

# A History of Weather In Epsom and Ewell

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## Snow, Storms, Floods, Freezes & Droughts

General weather patterns for London & the south of England from 1600 to 2009

### 17<sup>th</sup> Century



*"The Frozen Thames", 1677.  
Museum of London Collection. Artist not known.  
Image Source Wikipedia*

- 1616: Hot summer with droughts
- 1620-21: Frost Fair held on the Thames
- 1626: Dry & very hot summer
- 1635: Severe winter, Thames frozen over
- 1636: Severe drought, rainless for months
- 1644: Late January snow falling for 8 days
- 1648-9: Thames frozen over
- 1657-58: Long lying snow lasting from December until March
- 1658: A "wild & stormy night" when roofs & chimneys were blown down. Noted as the night Oliver Cromwell died.
- 1662-67: 3 of 5 winters in this period were described as cold with severe frosts. Skating on the Thames introduced for the pleasure of King Charles II.
- 1664-65: Reputedly the coldest day ever in England with frosts lasting 2 months.

- 1665: In November a deep depression was recorded, possibly the lowest recorded in London, of 931 millibars! Record still stands today
- 1666-67: Thames frozen over
- 1674: March snowfall lasting 13 days, described as “The thirteen drifty days”. Most of the sheep perished
- 1676: June exceptionally hot [notice correlation with 1976]
- 1677: Thames frozen over. Becoming a regular occurrence
- 1683-84: This one winter easily surpassed both 1947 & 1963 in severity. Mid December saw the “Great Frost”. The Thames froze all the way up to London Bridge & remained frozen at a depth of 11” until mid February.
- 1690-99: The “Little Ice Age”. 6 out of 10 of the winters in this period were described as severe, meaning their temperatures for December – March was below 3c. 1695 is believed to have been one of the coldest years ever recorded. The cold probably brought famine as the livestock perished and crops failed.

### 18<sup>th</sup> Century



*The Great Storm of 1703 by J.S.Muller*

*The Royal Navy alone lost 12 ships with the loss of about 1300 lives in the 1703 storm that also caused the loss of the first Eddystone Lighthouse.*

- 1703: The “Great Storm” occurred in November, the most damaging storm in history. London and the southern half of the country felt the full force of the storm with wind speeds estimated at 120mph/104knots. Many people were drowned or killed by flying debris. After the storm the price of roof tiles increased by about 300%

Twelve warships with 1300 men onboard were lost within the sight of land and all shipping on the Thames was destroyed.

- 1708: Coldest spring, summer & autumn for 47 years.  
1708-9: Severe winter, temperatures plummeted to -18c.  
1715-16: Severe winter, flood tide lifted the Thames by around 15 ft.  
1725-6: Severe winter.  
1728-9: A violent thunderstorm in May with massive hailstones that caused severe damage and drowned cattle that were trying to seek shelter. Huge chunks of ice punched holes in the ground several inches deep. This was followed later in the year by a severe winter.  
1739-40: Severe winter, one of the worst since records began, with the temperature falling to -24c. The Thames remained frozen over for about 8 weeks.  
1740: Coldest October on record.  
1748: Severe frost in November around London & the south  
1749: Severe frost in November around London & the south  
1775-76: Severe winter.  
1779-80: Severe winter  
1783-86: Two successive severe winters attributed to Icelandic volcanic eruption although details regarding this are slim.  
1794-95: Exceptionally severe winter

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century



*Flooded High Street, Kingston 1894  
Image courtesy of Simon Norman © 2011*

- 1813-14: A severe and snowy winter, possibly the snowiest in 300 years. Fog was also a hazard lasting from late December until early January. Visibility was down to 20 yards & traveling became very difficult.
- 1816: Known as the year without summer due to a volcanic eruption in Tambora [East Indies]
- 1818: A very hot and long summer. Alarming shortage of water.
- 1834-38: A series of severe winters, most notable:
- 1836: Christmas Day snow depths reached 5-15 feet & in some places up to 20 feet.
- 1849: 19<sup>th</sup> April, a great snowstorm hit southern England, coaches became buried & were abandoned.
- 1851-53: Severe winters and heavy snowfalls.
- 1867: It was reported that a temperature as low as -12F [24c] was measured at **EPSOM** early on 4<sup>th</sup> January. Three days later the mercury reached 54F [12c]
- 1875-76: Amazingly snowy winter for the UK especially in the south east. Snowfall recorded from November through to May.
- 1881: A great blizzard in January. Vehicles became completely buried.
- 1882: On April 29<sup>th</sup> "a great mischief" occurred when salt was blown in from the sea by a severe gale causing all flowers and leaves to be stripped off and turned black and then torn into shreds by the extreme wind.
- 1888: A dismal, wet and cool summer, snow reported to have fallen in July.
- 1890: Coldest December for 150 years.
- 1894: Disastrous flooding in November followed by a severe winter

## 20<sup>TH</sup> Century



*Members of the University and Public Schools Brigade Royal Fusiliers on Parade on Epsom Downs waiting to be inspected by Lord Kitchener 22 January 1915*

- 1903: An incredibly wet June as a slow moving depression crossed Southern England bringing very heavy rain. Non stop rain fell for 60 hours on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month. Temperatures plunged from 83F [28C] on 1<sup>st</sup> June to 40F [5C] on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- 1906: A temperature of 95F [35C] was recorded in **EPSOM** on 2<sup>nd</sup> September
- 1908: Unseasonal heavy snowfall of over 6 inches in April in **EPSOM**.
- 1909: Ten inches of snow fell at **EPSOM** on 3<sup>rd</sup> March



*The snow covered street outside The Queens Head, Epsom c1909*

- 1911: A thunderstorm of amazing severity left at least five people dead and others burnt and injured just as the **EPSOM** Derby celebrations were coming to an end.
- On the 31<sup>st</sup> May, the attendance at the Coronation race meeting surpassed all previous records. Despite being held a week earlier than usual because of the crowning of King George V in early June, hundreds of thousands made their way to the racecourse on a warm afternoon.
- After the main race had been run, the oppressive heat of the bustling afternoon was suddenly interrupted by a few hailstones falling from an ominous looking sky onto the roads and paths below, bouncing at angles near people's feet. Then a vivid flash of lightning followed by a terrific clash of thunder, appeared to "let loose all the elements and rain and hail poured down in merciless torrents".

