

WINTER OF 2002/2003.

The winter of 2002/2003 ranked 7th in terms of “open-ness” since 1956 [48 years] adding weight to the argument made by the protagonists concerning “climate change”. The season was slightly warmer than average, the mean daily temperature of 4.4°C/39.9°F being 0.3°C above expectation. However, the highest daily maximum attained, 13.5°C/56.3°F on February 23rd, was marginally below average, and well below the 14.6°C/58.3°F seen last year. The season was less frosty than usual, despite the cold February, with 45 ground and 29 air frosts. We could have expected 51 ground and 31 air frosts in a “normal” winter. All soil temperature are around normal though the cold February brought all of these down appreciably on the values seen in December and January.

The coldest day, December 10th, with its maximum of 0.8°C/33.4°F was the 6th successive occasion not to see negative values. The last of these was as far back as 1997 when the coldest day maximum was no higher than -1.8°C/28.8°F. Prior to this it was a fairly regular feature to have the coldest day producing negative maximum temperatures. The warmest night, December 24th with 9.0°C/48.2°F was the lowest for 3 years despite the fact that in 48 years the warmest night has seen double figures on only 14 occasions!

It was a little drier than usual, the 180.2mm/7.09ins of rain being 15.9mm/0.63in below expectation giving the driest season since 1998. Rain, or snow, fell on 57 days, 7 days above average, the same as in 2002 and the fourth highest in a decade. There was more snow this year than for 7 years, 1996 seeing snow on 28 occasions against the 15 this year. However, snow lay on just two days, both in February, the best figures since 1991 [1], and then it was barely 1 cm deep. Despite this there was still major traffic problems as motorways, main and side roads all ground to a halt. Will we ever learn? It was in 1998 that no lying snow at all was recorded and in this neck of the woods it is rare for it to lie on more than a few days each winter. However, the forecasts of it were good and there could be no excuse for the chaos that ensued from a mere thin coating.

Sunshine was well above expectation at 200 hours, the fourth best set of figures in 48 years of data and 39.7 hours above the 30-year mean. The sunniest day, February 18th saw 9.1 hours, enough for it to be termed a “sunny” day and almost an hour above the average in line with trends towards a sunnier season. There were 26 days without any sun at all, 9 better than usual and the best figures since 2000.

Yet again we had no gales, though winds gusts did reach a peak of 36knots/41mph on February 2nd. Wind direction was predominantly from an easterly quarter in both December and February, and from a westerly quarter in January. This was determined by the position of a high pressure centre near Scandinavia giving us a maximum MSL pressure reading of 1040 hPa on February 14th, falling to a low of 977.8Hpa on January 21st as an Atlantic low crossed the country.

As winters go this one was well above average, though February was certainly more in line with expectation producing spells of frosty weather and some snow showers.