

The Great Heatwave

As one hot day followed another, people wondered when the last time was that the temperature had been below 30 during the day. Night time was little better. It might drop to the upper 20s, but it was too uncomfortable to sleep.

When the heatwave had started, people were generally pleased. "The summer's here at last," they said.

Paddling pools appeared in gardens; in the few houses with swimming pools people invited neighbours around. The evening air was filled with the smell of barbecues and the sound of gardens being watered and the occasional joyous shouts of kiddies who 'accidentally' got themselves watered. Everybody seemed happy.

But even then it was not all happiness. A rumour had spread that you would be sent home if the temperature exceeded 30 degrees in your office or place of work. But it was only a rumour. The Health and Safety Executive merely states that employers have a legal obligation to make sure that working environments are a *reasonable* temperature; it does not specify any actual maximum, nor what is reasonable; that is left to lawyers to argue over. There were many disappointed and disgruntled workers. Dissatisfaction was later compounded by other problems caused by the continual high temperatures as road surfaces melted and railway lines buckled, causing all sorts of disruption to commuters.

As the days passed and the heat continued, people were finding it more and more difficult to sleep properly. Very few houses had air-conditioning. "You don't really need it in Britain," people had said.

When the heatwave had begun weeks ago, there had been a rush on buying electric fans. The local supermarket had soon run out; and in the town the shops had soon sold their stock.

Then news programs started to give warnings about reservoirs getting low and asking people to be sparing with water. Fewer hosepipes were heard in the evenings, though some could still be heard, until a hosepipe ban was imposed. Then people resorted to watering cans; but this was more trouble and most gardens became browner and browner.

What had at first be welcomed as "summer at last" was now getting wearisome. Lack of proper sleep and all the other problems the heatwave brought were not only causing physical stress; they were causing mental stress as well. People became more irritable and ready to quarrel over any trivial matter. There was tension in families; tension among neighbours; tension in the workplace. Petty crime increased, especially among young people.

The evenings were particularly tense times; people gathered in groups and general tiredness and irritability fuelled by alcohol was a potentially explosive mixture. The neighbourhood police team had to tread a fine line: too obvious a police presence could easily ignite things, yet their absence would lead to a breakdown in law and order. In the village - for it still considered itself a village although it had long become in effect a small town - many people were worried and did their best to calm things. They feared quarrelsome groups would turn into gangs which would only increase friction.

But, as so often, when things become tense, people look for a scapegoat, preferably an outsider. It was not long before hostility was turned towards the East European migrant workers at Sunny Fields farm. People grumbled that they were taking local jobs, though there was very little unemployment in the village and everyone knew it was difficult to find locals who were willing to pick the fruit in those great polytunnels there were there.

There had always been some people who had grumbled about migrant

workers. But normally the grumblers had been very few. Most people knew they were needed and indeed welcomed them as they brought trade to the village. Without them it was feared by some that many village shops would not survive

But now the grumbles grew and hostility hardened. To hear some people one would imagine that it was the migrants who had caused the heatwave in the first place! There were some ugly incidents between local youths and migrants in the evening and the police advised the farm management that migrant workers had best keep away from the village, particularly in the evenings. Security at the farm was increased; local vigilante groups were formed in the village to control the growing wave of petty crime and looting which, of course, was blamed on migrants though nearly all was perpetrated by villagers themselves.

Shops suffered as migrants rarely came into the village at all; but not wanting to fuel more dissension in the local community, shopkeepers mainly kept quiet and hoped that things would get back to normal when the heatwave was over. The two or three shopkeepers who did speak out found themselves the recipients of threats on social media and their shops sprayed with graffiti.

The police felt they were not keeping on top of things. There was general apprehension and people felt that it needed only a spark to ignite things.

A spark did come, but not as people expected. Late one evening, well into the second month of the heatwave, an ominous glow was spotted in the sky in the heathland which bordered the village and the farm.

“Bloody migrants,” said some. “What are they doing now?” But others realized it was the heath on fire. The long period of drought had caused everything to become quite literally tinder dry. They pointed out that the wind was taking the flames towards the farm where the migrants were encamped. “Serves them bloody right,” said some, but others said they were not likely to have started a fire to harm themselves.

Soon fire engines were racing through the village; a gang of youths gathered near the farm and began pelting the fire fighters; police soon appeared in numbers and some sort of order was restored before they saw flames skip across and set light to one of the polytunnels. This soon spread and the emergency services evacuated the migrants from their encampment as fire fighters struggled to contain the fire. The village schools were opened up to house at first migrants, but soon villagers themselves as, during the early hours, the wind changed and fire spread towards the village itself.

But with the change of wind, came a change of weather. The sky was lit up with great flashes of lightning which, while spectacular, caused concern for the safety of people on the ground fighting the fires. A tree or two did get struck and they added to the conflagration but, fortunately, no person was struck.

Soon the heavens opened and rain fell in torrents. Drains could not cope with the excess and there was flooding in some places. But no one really minded this. They were thankful the deluge had stopped the spread of the fire and after the long period of drought, water was very welcome.

The air was fresher the next day. People felt better. The irritability had gone; there was even pity from some towards the displaced migrants and some feeling of guilt.

The rain was over within a day and the floods soon subsided. Things would, it was hoped, get back to normal. But the migrants drifted away, feeling they were not really welcome. The farm was insured and eventually when money came through some attempt was made to restore it; but it found difficulty in attracting workers, especially at picking time; and the owners felt it best cut their losses and sell. Almost inevitably the site was bought up by a developer who had persuaded the council it was a brown-field site, ready for development.

Trade fell off in the village and, while the supermarket survived, other small shops began closing; some of the older inhabitants said the heart had been torn out of the village.

What had once been Sunny Fields Farm became a large urban development, part housing and part light industrial units. So the small town that liked to think of itself as a village found itself being absorbed into a large conurbation attached to the much larger town nearby.

Some people talked about the Great Heatwave as the time when things went wrong and looked back wistfully to times before and wished Sunny Fields Farm was still there; but most people liked to put the heatwave out of mind either through shame or, in most cases, through just plain indifference.