Parades of people leaving the races on foot and in open carriages were drenched to the skin and women dressed in summer finery "*were cruelly bedraggled*". Roads in **EPSOM** turned into muddy rivers and the soaked human army came to a near standstill.

A party of 20 took shelter against the wall of the reservoir on Banstead Downs and eight of them were struck by lightning. Two men were killed on the spot and were removed to Banstead mortuary while the injured were taken to Sutton hospital by ambulance and motor car.

Also hit was a Sutton postman who sustained severe injuries to his left side. He was cycling from the Downs and on reaching the reservoir remarked to a colleague "*I think I'll get off & shelter under this wall*". Hardly had he dismounted when he was struck & knocked unconscious.

Back at the racecourse, among the unfortunate victims of the afternoon's violent storm was a young greengrocer called Wilfrid Noah Wetherall who was just 17. His terrible fate at Buckle's Gap went unnoticed for sometime as the thunder crashed above and the lightning flashed all around. His employer's horse became frightened and would not stop jerking its head. Several people tried to restrain the terrified animal & called for young Wilfrid to help. It was then that he was seen sitting in the back of the cart with his hand raised as if to ward off a blow. It was assumed he had been hit by the same flash which had disturbed the horse.

A remarkable fact was that the crown of the straw hat he was wearing had been cut out by the lightning and the brim had slipped over his face. News of his death came as a great shock to those all around, some of whom had been "rendered quite deaf for a considerable time"

At the Epsom mortuary, the lad was found to have a fern-leaf design on his body and it was presumed that that he had been struck by the same lightning which led to the horse's death. At the inquest, a survivor said he had seen a ball of fire and that he had tasted sulphuric acid in his mouth.

In a tent at Tattenham Corner, tragedy was narrowly avoided when 8 men working as job-masters were struck, one sustaining serious injury and suffering extensive shock to the system.

As if the grim toll wasn't enough, another man James Harris, from Sutton, was leaning on some rails near the racecourse when they were struck. He was left unconscious and taken to Epsom Cottage Hospital.

The mayhem was not restricted to the Downs, many people were killed or seriously injured and buildings badly damaged in all areas of Surrey. Enormous amounts of rain fell during that Wednesday afternoon but the greatest downpour was logged at Banstead

where 3.59ins [92mm] poured down. At the North Looe smallholdings in **EWELL** 50 chickens were drowned.

At the inquest into the Derby deaths the coroner informed the jury that he had heard many people say the storm was a judgment on those who visited the races and he stigmatized the remark as a "very foolish one" The inquest also studied the bizarre fact that when the lightning killed young Wetherall and the horse, those sitting between them in the van were incredibly not affected.

1914: Blood –Red Tempest of June 14<sup>th</sup> The giant storm that broke over South London, mainly Wandsworth, Balham and Clapham, was a phenomenon quite outside the previous experience of any who lived through it. At high noon, day became night – illuminated by sheets of blood-red lightning and accompanied by racketing thunder. The rain splashed onto parched pavements before descending in a watery mass, soon followed by a barrage of hail-stones, some as big as walnuts. Not within living memory had a thunderstorm caused such loss of life, injury or havoc. In 45 minutes more than 2" of rain fell. While the storm raged south of the river Thames families in the northern suburbs continued to bask in the sunshine unaware of what was happening to the south. Records kept by a Dorking meteorologist at the time show that Sunday June 14<sup>th</sup> 1914 was a day with a maximum of 75F [24C] and humidity of 79 %. No rain fell at Dorking or **EPSOM**, such was the local nature of the storm.

1915: Generally a cool and wet year but marked by two great national disasters. The worst rail crash in British history when 200 people died in a multiple collision at Quintinshill Scotland and more than 1,000 people perished when the liner Lusitania was torpedoed by a German u-boat.

The first three weeks of the year were unsettled with heavy rain and strong winds. However towards the end of January the weather became much colder and there was a very heavy snow fall measuring over 30cm.

On Friday 22 January 1915 an inspection by Lord Kitchener was held in blizzard conditions on Epsom Downs and, in total, over 20,000 troops were drawn up for inspection. The locally based University and Public Schools Brigade (UPS) having been joined by soldiers who were encamped all over the district. Reveille for the UPS was at 0400hrs to allow for the march to the Downs. Lord Kitchener, who arrived at 1030hrs, stayed only five minutes before going to inspect even more men at Aldershot. The Epsom Herald gave an interesting little picture of the scene :

*"Several years have come and gone since the district had such a visitation of snow . . . and the ground was well covered ... by the time any one anxious to witness the*

*inspection had begun to make the necessary ascent. It was surprising how many people did commence the ascent, considering the most abnormal weather conditions. To suddenly plunge into a snowstorm of the kind prevailing required some little courage on the part of ladies, but quite a large number of them marched through the snow, already several inches deep, on to the Downs, and waited there for some time to see Lord Kitchener. There were the troops also to see, but there was no march past, and in the bad snow-storm light, the vision could envelop only those soldiers standing close to one. Had the day been a very clear one, the eye would have absorbed far more of the military picture.*

*The Downs have not, hitherto, been the background for such a picture, one so big, and one so breathing the spirit of seriousness. Seriousness and silence often go hand in hand. They did on this occasion, and the spectators, who would not have braved such a snow-storm for any ordinary thing, felt that they were present at proceedings which will be remembered as forming a notable chapter in the history of the Downs. . . . Among those who saw the War Secretary were some of the Belgian wounded soldiers. Thus Great Britain, France, and Belgium had sons on the Downs on Friday, sons united by a spirit of unconquerable confidence. When, if ever, will the Downs again see anything so remarkable as it saw on Friday last?"*



*Lord Kitchener, accompanied by the French War Minister, M. Millerand, inspecting over 20,000 troops in blizzard conditions on Epsom Downs*

The spring remained dull, cool and unsettled. June started very dry with temperatures above normal but by the end of the month it again became unsettled with rain. The Summer remained dull, wet and cool. By late November the temperature had fallen to 17F [-

8C] but rose again in the last few weeks of the year when it became milder but very wet.

