

FEBRUARY 1895 IN LANCASTER

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Abstract

February 1895 was an unusually severe winter month in the UK. This paper examines its many effects in the Lancaster area and analyses the role of the Borough Council in the crisis.

The national picture

The list of cold winters that people today can recall includes 1986, 1963 and 1947; that of 1895 has slipped from our collective memory. In the UK February 1895 had the lowest mean daily minimum temperature of any complete month between 1884 and 2021 (Meteorological Office A). Within the month, on 11 February, Braemar recorded the lowest ever UK daily minimum temperature of -27.2°C (a temperature twice equalled since but never beaten) and several other places recorded daily minima below -20°C (Meteorological Office B) (Endnote 1). February 1895 also recorded the second lowest ever UK daily average of any month in the UK between 1878 and 2021 (Meteorological Office C). The cause was a deep anticyclone that extended from Scandinavia to the UK and other parts of Europe and did not move, giving prolonged low temperatures by day and night. Snow and ice were reported as far south as Tunis in North Africa (Currie 1995, 67). Only the most westerly parts of the UK escaped the severe cold that month (Meteorological Office D). A medical report noted that the 66 days of cold had led to increased mortality among children and the elderly, particularly from respiratory problems (*British Medical Journal* 1895). A lengthy report in *The Times* (1895) noted deaths from exposure, frozen pipes and use of standpipes, the Thames frozen at Woolwich and similarly on many other rivers. There were five inches of ice on the Serpentine in London, unemployment among outdoor workers, and exploding boilers with fatalities. Water mains froze in Edinburgh at a depth of 1 metre, Sheerness harbour on the Thames was blocked by ice and the Thames at Kingston froze as did Windermere (Currie 1995). Special trains took 2000 skaters to Bowness and similarly from Glasgow to Loch Lomond (Spink 1947; Pike 1995). Spink (1947, 4–5) noted that whereas 39 per cent of the winter months between 1783 and 1895 at Kew in London recorded monthly mean temperatures of 35°F (1.7°C) or below, only 12 per cent of the winters between 1896 and 1945 did. The year 1895 was a turning point in the frequency of severe winters in Britain; they still occurred but much less often.

The weather in Lancaster

There are no Meteorological Office weather records for Lancaster until 1908 but, using volunteers, the Royal Meteorological Society (RMS) collected data at the Greg Observatory in Williamson Park from 1893. The Greg Observatory opened in 1892 with equipment and donations from the local Greg family who were mill owners. The Observatory closed in 1944 and was demolished around 1960 after a long period of dereliction, though its base is still visible (Wade 1992). The RMS manuscript data are now held by the Meteorological Office and, with access in person halted by COVID restrictions, they kindly scanned the Lancaster data for February 1895. The lowest minimum temperature at the Greg Observatory was -10.6°C on the 8th and every day that month the minimum temperature was under 0°C , the monthly mean minimum being -4.1°C . The maximum temperature was 5.4°C with a monthly mean maximum of 2.3°C . These are not nearly as low as in eastern and northern areas of the UK where clearer skies prevailed, but they did constitute a prolonged freeze, easing only at the end of the month. There are Meteorological Office data for Heysham Hall for this month – nearer the coast and only 24m above sea level compared with the Greg Observatory at 97m. The data are not exactly comparable, but the lowest temperature recorded was -9.2°C and on 16 days the minima were below 0°C . The slightly lesser severity of cold is what one might expect for a site so near Morecambe Bay. The weather right across North West England was comparable to Lancaster's experience (Meteorological Office D).

The effects of the cold weather on Lancaster

The *Lancaster Standard and County Advertiser* and the *Lancaster Guardian* for February 1895 reported the usual cold-weather stories: skating on the frozen ponds in Williamson Park, policemen being snowballed, and the Lancaster Canal frozen 7 inches (18cm) thick. There were frozen pipes and an

exploding boiler in Morecambe that killed two children. The River Greta was frozen; a ship at Morecambe was covered in ice; and there was a water shortage in Warton due to frozen pipes. Two people drowned at Glasson; grouse moved down from the Forest of Bowland; sheep were unable to feed on frozen fodder swedes in the fields; football matches and a ploughing competition were postponed. There were broken limbs from falls and a person was taken to the Infirmary suffering from exhaustion. There were reports of gas meters freezing and cutting off the supply to households (*Lancaster Guardian* 16/2/1895, 4). Frozen pipes required standpipes in the streets. Yet water supply presented a dilemma. People were advised to leave a trickle of water running over night to prevent their pipes freezing; but there was also a plea to minimise water use to protect overall supply (*Lancaster Standard* 15/2/1895, 1). The exploding boilers, reported nationally as well as locally, were due to frozen pipework leading to a build-up of steam pressure in the boiler, which then exploded causing injury or death. At that time the cheaper boilers did not have a pressure-relief valve that would have prevented such accidents (*Lancaster Standard* 15/2/1895,7).

While ports on the Thames and Clyde reported some disruption of traffic due to thick ice on rivers and quaysides, the Lancaster Port Commissioners recorded no such stoppages (Lancaster Port Commissioners 1895). Nonetheless Samuel Thompson, a noted local photographer, took impressive pictures of ice on the River Lune that month (Figures 1 and 2).

