

## **A long hard winter**

Of course it has not been a hard winter in comparison with those who have really hard winters, or long in the sense of the Laura Inglis-Wilder book of that name, and when we think of the floods, droughts, fires and earthquakes that have devastated other parts of the world in the last few months, we must be grateful for living in such a soft, kind country. And we must allow for exaggeration. Perhaps things have seemed worse than in other years because we are getting older and have to think twice before running the risks of being soaked to the skin or falling over in the street. Our friends too are getting older, which means that we've been more inclined to notice these things in conversation.

In early November we were down in London staying in Hackney and spending most of the time looking after Mo. We went out most days with the pushchair. It was mostly grey, sometimes sunny, and not particularly cold. I spent a lovely damp autumn morning on my own in the Crystal Palace Park where the dinosaurs are, and then met up with Michael and Sue Callaghan in Dulwich and went back with them for dinner. Later in the month Jessy, Jules and Mo came up to St Andrews. The weather was still mild enough after they left for me to spend some time digging the garden. Then, on Friday 26 November it snowed in St Andrews. The next day the weather was dramatic with thunder and more snow. It was Hazel Gifford's funeral and I took Betty Willsher to St Andrew's church by car, having a minor collision with a taxi at the bottom of Queen's gardens. There was a partial thaw on Sunday, followed by a drop in temperature and more snow. Roads and pavements were very treacherous on Monday. I was due to have lunch with Lorraine, but she couldn't get in to work from Kirkcaldy. The contre-temps with the car, the sudden cold and a mild stomach upset left me depressed. Anna too had a stomach upset at about this time. This was the beginning of a three month period during which one or other of us, sometimes both together, suffered a succession of coughs and colds and minor stomach disorders, all of which in Anna's case aggravated and were aggravated by her chronic back problems.

It remained very cold and treacherous underfoot. Several days we stayed indoors the whole time. Isabel Gunn could not go out for weeks on end and we were doing her shopping all this time. One evening Swithun's bus back to Edinburgh was held up and he caught a bad chill. Ten days into December, the streets in St Andrews were pretty well clear, but when we went to Cupar we found thick layers of ice on all the side roads, and mountainous piles of snow on the pavements. I was planning a journey to London, to meet up with Christopher and Daphne who were due to fly from America on 20 December, and also to see Jeffy, who had suffered what sounded like a stroke. The news spoke of train cancellations and until the last minute I was undecided whether to go.

In the end I set off on Saturday 18 December, a bad day to travel from here as it was the end of term. I have never seen Leuchars so full, and it took ten minutes for people to be packed into the train, after which there were still some left behind on the platform. After Edinburgh the crowd thinned out. I was surprised how little snow there was as we went south through northern England. It was very cold. On the way I heard that the family's flight from America had been cancelled because Heathrow airport was not coping well with the weather. I think the trouble was the extreme cold rather than the snow itself. I decided to divert to Stamford to see Jeffy rather than going on to London. Jeffy was much better, more or less back to her normal

state. While I was in Stamford we heard that Swithun and Pomme were stuck for hours on the station at Peterborough because the power lines were down. I stayed until Monday morning, and then I would probably have turned round and gone home if I had not been bearing various family Christmas presents. The train from Stamford to Peterborough was delayed (fortunately the waiting room was open, so I was out of the cold) and I did not reach Hackney until late afternoon.

Although it seemed probable that Christopher and the family would reach London on Thursday I decided not to wait. We looked at the forecast and tried to speculate which would be the safest day to travel, but it was hard to guess and it seemed best not to delay. It turned out that Tuesday was not a good choice, as the power lines were down again and there were no East Coast trains leaving Kings Cross. I went along to Euston and got a crowded train up the west coast line, changing at Preston. Again there was surprisingly little snow, but frost covered everything. There were extraordinary views over the flat fields of whitened trees, their branches and twigs standing out clearly against the grey sky. In sidings and cuttings the willow herb was encrusted with white. In the end Swithun and Pomme got to their destination in France, and Christopher and family made it over from America in time to spend Christmas day with Jessy and Jules in Hackney. They had temporary accommodation in Greenwich on the border with Deptford.