1916: A chilling end to February with deep snow which the troops helped to clear. At Walton on the Hill 21ins of snow fell between 23<sup>rd</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> February. Frost in February penetrated the soil to a depth of 9ins and the early part of April was very cold. In early spring the bushes in some areas were burnt by the icy winds.

1918: The Terrible Hailstorm of July 16<sup>th</sup>.

The incidence of damaging hail in the UK is greatest in the South East, with South London and Surrey suffering the most. A good example was the Great East Surrey Hailstorm which cut a characteristic swathe of destruction from near Dorking, east of Kingswood through to Addington in the early hours of July 16<sup>th</sup>

An eye witness account described how at Buckland west of Reigate, terrific thunder & lightning preceded the climax. A loud roaring noise was heard and dense hail obscured the light. Greenhouses were riddled and windows smashed, trees stripped and vegetables were pulverized. The destruction was confined to a strip 800 yards wide, inside which everything growing had been laid waste, whereas adjoining land remained unscathed. Hailstones of 2 and a half inchs in length, some with spikes of nearly an inch long or others the size of pigeon eggs were reported.

1923: A strong contender for the title "storm of the century" must be the one that occurred on the night of 9<sup>th</sup> July 1923. The brilliance & frequency of the lightning, the loudness of the thunder & the fact that it went on all night with torrential rain made it a formidable storm. For those with a fear of thunder it was a nightmare come true. The storm was really a series of thunderstorm cells which cut a swathe across Sussex and Surrey. An observer described the lightning as being a beautiful violet colour. The whole southern horizon was ablaze but at first there was only the occasional low rumble of thunder and not a breath of wind to ease the sweltering conditions. The storm struck during the late evening and raged for 8 hours. On occasion there would be a brief lull before the pyrotechnics began again with renewed vigour. At Walton on the Hill an eye witness said a ball of fire dropped in front of a house and within minutes it was completely in flames.



*Snow Drifts in Reigate Road, Winter of 1927/8*

1927: Christmas Day 1927 dawned dull and gloomy with relentless heavy rain. Roads were awash after days of unceasing rain and it seemed inevitable that serious flooding would follow. What happened next took people by surprise, as the light faded the temperature dropped and the rain turned to sleet and then to snow. By midnight savage winds whipped over the North Downs driving the snow into deep drifts. On Boxing Day morning, Surrey awoke to an incredible winter scene. Icy blasts of wind whistled down as horizontal snow brought white –out conditions across the county, piling snow into drifts of up to 20 feet on the road over the Surrey hills. The following day, December 27<sup>th</sup>, unveiled a county gripped by the worst Arctic conditions known to it's residents. Villages were marooned for over a week.

Those people that did venture out were able to walk over the tops of signposts, such was the depth of the snow. On Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> December a north easterly gale blew the snow into even grater drifts.

By Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> December, fears were growing for the villages cut off by the mountainous heaps of snow and the Salvation Army chartered five planes to drop food supplies to isolated communities. The B.B.C. asked people to lay out black clothes in the snow to help the pilots pinpoint people in need across the area.

1928: On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1928 a slight rise in the temperature turned the snow to slush in the low-lying parts of Surrey. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> January

the temperature rose a little more. This caused disastrous flooding by the River Thames and its tributaries causing tremendous lakes to form, in some places up to a mile across.



*The Ruxley Splash after a fall of snow. Date N/K*

- 1930: A severe gale felled many trees and brought down telephone lines with gusts of wind of 77mph on January 12<sup>th</sup>.
- 1933: The driest year of all in East Surrey between 1926 and 1976.
- 1937: In the year that Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister and George VI was crowned. A mild wet winter and generally rather dull throughout the year.  
A deep Atlantic depression crossing over the British Isles in January and into February caused very wet, windy and mild conditions but at the end of February sleet and snow began to fall and the temperature throughout March struggled to climb above freezing on several days.  
May made a promising start to Summer with temperatures rising to 80F [27C] but this failed to last for long. In July severe thunderstorms affected most of the UK with some places recording up to 100mm of rain for the month. Torrential rain continued through August and on 13<sup>th</sup> in Surrey over 90mm of rain fell in 30 minutes, this caused extensive flooding over the **EPSOM and EWELL** area. The rest of the year continued to be mainly dull, wet and cold until the last week of December when the temperature suddenly rose above 51F [11C].



*Flooding by Nonsuch Park Gates c1937*



*Flooded Nonsuch Park c1937*



*The Hogsmill in Flood 21 July 1937  
Worcester Park Road, Kingston Road, Mortimer Crescent*



*Ducks enjoying a swim on a flooded West Street, Ewell c 1937*

1939: A short cold snap at the end of December sent temperatures plummeting to 12F [-11C] on 29<sup>th</sup>.

