

West Countryman's Diary



With LES
DAVIES MBE

FIRSTLY, I must apologise for not letting you have the answer to the November issue's photograph. The circular stone trough was missing a vital component – that being a large circular stone that was rolled around the trough from a central pivot. This is a stone apple mill, and very few of them were used in Somerset, though these mills were the tradition in Hereford and Worcestershire.

The operation is simple; the apples are crushed as the round stone wheel is trundled around the trough by horse power. From there it's into the press as normal. I believe that some of these stone mills that were used in this part of the world were 'dressed' in Nailsea. One of these stands as a 'gate keeper' at the entrance to what was Long Ashton Research Station, but is now a residential housing estate.

Wassails will be the main calendar event for the New Year, when the sleeping apple trees will be woken from their winter's rest and encouraged to think about giving a good crop for the coming year. Traditionally carried out around old twelfth night (January 17th) this was a pagan insurance policy that left nothing to chance in an uncertain world of temperamental earth gods.

We live in more enlightened times now, but let's not leave anything to chance – just in case! I will be hosting the wassail at the Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury on Saturday January 18th (sorry, I think I said the 17th in my last article). I will also be doing the same at the Chew Valley Community Farm on the afternoon of January 25th, so make contact with either organisation if you are interested.

I have been told that the weather patterns we are experiencing at the moment are very close to those for the same period in 1962. For those of us who are of a certain age that will bring back memories of the winter of 1962/63, when it started snowing on Boxing day and the snow did not leave us until Easter. The leaves are staying on the trees much longer than I have ever known before, which means to me that the trees are not yet fully dormant and are grabbing as much food as they can before dropping the leaf.

I am not so bold, or knowledgeable, to predict another 62/63 winter, but I'm sure that a cold spell will be on the cards. As to the duration and severity of it, well, we will have to wait and see. New Year 1963 was an exciting time for me as a 10-year-old boy living at Hales Farm in North Somerset. The snow was frozen on the top by sub-zero conditions night after night.

It meant non-stop winter sports for me and my friends, Elizabeth, Elaine and Robert McEwen-Smith whose grandfather, W.G. McEwen-Smith, owned the farm at the time. Living on the edge of a shallow valley meant slopes, and slopes of varying severity. Whilst those people who could get out were 'invading' us on the more sporty slopes, we, the indigenous population, stuck to a short but moderately interesting slope.

I found the toboggan that my uncle Dennis had made several years earlier. I still remember it had low runners and would plough through the soft snow covering me with a fine shower of the stuff that would then melt with the consequential dampening of clothing. It was painted blue and had a broad white arrow that ran on its deck from back to front, and there at the front was painted, in bold letters, the name "The Tickenham Torpedo".



It was great fun and I think it ended its days propped up outside the back door, desperately waiting for more snow that never came back in quite the same way again.

As with all things, research and development now began to play a role in improving the performance of adrenaline seeking youngsters. We found some sheets of thin galvanised metal. These were not the corrugated (wiggly) tin sheets more commonly known, but instead they were about two-foot by six-foot (in old money) flexible and flat. They could be turned up at the front and held in a bow, and were incredibly fast over frozen snow, especially if left out overnight to get a layer of ice on the bottom.

Steering had to be mastered by experience and was achieved by a combination of body lean and the twisting of the front upright section being held onto. Stopping was another thing and was normally abandoned in favour of leaving the projectile by rolling off the side and letting it stop itself in a hedgerow. Getting wet was the order of the day, but it didn't seem to matter much back then. Feet became cold in thin Wellington boots that only had one pair of socks inside, whilst faces and hands glowed red.

Even better news was to follow – the village school was closed after the Christmas holiday because of the snow conditions. Yes! This utopian life did not however last for long. I was due to sit that most awful of examinations, the 11 plus. So the school was opened specially for those of us who would have to go through this ritual that would split friends and hang labels of 'bright' and 'not so bright' on everyone.

The school milk on very cold winter's days was used to make cocoa and this day was no exception. The smell still stays with me today and I am taken back by the smell of mud on the Land Rover exhaust to that cocoa made on the old stove in the classroom.

Work on the farm was not easy, animals had to be fed and the daily routine of thawing field water troughs and hauling feed about had to go on. It was the first time I got blisters on my hands that became calloused through chipping a path through the snow and ice to the feed house so that others could safely carry sacks of feed about.

Then came the day that the digger arrived to pile all the snow from the yard up in one heap, where it stayed until the warm spring sunshine gradually reduced it to a blackened, crystallised lump, and by Easter it had gone. I hope it doesn't snow like 62/63 again, I have to get about and earn a living these days and I am far too old to go capering about like I did then... but it was great fun!

Happy New Year everyone and I hope that this coming year will bring you happiness, contentment and health. My kindest regards to each and every one of you.

You can always contact me through my web site: Westcountryman.co.uk