The severe and prolonged cold did lead to an increase in burials in Lancaster in February 1895 compared with that month in 1894 (58 up from 38) but taking February and March together the total burials were similar – 122 following 127. If this is a sign of the cold on local deaths, then it is at most a minor one. (Lancaster Cemetery 1894/5).

The reports of the local Medical Officer of Health provide more details on causes of death and the incidence of illnesses (Medical Officer of Health 1895). There were in total 750 deaths in Lancaster in 1895 (out of a population he estimated at 35,830) which is higher than the figure for 1894 (618) but is similar to the numbers in 1893 and 1892. This pattern is seen also in deaths outside the local institutions (the workhouse, hospitals, etc). The Officer reported that 1894 saw an unusually low death rate across England, with 1895 reverting to a more usual number. In his report he was concerned about the outbreak of measles – 405 cases in 1895 – not the cold.



Figures 1 and 2 Ice on the River Lune (Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection, gratefully acknowledged)

The increased use of gas may have partly counteracted the effects of the cold for those who could afford it (Winstanley 1993, 182; Endnote 2). The Borough's Gas Department – the gas works were next to New Quay – benefited from the increased consumption of gas – 5.68 per cent higher over the year compared with 1894 (Borough of Lancaster Annual Accounts). The Department's annual net profit up to 31 March rose from £930 in 1894 to £4550 in 1895 – an increase of £3620 – and fell back to £1099 in 1896. The long-term trend was for rising gas consumption year on year and coal prices fell in 1895, which also helped boost the profits, but it is the 5.68 per cent increase in consumption (measured in

cubic feet of gas) that shows the effect of February's cold weather, as the Gas Manager noted. Gas consumption in Lancaster in 1895–6 fell by 2.93 per cent due to the following winter being milder. The cold weather reduced gas supplies in Carnforth due to a technical fault at the gasworks. At this time gas was being increasingly used for lighting and cooking and less for house heating. There were no reports of coal supplies under pressure despite Lancaster Canal being frozen: the railways continued in operation. One Lancaster coal merchant reduced his prices, so coal supply for domestic heating was adequate (*Lancaster Standard* 22/2/1895, 8). Five schools were closed in February to contain an outbreak of measles, not because of the cold weather (*Lancaster Standard* 22/2/1895, 5).

The Lancaster [Poor Law] Union might have been the place of last resort for assistance in the very cold weather, with either Indoor Relief in the Workhouse on East Road or Outdoor Relief. The [Poor Law] Guardians' Minute Books for the period show the number of people in each week who were receiving Indoor or Outdoor Relief (Lancaster Poor Law Union 1893–6). A 12-week period can be divided into three groups of weeks: the five weeks before the cold spell in 1895 (24 December to 28 January); the five weeks of the cold spell (29 January to 3 March); and the two weeks after the cold spell (4 to 18 March).

In the early 1890s more people in the Lancaster Union were receiving Relief. We can compare the number of people receiving Indoor Relief for the equivalent winter weeks in 1893, 1894 and 1895. Before the cold spell the number rose by 26.1 per cent averaged over that five-week period between 1893 and 1895. During the cold spell it rose by 26.4 per cent. The cold spell had only a minor effect on the pre-existing annual increase in the number of people in the Lancaster Union's Workhouse.

The picture for Outdoor Relief is different. Before the cold spell the number of people receiving Outdoor Relief rose by just 2.3 per cent averaged over those five weeks between 1893 and 1895. During the cold spell it rose by 18.3 per cent. In the two weeks immediately after the cold spell it fell back to a 14.8 per cent increase. The Lancaster Poor Law Union used the Outdoor Relief system to help alleviate some of the suffering of those with the fewest alternatives during the very cold weather. In total 210 more people were helped in the cold period than would have been expected given the long-term rise between 1893 and 1895 before the cold spell. Some may have been helped over several of the cold-spell weeks: at least 42 different people were helped, and probably more.

In 1895 the number of vagrants receiving Relief each week fell by 27.1 per cent over the five cold weeks and by 53.9 per cent in the week of 4–11 February 1895 when the cold was particularly intense. Perhaps the vagrants stayed wherever they were in early February 1895 because tramping town to town could be fatal in those weeks. This did not stop one vicar complaining that “unknown tramps” and “regular topers” [drunks] were being served at the soup kitchen.

The Borough Council's response to the cold weather and hardship

The response of the Borough Council to the cold weather is interesting, as reported in their Minutes (Lancaster Borough 1895) and reports in the two local newspapers. The clear problem was that “There is a good deal of distress in the town” (*Lancaster Standard* 1/2/1895, 5). Many low-paid outdoor workers with precarious earnings suddenly became unemployed or temporarily laid off and so had no income. They would probably have very limited savings, there was no national social-security system and increased gas and coal use for heating and cooking would be difficult to afford.

From the start of February the Borough's Relief Committee used £25 still in its Cotton Famine Fund to employ some of the unemployed to clear snow from the streets. This Fund had been set up in 1862 and used public donations to help those made unemployed in the town's cotton mills because the American Civil War had reduced cotton supplies.