It remained cold over Christmas and New Year, with ice often making walking treacherous, but I forced myself to get out most days. We were putting out seed for the ground-feeding birds, with fat-balls, nuts and thistleseed as well. The tits were regular in attendance, but the finches less so, and on some of the coldest days the thistle seed did not go down at all. Over the winter we had a couple of visits from a sparrow-hawk, or some such predator, and on each occasion the small birds stayed away for several days. Crows and pigeons threatened to clean up all the ground seed, so we put most of the seed under the table, rigging up string around the legs. This kept the crows out, but the pigeons soon got the hang of getting underneath. As the weeks went on we got more and more blackbirds, and the chaffinches and goldfinches came back, although the goldfinches were never as numerous as they had been the previous winter. We also saw the occasional thrush and wren, and there were usually a couple of robins and hedge-sparrows. As time has gone on there is now a deep pit underneath the table, mainly due to the blackbirds, I think. We shouldn't have left the table in the same place all the time.

It snowed again on 7 January, two days before we were due to go south again to see Christopher and Daphne and help with the children. As a rest from baby-minding in Greenwich we had an afternoon with Michael and Sue, an evening baby-sitting in Hackney and then a very quick visit to Rowwy with Daphne and the two children. The weather in London was not extreme, no more than raw and wintry, but still not a good time for the family to be settling into their temporary accommodation, looking for schools and starting their new jobs. We called in Stamford again on our way north, and the train from Stamford was delayed (not, I think, by the weather) which meant we did not reach home until 1am.

We got used to the garden being covered in snow, and to the views of white fields. The thaw came in the garden sooner than on the hill that we see from our window. It left the lawn quite spongy. Whenever there was a slight thaw the burn would fill up, and for some time it was so high and fast that we didn't see the dippers on our walks along the Lade Braes.

For a fortnight after we got home we both had a bad cough; sometimes one of us was worse, sometimes the other, but neither of us got very much done. We also felt queasy for much of the time. I was due to have lunch with Heidi, but put it off. On 26 January we found there were aconites out along the Lade Braes, and a few snowdrops. They were also beginning to show in the garden. It was milder on some days, and we had a good weekend with the launch of Simon's latest volume of the Place Names of Fife, and Elspeth staying with us. At the end of January events in Egypt certainly took our minds off the weather and our minor ailments. When we went to lunch with Claire on 3 February the streets in Cupar were clear of ice, but there were still one or two blackened heaps of snow. Anna was quite poorly around this time, and pulled out of a proposed trip to Edinburgh. In the middle of February Bernard and Ann were up to stay with us. They were taken aback by the cold.

We left for the south again on 20 February. Christopher and Daphne were now in a larger house, still renting, but expecting to be there for some time. They have not yet got the hang of the heating system, so it was quite chilly. We had one longish walk in the park with Nayana, but most days she was unwilling to go out and it was cold enough for us to accept her verdict. With Daphne starting work, both children were a bit sorry for themselves. On the Saturday we were looking after Mo, and took her to meet Daphne and the children at the Horniman Museum. It was a wet day, but not cold. All three children had runny noses, and we both found our colds getting worse. It didn't prevent Anna going to Mallorca for her book launch.

When I got home I was coughing badly enough to postpone visits to friends who might not want to risk contagion. On the other hand, our crocuses were out and the daffodils were beginning to come up, with the snowdrops still putting on a good show – all just a little behind Martin's garden in Stamford which was looking lovely when I visited them during our time in the South. A couple of afternoons last week were pleasant enough for me to put in a bit of time tidying things up in the garden. When I took the car to Cupar for its MOT there was a faint hint of green about the trees along the way. Anna has been home for a week now, and although we are both still coughing things are getting better. I have made my postponed visits, and today, although it is raining hard with occasional sleet, the quality of the daylight and the touches of green together give an unmistakable feel of spring.

The news always makes our troubles seem trivial. The struggles in north Africa and the Middle East have been occupying our attention, and now even these have been overshadowed by the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear explosions in Japan. Within the family too the activities of our children have been both more interesting and more arduous than our brushes with cold and minor ailments. The winter has seen a deterioration in the condition of Anna's parents; her father no longer goes to the shops. Anna and I have both had our work. Anna's book has come out in Mallorca and she has been busy with her translations, in particular the translations of RS Thomas into Catalan. I have been waiting for Harewood House to give permission to publish my book on Mrs Hunn, and in the meantime have been working on my novel, and I read *Life and Fate*, one of the most gripping and important books I've ever read. All this has gone on despite the cold. But still, making all allowances, we have found it a long hard winter, exceptional enough to be worth recording in its own right, and also as marking something of a frontier point in our lives, as we move further into old age.

**12-14 March 2011**