- 1940: No weather forecasts were issued during the war years for the fear that the information may have been used to disadvantage by the enemy, so it came as a shock to the people of Surrey when some of the harshest weather this century arrived in January. The Surrey Comet summed up the restrictions as *“one of the greatest misfortunes for which Hitler has so far been responsible”* After the cold foggy Christmas of 1939, the bitter weather soon moved in and with no street lights there were many road accidents in the darkness. When the fog lifted by December 27<sup>th</sup>, heavy snow fell and the Thames froze. A brief thaw in early January gave way to vicious easterly winds sending the temperature down to 18F [-8C]
- 1947: The Big Freeze. Probably one of the most remembered winters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Times were still hard following the end of the war with food and fuel shortages. So when the winds swung to the east in mid January, bringing a prolonged period of snow and ice which lasted until mid March, it seemed that nature had dealt a cruel blow. Heavy snow fell on the night of January 23<sup>rd</sup>. Next day on a snow covered airfield at nearby Croydon Airport, a terrible disaster occurred when 12 people lost their lives within a few minutes of saying goodbye to their friends and relatives. The Dakota airliner in which they were travelling to South Africa, faltered as it took off and crashed onto a stationary plane. In the early days of the big freeze, the icy weather was all that people could talk about. Even the animals were cold and wood fires were lit in the cages at Chessington Zoo. Power cuts hit hard and by the end of February an extra 1,500 people in the county were unemployed due to the blackouts. Long queues developed outside gasworks and power stations by people in search of solid fuel to heat their homes. Council municipal offices had neither heat or light and staff worked in overcoats by candle light. On the morning of February 24<sup>th</sup> the lowest temperature of the century was recorded when it plunged to 1F [-17C]. People hoped that March would bring relief from the ordeal, but the reverse happened. There were more snowstorms and frost. 27 successive nights of frost from February 11<sup>th</sup> to March 9<sup>th</sup> were recorded and it was not until March 16<sup>th</sup> that the snow disappeared when the temperature soared to 54F [12C]. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, mild air pushed into the county with gale force winds and heavy rain quickly melting the remaining snow bringing havoc to towns and villages near water and “flood conditions unequalled for over 50 years” as reported by the Surrey Comet. After the momentous weather of January, February & March, the following summer was gloriously hot and August was among the top three hottest Augusts of the century.

- 1950: The warm sunshine and blooming flowers of April 22nd 1950 seemed to convince people that spring had well and truly arrived. Not so. As a polar depression crossed Surrey tugging down Arctic air, heavy snow fell in the early hours of April 26th and lay on the ground to a depth of 10". Hundreds of trees broke under the weight of ice and around 600 telegraph poles were either felled or snapped in two and drivers inching their way along hazardous roads became entangled in the icy wires. The snow caused such serious damage that questions were asked in the House of Commons. Not a bird sang and not a flower was in sight.
- 1952: A violent thunderstorm struck north Surrey at the end of August 1952. Hailstones the size of mothballs fell causing damage and injury to many people.
- 1958: Giant hailstones accompanied by vivid blinding flashes and cracking thunder on the evening of September 5<sup>th</sup> made some people fear it was the end of the world and for many it would never be forgotten. Hailstones the size of tennis balls and weighing around 6¾ozs were recorded. A tornado cut a swathe of destruction across Sussex and Surrey with a record 5.14 inches of rain falling in just 2 hours.
- 1962: On New Year's Day the area was buried under 7" of snow with **EWELL** suffering power cuts and the Metropolitan water board reporting 550 burst water mains.
- 1962-3: The Big Freeze. An Alpine winter. On Christmas Day a band of rain and sleet moved southwards and as it reached the South-East it turned to snow. By day break on 27<sup>th</sup> December the snow lay to a depth of 10" A severe gale and accompanying masses of crystalline snow soon caused immense drifts and all main roads in the area became blocked. Country lanes were completely buried and steam trains had to be used to assist the electric motor units as the rails became chocked with snow. Some roads remained closed until March. In January alone Surrey County Council used 2,000 tons of salt and 6,000cubic yards of grit. The weather pattern of the winter gradually eased and the thaw was gentle so flooding was not a problem. By March 4<sup>th</sup> the temperature stood at 50F [10C] and Surrey was green again.
- 1968: Of all weather events that have hit the headlines the devastating flooding in September 1968 must rank as the most serious natural disaster in Surrey. Virtually every low-lying town was inundated with torrents of muddy water, which in places was so deep people had to move upstairs.  
After a particularly cool, dull and damp summer, the people of Surrey were hoping for some soft September sunshine. Instead some parts of the county received as much as 1/3 rd of their annual rainfall in what was to prove the wettest September on record.

On the weekend of 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> torrential rain and thunderstorms led to widespread flooding with some 2,400square miles of the South East receiving, in just 48 hours as much as 400 tons of water per acre.

At nearby Leatherhead, an estimated 1,072 million gallons of water poured through the town and a bus became stranded with the occupants having to spend the night on the top deck before being rescued the next day.



*Rain water in Green Lane lifts a drain cover and rushes out. Date Not Known*

Even the normally placid Hogsmill River burst its banks pouring water waist deep into nearby houses. An estimated one thousand million tonnes of water fell on the South East and much of this surged down the river courses and then into the Thames which also over flowed its banks causing further distress.

Evacuation centres were set up in many areas with the army using amphibious vehicles to rescue people. Many homes were without power or food due to the damage. As the waters receded there was an infestation of ants and centipedes, huge growths of mould and the overbearing stench that such disasters bring. It took many months for people and property to recover.

An ongoing scheme to prevent another flood nightmare was quickly formulated and in the years following a new channel had been built to the Thames with the Ember taking the greater capacity. In all some £19 million was spent with the work finally completed in 1990



*Flooding in Green Lanes. Date Not Known*



*Men from Surrey Fire and Rescue pumping out a flooded basement in Temple Road. Date Not Known*

