to where this person lived. After battling through, the police got my father to the house and he went to the door. On it was a note that said, 'Gone to the pictures in Hawick'... The air turned blue!

John Smail, whose father and grandfather were doctors based in Rothbury

Shepherds Letters

William Potts letters

7 Jan 1945. 'The weather is very cold and wintry with keen frost at nights. There is a good pickle snow in the sheltered places but only a thin covering on a lot of the ground if only we could get a thaw. The Ewes will be to go to Whitefield a week tomorrow that will be Jan 15. The hay is going very fast this hard weather.'

28 Jan 1945: 'There is a big lot of snow up here and by the look of the weather everything will be to carry even coals from Kidland hillfoot as I cannot get the horse down for snow. The Postman does not come any further as Clennell.'

12 May 1945: 'The lambing was very good the first week, but we had a bad storm the 2nd week. We had a lot of Ewes & lambs buried in the snow. 4 Ewes died and a good few lambs. The weather is good again.'

4 April 1946: 'In reply to your welcome letter I think there will be plenty Inoculation Serum. The weather has taken a sharper turn. There is a good bit grass for sheep but not much for the horse and cows. I will try and get a cart load of Oat Straw before the lambing starts it would help to spin out the hay in case the weather turns bleak and barren but I hope it keeps fine.'