After 22 February coal and coke from the gas works was donated by the Borough's Gas Department – 1 cwt of each for each of 100 people via the Relief Committee. The Committee also gave £10 to buy coal for the needy. By 23 February 33 tons of coal had been distributed to the needy. The Thomas Robinson

Charity was also delivering donated coal to those eligible (*Lancaster Standard* 22/5/1895, 8). Residents of China Lane were reported to be using timbers from the buildings then being demolished along that street as a free source of fire wood. In Carnforth coal, soup and blankets were being given to the needy. Free breakfasts for children, made in the old Town Hall's kitchens, were being given out at the Fire Station along with clogs, stamped so that pawnbrokers would not accept them. "Cast-off clothing" for the poor was collected at the Police Station.

Perhaps the most notable response by the Borough was the opening of a soup kitchen on 29 January in Borough property on Common Garden Street. There were also soup kitchens in Morecambe (St Laurence Church) and Bolton-le-Sands. On 16 February there was a fund-raising concert, promoted by the Mayor, in the Palatine Hall for the soup kitchen and donations were encouraged. £14 was raised and another £9 by the High Street Church. The Lancaster and Skerton Cooperative Society initially gave the kitchen 200 cobs [loafs of bread] a day for 12 days, later continued into March. Soup and bread were the standard fare, though a stew was proposed. The demand for food grew rapidly; initially open three days a week, the soup kitchen soon became daily. On the first Tuesday of operation 276 quarts of soup were served; by the Friday this had risen to 720 quarts and it peaked at 930 quarts a day by the 22nd of the month (Endnote 1). One observer noted "the bloodless and chilled appearance of the large majority" (*Lancaster Guardian* 16/2/1895, Supplement p2). The queues at the soup kitchen were so long that a tent was erected so they could avoid some of the cold while waiting their turn. By the end of the cold spell 29,000 quarts of soup, the same number of loafes and 1542 children's free breakfasts had been provided.

The need was clear: many were in need that month. The arguments were about how to ensure that only the truly needy benefitted from the free food and coal. It is unclear how eligibility for assistance was defined in practice. You could queue and pay a penny for the food. You could buy a ticket for a penny and get the food by handing in the ticket at the kitchen. You could be given a ticket. The key to the free food was obtaining a ticket. The Relief Committee was clear that tickets should be supplied only to Lancaster residents and not to "itinerant vagrants" (*Lancaster Guardian* 16/2/1895, 5). Tickets could be generated by the Committee from its own funds. The public were encouraged to donate money to create more tickets. The concerns were about the distribution of the tickets. Here it is difficult to separate troubling anecdotes from proven abuses. There were reports or allegations that some recipients were not in need; that some in need passed on the tickets to others less worthy of charity; that some 'played the system' by getting multiple tickets from different sources; even that some ticket distributors (e.g. councillors) favoured their neighbours, family or voters over those in the greatest need. These were seen as abuses of the system. At its final meeting after the cold had abated the Relief Committee agreed to devise a better system for determining eligibility, in case of a future cold spell. This would involve ticket distribution by only four people, much closer examination of the needs of those applying or nominated (means testing), and the tickets issued being dated, timed and punched once handed in.

It is interesting to examine the role of the Borough in coping at short notice with this unexpected period of hardship. They were quick to tap into existing charitable funds to pay for the soup kitchen and they encouraged the public to donate more money. At one point the Relief Committee reported having nearly £212. They used their Common Garden Street property and the Town Hall kitchens to supply food. The Chief Constable devised relief schemes and councillors distributed the tickets. However, the Borough was less generous financially. Of the cost of the children's free breakfasts, 86 per cent was spent to use the Borough's kitchens, the rest for purchased ingredients. Five tons of coke valued at £1 was donated by the Gas Department out of 7727 tons sold in 1895–6. The Borough was an enabler and encourager of public generosity rather than a donor in its own right. In 1895 the increased consumption of gas gave the Borough an additional profit of £3620, which dwarfs their additional expenditure on the relief works.

The Relief Committee last met on 8 March £146 still unspent, the cold eased, workers returned to paid work and the soup kitchen closed. The Great Frost had ended and normal life had returned.

Viewed from today

Arguments persist about the correct scale and duration of support for those in need in troubled times: and similarly on the proper criteria for eligibility and priority for support. There remain debates around the balance between support funded from private donations and from the public purse.

Endnotes

- 1 At this time temperatures were recorded in degrees Fahrenheit. They have been converted to degrees Celsius (formerly called Centigrade). Heights recorded in feet have been converted to metres. A quart was two pints or 1.14 litres.
2. The Manager of Lancaster Gasworks (Charles Armitage) was paid an annual salary of £500 in 1895, which was £50 more than the Town Clerk received, £250 more than the Chief Constable and £400 more than the Headmaster of the Grammar School. He was provided with a house at Scaleford near the gas works.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges gratefully the assistance of the Meteorological Office in providing remote access to the Royal Meteorological Society's data for Lancaster, and the comments from a referee.

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