

The dangers of open fires and long skirts

Tina Notley

Two newspapers reported the death of elderly ladies, by fire, within a year. The West Somerset Free Press, dated the 30th March 1867, reported that Nancy Poole, aged 76 years was "found lying on the ground at her back door burning." When questioned, "the unfortunate woman said she was sitting by the grate when her apron caught on fire." Although Nancy attempted to remove her apron, the remainder of her clothes were alight. She was burnt on her back, sides and one of her breasts. Tragically, Nancy died a few days later. The Coroner recorded a verdict of Accidental Death.

The County' Gazette, dated the 30th November 1867, reported the unfortunate death of Mary Hole, aged 78 years. Mary was sitting in front of the fire with a child on her lap. The child dropped the tea caddy and as Mary leant forward to pick it up, she fell into the fire. She was burnt on her arm and chest. The Coroner recorded Accidental Death.

The combination of long skirts and open fires must have been responsible for the deaths of many elderly women.

Climate Change?

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1718 The summer was hot and dry and the harvest quite good. The early part of the year was characterised by hard frost with considerable snowfall. 1818 A fine summer with an excellent harvest. The year started with mild weather, but chilly rain prevailing throughout much of the spring until the middle of May. The heaviest downpour occurred on May 8th, after which no rain fell in some parts of England, especially in the south, till early September. By September 3rd there had been a succession of 108 days, during which the temperature had averaged 65°F (18.33°C). July was particularly hot, the temperature rising to 121°F (49.44°C) in the sun on July 23rd.

Harvest proved exceptionally early; some wheat being marketed on July 12th. In spite of shortness of straw, the yield was good and the quality' excellent. The hay harvest was meagre, but there was a luxuriant aftermath. Mild weather continued throughout the autumn. Strawberries and raspberries were picked in Devon in early December, and spring flowers were in bloom. Turnips suffered considerably from attacks of black caterpillars. There was an abundance of food for cattle and sheep, but sheep rot again caused serious losses.

In the autumn, serious unemployment developed among the agricultural labourers of southern and eastern England, up to 60% being unemployed.

1918 A rather wet year.

January cold, with much snow. Severe frosts in Scotland, with river Dee and parts of Loch Lomond frozen. Temperature on January 8th -3°F (-19.44°C) at Peebles, Sharp rise in temperature towards end of month.

Mildest February since 1903. March much colder but mostly dry (though with blizzards in the north). April dull, cold and wet.

May opened cold, but became warmer towards the middle of month, ushering in a period of thunderstorms, with much rain and hail. June opened and closed warm but in the middle of month had sunny days and cool nights.

July, sunshine and heavy showers with normal temperatures. August, changeable but warm and dry on whole, with fair periods of sunshine.

September, very rainy and cold. October, dull, damp and foggy with severe frosts at times.

December, mild and unsettled, with much rain.

Rainfall in general above average, except in Scotland. The September rainfall in Lancashire and West Riding of Yorkshire was the greatest ever recorded. 44 hours of continuous rain began at Meltham, Yorks on September 14th.