- 1970: In February, police helped to dig out 14 cars trapped in 18" of deep snow drifts at the Grandstand on **EPSOM DOWNS**. The 25<sup>th</sup> December saw the first white Christmas Day since 1938 with 6" lying on the ground.
- 1974: Gales in mid January brought a tree crashing down onto a car in **WEST EWELL** seriously injuring a man.
- 1976: The long sizzling summer of 1976 will be remembered as the year when water dried up, people were told to share baths, put a brick in the cistern and not to water the garden.  
It was also the year when much of Surrey's countryside went up in flames. Between April and the middle of September Surrey Fire Brigade answered more than 11,000 calls. So many, that by the end of August they had called in 22 Green Goddess pumping appliances to help them out. Many local newspapers carried stories of water spies – people who had seen their neighbours and local sports clubs hosing down grassy areas for hours at a time. Particular criticism was directed at **EPSOM RACECOURSE** where thousands of gallons were applied in preparation for the August Bank Holiday meeting.  
The temperature in **EWELL** reached 95F [35C] on 26<sup>th</sup> June and there were 36 days of absolute drought in **EPSOM**.
- 1978-9: Frequent snow and frost brought misery to Surrey during the "winter of discontent" as people manning the picket lines during the numerous industrial disputes struggled to keep warm.  
Average temperatures were up to eight degrees Fahrenheit below normal. January was the coldest month since 1963.  
The worst weather arrived with a vengeance just after Christmas 1978. At 11p.m. on 30<sup>th</sup> December a snowstorm accompanied by high winds brought conditions similar to those usually seen in the Scottish Highlands. The blizzard brought in bitterly cold air from the east. Local temperature was 25F [-4C] with much drifting of snow. The first day of 1979 was bitterly cold and all buses and trains were cancelled. Some milder weather followed for a spell but blizzards returned in mid February. Winter had one last fling on 2<sup>nd</sup> May when snow fell again on higher ground.
- 1981: It was like the end of the world, black as midnight, ominously still, yet this was midday in high summer. A towering cumulous-nimbus or thunder cloud nearly eight miles high was passing over East Surrey on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1981. Street lights went on and people thought this was it – the end of the world.  
Suddenly the storm broke and lightning filled the sky. 16 buildings were struck by lightning and the Fire Brigade received 338 distress calls. On Epsom Downs 66mm [2.6in] of rain fell, the heaviest since at least 1975 and nothing approaching that daily total has fallen since.

In Waverly Road **STONELEIGH** lightning caused £20,000 worth of damage. At nearby Addlestone there was a giant display of blinding blue light which was seen for miles as power from an electricity pylon short-circuited to the ground.

The winter of 1981-2 was particularly severe in early to mid December and again in mid January. The first heavy snow arrived on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> December and by the following Sunday was lying level at nearly 12 inches [30cms]. One hundred drivers were trapped in a blizzard at **EPSOM DOWNS** on Sunday night 13<sup>th</sup> December and were forced to spend the night in the Berni Inn Tattenham Corner.

The 12<sup>th</sup> December had dawned sunny with an opalescent glow in the sky, a truly Alpine day. One of the most amazing sunsets ever known followed. A large rosy sun sank over the whitened slopes before the air turned outstandingly cold. At **EPSOM DOWNS** the temperature sank to -6F [-14.4C]

1983: July was the warmest month since records began in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. The average temperature was 70F [21.C]

1987: The week beginning 12<sup>th</sup> January will long be remembered for its intense cold and deep snow which blew into mountainous drifts in the Surrey countryside.

Such a severe spell was virtually unprecedented this century and many villages were cut off for almost a week. For the few motorists who risked taking their cars out they found the nearby A217 reduced to the size of a footpath by the towering drifts, some 15ft high in places. So severe was the blowing snow that police used flares to guide the motorists one by one to safety. Visibility on the nearby M25 was down to a few inches. In the shops the shelves were stripped bare by people panic-buying and in some cases fighting over the last available items of food.

East Surrey, along with Kent was the worst affected area in the country. Clouds had formed over the sea and built up huge burdens of snow which were readily deposited over the South East hills. But it was the intense cold that made the headlines, indeed it had not been so icy by day since 1867 and considering the talk of "the greenhouse effect" this was even more remarkable.

At nearby Dorking on Monday 12<sup>th</sup> January the temperature climbed to just 18.F [-7.C] and motorists had to scrape ice from the inside of car windows at lunchtime. This quickly reformed and the only way to see out was to hold your breath. On **EPSOM DOWNS** frost was continuous day and night from 12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> and ice flows up to 8ft across were seen on the Thames at Sunbury

The "Great Hurricane of 1987" is recognized as being the most severe storm since the hurricane of November 1703 and the devastation in Surrey's woodlands was unthinkable. Winds exceeding 100 miles per hour caused the worst damage ever

known to any living person in Surrey during the early hours of 16<sup>th</sup> October.

An estimated one and a half million trees were felled on that ferocious night in the county and nationally 19 people were killed.

At the height of the gale, dozens of pairs of shoes were hurled across **EPSOM** High Street as the powerful winds smashed a plate glass window and sucked out the shoes. The winds tore over the Downs smashing buildings and tearing off roof tops in its path. An ancient cedar tree crashed down into Church Street and many people were trapped in their homes. In the big clear up that followed there was a queue at one stage of more than a mile long at Longmead tip as people brought along their personal debris.



*Two views of the felled Cedar Tree, in Church Street*

So many trees fell in Downs Road which links the town to the Grandstand, that it was impassable. In **EWELL** a tree narrowly missed some ponies in a stable at Grafton Road. Also in **EWELL** many cars were crushed by falling trees and **EPSOM & EWELL** Council estimated that the clean up operation had cost £175,000. In early November the two famous trees in The Cedars at **EPSOM** were removed using a 30 ton crane. One of the trunks weighed eight tons and it was expected to be used for making furniture. Many historic trees crashed to the ground in Nonsuch Park, once the home of a unique palace built by Henry VIII, now a park visited by hundreds of people.

1990: The "Great Gale" of 1990 that caused so much destruction across Surrey on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> January 1990 seemed inconceivable, coming so soon after the "Great Hurricane" of October 1987.

No-one believed that winds of such violence would strike Surrey again for many a decade. But while foresters and National Trust wardens were still clearing up after the "storm of a lifetime" grim warnings were flashed on television screens as a ferocious area of low pressure looked set to unleash it's fury over a wide area of England.

Savage winds increased throughout the day and by mid-afternoon had reached speeds of more than 80 mph. Thousands of pounds worth of damage was caused in virtually every Surrey street. Many many trees were toppled, roofs blown off, roads blocked and because it struck during the day, unlike the last gale, a number of people were killed.

