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Snowfalls are now just a thing of the past

BY CHARLES ONIANS | Monday 20 March 2000

Britain's winter ends tomorrow with further indications of a striking environmental change: snow is starting to disappear from our lives.

Sledges, snowmen, snowballs and the excitement of waking to find that the stuff has settled outside are all a rapidly diminishing part of Britain's culture, as warmer winters - which scientists are attributing to global climate change - produce not only fewer white Christmases, but fewer white Januaries and Februaries.

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average was 0.7 days. London's last substantial snowfall was in February 1991.

Global warming, the heating of the atmosphere by increased amounts of industrial gases, is now accepted as a reality by the international community. Average temperatures in Britain were nearly 0.6°C higher in the Nineties than in 1960-90, and it is estimated that they will increase by 0.2C every decade over the coming century. Eight of the 10 hottest years on record occurred in the Nineties.

However, the warming is so far manifesting itself more in winters which are less cold than in much hotter summers. According to Dr David Viner, a senior research scientist at the climatic research unit (CRU) of the University of East Anglia, within a few years winter snowfall will become "a very rare and exciting event".

"Children just aren't going to know what snow is," he said.

The effects of snow-free winter in Britain are already becoming apparent. This year, for the first time ever, Hamleys, Britain's biggest toyshop, had no sledges on display in its Regent Street store. "It was a bit of a first," a spokesperson said.

Fen skating, once a popular sport on the fields of East Anglia, now takes place on indoor artificial rinks. Malcolm Robinson, of the Fenland Indoor Speed Skating Club in Peterborough, says they have not skated outside since 1997. "As a boy, I can remember being on ice most winters. Now it's few and far between," he said.

Michael Jeacock, a Cambridgeshire local historian, added that a generation was growing up "without experiencing one of the greatest joys and privileges of living in this part of the world - open-air skating".

Warmer winters have significant environmental and economic implications, and a wide range of research indicates that pests and plant diseases, usually killed back by sharp frosts, are likely to flourish. But very little research has been done on the cultural implications of climate change - into the possibility, for example, that our notion of Christmas might have to shift.

Professor Jarich Oosten, an anthropologist at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, says that even if we no longer see snow, it will remain culturally important.

"We don't really have wolves in Europe any more, but they are still an important part of our culture and everyone knows what they look like," he said.

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David Parker, at the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research in Berkshire, says ultimately, British children could have only virtual experience of snow. Via the internet, they might wonder at polar scenes - or eventually "feel" virtual cold.

Heavy snow will return occasionally, says Dr Viner, but when it does we will be unprepared. "We're really going to get caught out. Snow will probably cause chaos in 20 years time," he said.

The chances are certainly now stacked against the sort of heavy snowfall in cities that inspired Impressionist painters, such as Sisley, and the 19th century poet laureate Robert Bridges, who wrote in "London Snow" of it, "stealthily and perpetually settling and loosely lying".

Not any more, it seems.

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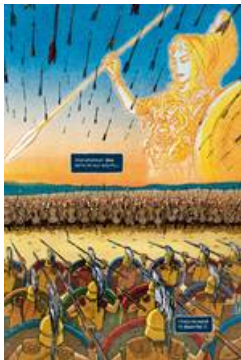
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