A schoolgirl from Banstead was crushed by a tree and a man at **EPSOM DOWNS** died while trying to repair a rose trellis. Another resident died after falling while trying to secure roof tiles. At **STONELEIGH** a chimney crashed through the window of Graeme Fuller Classic Cars causing some damage to the vintage cars and injuring a customer.

Across Surrey the damage amounted to at least £5 million and together with the bad weather in the following few weeks was estimated nationally to have cost £2,500 million.

After the ferocious storms earlier in the year Surrey people were looking forward to a sunny settled summer. But temperatures soared and by August 3<sup>rd</sup> in **EPSOM**, had reached 96.F [36.C]

There was a wide spread ban on hosepipes and as the reservoirs emptied, gardens turned brown, leaves started falling from the trees, heaths and commons dried in the hot sun and fires raged out of control. Vast areas of the Surrey countryside went up in smoke, destroying large numbers of wildlife.

The Fire Brigade was so stretched that crews from as far away as Portsmouth and Southampton were brought in to cover Surrey's fire stations.

The heat also buckled electricity equipment causing a huge power cut in parts of the county and British Rail was thrown into chaos when rail lines warped in the intense heat. On the 4<sup>th</sup> August 1990 the Fire Brigade tackled 103 separate incidents in one day.

1991:

After a run of mild winters, Surrey children were over the moon when February 1991 brought snow so thick they were able to spend days on sledges, making snowmen and throwing snowballs. A very cold pool of air from Scandinavia moved south-westwards in the first week of February bringing a fortnight of intense cold and snow.

The snow was fine, prevented from clogging by the extremely low temperature which was bad news for British Rail. Hundreds of trains were cancelled because of “the wrong type of snow” – a type which blew into every crevice. For three weeks the rail service was in chaos and even when it melted by the third week, only half the trains could run due to the extent of damage to the rolling stock.

On February 4<sup>th</sup> the temperature dropped below freezing and failed to rise above zero until 11<sup>th</sup> over most of Surrey. On 7<sup>th</sup> the temperature reached a maximum of 22F [-5C] this was one of the coldest days of the century in Surrey.

The Lester Bowden store in **EPSOM** sold 400 pairs of Wellingtons in three days and panic buying was reported in some shops.

The weekend of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> February saw thousands flock to the slopes of nearby Box Hill to toboggan down hill. People were using anything from canoes to car bonnets and “For Sale” signs. Fifteen people ended up in hospital, according to one ambulance officer they were “like lemmings rushing over a cliff”

1992-3:

Dry spells are not uncommon in Surrey. They last for a few weeks or a month but occasionally far longer such as in 1921, 1959 or the infamous 1976. But when season after season records below average rainfall then it becomes a serious matter and between January 1988 and December 1992 rainfall was at its lowest since the 1740's.

Rivers began to dry up and ponds disappeared. The reservoir for East Surrey was just 40% full in February 1992 after the second driest winter of the century.

Springs that fed ponds and lakes dried up and the famous Silent Pool at Shere was completely dry in July 1992. But by mid August low pressure systems brought over 4inches [114mm] of rain to nearby Tadworth. On 20<sup>th</sup> October an unusually violent thunderstorm for the time of year, brought widespread flooding to many areas and 35,000 homes were blacked out when lightning struck electricity cables. The water filled the underground reservoirs and by early 1993 the Silent Pool was full to the brim once more.

- 1993: January 1993 was the sixth in a row without lying snow and February only produced 0.2 inches [5mm] of rain at Leatherhead. It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> driest of the century.
- During the afternoon of Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> January a deep area of low pressure moved eastwards over England with winds reaching 71mph over Surrey. Several trees came crashing down causing the deaths of two drivers and injuring several more. Firemen were called to Walton on the Hill where a large tree had trapped a driver. Trains from Tattenham Corner were cancelled because of trees on the line. The storms of 1987 and 1990 had removed many weak and vulnerable trees otherwise the damage would have been far greater.
- A mini heat wave at the end of May saw temperatures in excess of 80F [27C] and over heated elephants at a circus in Reigate Road, **EWELL** had to be hosed down by firemen on two occasions. Generally the rest of the summer was not nearly as warm. June had a little more rain than normal and July and August were drier than average. September was very wet with 4.5 inches [116mm] of rain.
- In October a long spell of torrential rain brought misery to many homes. The worst affected area was Chobham where the River Bourne rose to its highest level for several years. At one point the water was waist deep and residents had to be rescued from their homes as did some farm animals. Roads became blocked as the River Mole rose to it's highest level since 1979 and police turned drivers away from Brockham's Borough Bridge, but they did allow two men desperate for a drink, to strip to their under pants and swim across to the pub.
- 1994: The 6<sup>th</sup> of January started with heavy rain which turned to sleet and then snow. Some flakes measured 3 inches across and lay up to 6 inches deep in places. This was the first January snow fall in Surrey for seven years. Further snow fell in February.
- The long hot spell in July saw temperatures rise to 90F [32C] on 12<sup>th</sup> and will be remembered for the bad thunderstorms that went with it. On Friday 24<sup>th</sup> a house at Pine Mill **EPSOM** was wrecked. The owner told of a "glowing red ball" hurtling towards him, seconds later flames were coming from sizzling wall sockets and within minutes his home became a blazing inferno.
- The heat wave made July the fifth hottest of the century and overnight temperatures on August 4<sup>th</sup> did not fall below 68F [20C]. Such warmth had not been felt since 1923. A heavy storm on August 10<sup>th</sup> led to flooding in many places with over 1.25 inches [33mm] of rain falling in the Hook area within 24 hours.
- November 1994 turned out to be the mildest since the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century and the soil temperature at the end of the month were similar to early May meaning that flowers that should have died out

weeks before were still in bloom in December. Heavy rain followed in the winter of 1994/95 which made it the second wettest of the century.

1995: Summer began in May with temperatures soaring to the low 80F and continued to rise through June and July reaching 88F [31C] on the 21<sup>st</sup>. The highest temperature in Britain on 30<sup>th</sup> July was recorded at nearby Belmont and confirmed by the Met Office as the 5<sup>th</sup> hottest July on record. On August 1<sup>st</sup> the temperature in **EWELL** was recorded at 92F [32C].

Firemen were called to the pond at Walton on the Hill to try and save the fish by pumping in fresh water.

The newly privatised water companies came under pressure for threatening to cut supplies and their bosses were labeled as “fat cats”. People were urged by the Environment Secretary John Gummer to wash in a bowl to conserve water. The summer of 1995 was one of the driest since 1727 but because the previous winter had been wet the drought was not as severe as that of 1976 although August turned out to be the warmest ever recorded. Showers arrived for the August bank holiday.



*A Flooded West Street Ewell. Date Not Known*

A heavy thunderstorm on September 15<sup>th</sup> caused much flooding in parts of **EPSOM** when an inch of rain fell in 25 minutes.

The autumn was the hottest for 100 years and October the warmest since 1659.

December saw the snowiest and coldest in fifteen years. On 5<sup>th</sup> December the nearby M25 came to a halt in the snow with over 1,000 drivers being trapped for up to 12 hours. By December 30<sup>th</sup> a combination of freezing rain and sub zero temperatures made the

conditions on Surry's roads extremely dangerous. Thousands of people across the county fell on the clear ice coating roads and pavements. Over 200 casualties went to **EPSOM** hospital with broken bones and staff worked many hours overtime to cope as did other hospitals in the county. Surrey Ambulance had its busiest day ever.

- 1996: January 8<sup>th</sup> was the wettest January day since 1908.  
February was cold with some snow. A nacreous cloud was seen on the 16<sup>th</sup> and blizzard like conditions with strong winds occurred on the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup>.  
March saw heavy snow on the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup>  
May was the coldest since 1941 and the second coldest of the century and snow fell on 16<sup>th</sup> June was the driest since 1942 and on 7<sup>th</sup> the temperature in **EWELL** reached 90F [31.5C].  
July had heavy thunderstorms with hail leading to flooding in **EPSOM** on 23<sup>rd</sup>.  
August saw some rain but despite this the local ponds had began to dry out and by the 19<sup>th</sup> the temperature in **EPSOM** rose to 88F [31C]  
September had very dry conditions in the first three weeks.
- 1997: March was exceptionally mild but by April 21st the temperature had dropped to 18F [-8C] scorching many early plants.
- 1998: April 15<sup>th</sup> saw giant snowflakes falling
- 1999: May 19<sup>th</sup> saw ball lightning strike in places after the third driest spring in 100 years. A heat wave scorched parts of Surrey at the end of the driest July since 1825. On 1<sup>st</sup> August temperatures reached 87F [30.5C]. On 6<sup>th</sup> August, with temperatures of 81F [27C], a terrific storm and hail lashed **EWELL** and lasted from 1.30pm to 6pm. A further heavy storm occurred on September 5<sup>th</sup> when more than 3" of rain fell. Some flooding followed.
- 2000: In September Surrey experienced its worst flooding since 1968 and the country as a whole suffered the wettest autumn ever known. Many homes were flooded as nearly two thirds of the yearly rainfall fell during the Autumn, over 20" [506.8mm] of rain was recorded during September, October and November. December was the wettest for over 150 years.  
On the 30th of October winds gusting up to 73mph caused flooding and damage as trees were blown down and roads became blocked. At nearby Leatherhead the M25 was closed as water nearly 4ft deep flowed down the carriage way. Many cars were wrecked and people injured by falling trees. The entire south eastern rail network closed down as debris and floods blocked the lines and over 98,000 homes were without power for most of the day. The Environment Agency issued flood warnings on all the local rivers as levels rose dangerously high.

The floods returned again in December as very mild south westerly winds brought heavy rain into Surrey.



*Flooding in Hook Road. Date Not Known*

- 2001: On the whole, a wet and thundery year starting with a very mild January and early February but temperatures returned to normal by the end of the month when some sleet and snow fell. April was rather dull and wet with only 3 completely dry days. Summer started dry and warm in June but by August the sunshine and temperature were below average. The Autumn was wet and mild but December was very dry, sunny and cold. Snow and sleet fell twice but amounts were small and rainfall light.
- 2002: A very wet year with mild Winter months. January began with the temperature at 19F [-7C] but by the second week it became milder and by the end of the month temperatures were close to 57F [14C]. February and March were very mild, sunny and wet. By April there was plenty of sunshine and by the third week the temperature had risen to 73F [23C] and a total of 191 hours of sunshine was recorded for the month. The Summer was disappointing, being mainly wet and cool although 89F [32C] was reached at the end of July. The remainder of the year was mild and very wet ending with a rainfall of 32mm on the last day of December.
- 2003: A dry and warm year with an extended summer. The year started mild and wet but by the second week of January it had become much colder with frost and snow. The temperature fell to 21F [-6C] and snow lay at 4cm deep but by the end of the month it had risen to 62F [17C] and the month finished with the rare

phenomenon of thunder and snow. The rest of the Winter was very sunny, dry and rather mild but by the second week of April snow had fallen. However, by the third week the temperature had reached 78F [26C].

The Summer was warm dry and sunny with only light rain and a few short thundery bursts. August had a two week heatwave with temperatures reaching 96F [36C] but ended the month at under 64F[36C]. The fine weather continued through September with temperatures reaching 80F [27C]. November was very wet with 57mm of rain falling in 48hours. December had a small amount of rain and finished with some sleet but no snow.

2004: An average year with a wet August.

There were only two completely dry days during January, rain was heavy and the month ended with snow accompanied by thunder. Spring was dull, wet and unsettled. August started very warm but with several thundery downpours. Temperatures rose to 86F [30C] but thunderstorms occurred on 6 different occasions, the heaviest on the 18<sup>th</sup> when more than 33mm of rain fell. After a wet start to October, the rest of the year was dry and dull with temperatures close to average.

2005: Dry and sunny with a warm early Autumn.

The year began with winds mainly from the south west, bringing mid Atlantic air across the county and although there was frequent rain it was mostly light. Some sleet and snow fell in February and laid for 3 days in places. Half of the month's rainfall fell as snow.

Summer was rather cool and wet but fairly sunny with August ending on a high of 87F [31C]. September ended as changeable and windy. Ground frosts occurred at the start of October but by the middle of the month the night time temperature was an exceptional 62F [17C]. The last few weeks of the year were mainly sunny, cold and dry with some frost and fog and slight snow showers after Christmas.

2006: Rather warm with a wet Autumn after an extremely warm July.

The first month of the year started changeable with below average temperatures and some snow and sleet. This pattern continued through the Spring with thundery showers, average temperatures and light rainfall but by the middle of May there were no completely dry days and it was often rather cool. From the end of June it became increasingly warm and dry and by July temperatures were exceeding 86F [30C]. The coolest day of the month was recorded at 60F [21C]. The Autumn became rather dull, wet and mild with frequent thunderstorms and increased rainfall. The mild weather continued until the end of December when it turned colder with fog.

2007: Mild with a wet late Winter and a warm Spring.

The first few weeks of this year were mostly mild, wet and often very windy but by mid February the temperature fell to 21F [-6C]

with 6cm of snow. Spring was mainly dry, warm and sunny by day but the temperatures fell to freezing at night causing ground frost. July was very wet with below average temperatures and only managing to reach 75F [24C] on one day. There were several thunderstorms and over 41mm of rain was recorded. The cooler changeable weather continued until October when it became colder and overnight temperatures were often close to freezing. The year ended rather cold and foggy with a low of 21F [-6C].

2008: Rather mild and a wet Spring.

January began cold with some sleet but otherwise the month was mild or very mild and rainfall generally light. This led to a very sunny February with daytime temperatures exceeding 68F [16C] although night time fell to 21F [-6C] with frosts and at the end of the month 4mm of rain fell. During March there were only 4 dry days and some particularly heavy rain. After mid month it became colder with wintery showers and a maximum temperature of 39F [4C]. By the second week of April the temperature was only 41F [5C] and 5cm of snow had fallen. This was accompanied by several days of thunder but the month ended on a high of 68F [20C] and 17mm of rain falling in one day.

Both July and August were rather dull and wet with thunderstorms on five occasions and only 3 completely dry days during August. The warmest day was the last day of August when the temperature reached 78F [26C]. Extensive cloud cover gave warm nights but cool days. The Autumn was changeable with below average rainfall until November when almost 60mm fell in the first few days. It then became colder with sharp frosts and snow. December ended at just 33F [1C].

2009: Britain was wetter, warmer and sunnier than usual.

There was 9% more sunshine but also 4% more rain. Overall 2009 was the 14<sup>th</sup> warmest year since 1914 but the second coolest since 2002. There were two notable cold spells, in February and the end of December.

In February snow brought Surrey to a standstill. Surrey County Council closed all schools in the county, services were cancelled and residents urged to stay inside due to the severe conditions. On Epsom Downs more than 42cms [16.5in] of snow was recorded which was only beaten in recent years by in excess of 46cms [18in] in December 2010. Traffic was diverted off the M25, meals on wheels services were cancelled in some areas and community centres closed. Local hospitals cancelled most operations and all outpatients appointments. Surrey County Council sent out 42 snow plough across the county.

The highest temperature of the Summer was recorded at nearby Wisley at the end of June when it reached 89F [32C]. The rest of the Summer was marred by heavy rain.

2010

Official statistics confirm that 2009 was the fifth warmest year worldwide since the 1850's and the first decade of the new millennium was the warmest on record.

January started very cold, one of the coldest in U.K history with snow falling for the first part of the month. Average temperatures were 40F [4.4C], the coldest night occurred on 7th/8<sup>th</sup> when it was recorded at 15F [-9.5C]. Sleet and snow fell on 11 days averaging 3-4 cm and London's transport system became paralysed. February was the third wettest since 1900 with 0.7ins [17.8mm] falling on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

March was rather dry with around 25% below average rainfall April was dry and mild recording the highest temperature of the month on 24<sup>th</sup> of 70F [21.4C] The first thunderstorm of the year occurred on the 1<sup>st</sup>. April also saw the eruption of Mount Eyjafjallajokull in Iceland leading to major disruption of air travel throughout Europe lasting for about 8 days because of an ash cloud and the danger to aircraft. Airline losses were estimated to be in the region of £130 million a day affecting 10 million passengers worldwide. Desperate travelers in the U.K brought chaos to the Eurostar train terminal in London.

May was the coolest for 14 years with damaging frosts. July was very dry, third driest since 1921 and 1999. August was very wet with rainfall 90% above average at 3.9ins [98.5mm]. October saw the official end to the Mount Eyjafjallajokull eruption.

Winter returned with a vengeance in November with the heaviest November snowfall in the county's history bringing chaos to the area. Up to 11ins [28cm] fell on the 27<sup>th</sup> and temperatures plummeted to 14F [-10C]. All schools were closed, rail services suspended and all flights from Gatwick cancelled, motorists became stranded on the roads and panic buying started in the supermarkets.

December was also very cold with only 8 days in the month where the temperature rose above 41F [5C]. By the 21<sup>st</sup> the temperature had fallen to 15F [-9.4C] and again schools and airports were closed, rail and underground services suspended and Eurostar passengers queued all night in the freezing weather. London Ambulance Service, supported by St. John's Ambulance volunteers had their busiest night on record. 400 lorries were trapped on the Surrey section of the M25. Irregular shaped hail and ice pellets fell on the 27<sup>th</sup>. This is rain that has fallen through a sub zero layer and frozen.

**Janet Painter ©2011**

*With some additional information supplied by Phil Clifford  
Unless otherwise stated images courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum and  
Epsom & Ewell local and Family History Centre.*

**Major Sources:**

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This Surrey

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