

## David Pannett's History of Bicton Part 61

### Springtime past and present

Spring is the season when winter gradually gives way to summer, but, such is the variable nature of our climate, events do not always appear to progress in a logical order. March is reputed to 'come in like a lion and go out like a lamb', but this does not always happen that way round!

Spring at this latitude is the season for sowing summer crops and generally celebrating the mystery of 'life' returning to the world. It is no coincidence that the early church chose this time for the Easter Festival.

A major cause of variability in our weather is the meeting of cold polar air with warm tropical air, which interact to cause depressions. These 'low pressure' systems generally travel from West to East off the Atlantic, bringing wind and rain. Extreme examples can bring damaging gales and floods which 'hit the headlines' or stay in our memories. For instance, January gales in 1977 wrecked a greenhouse at Merton Nurseries, while press reported a 'killer storm' in January 1980 and a similar one in February 1997. Much earlier, our local Chronicle recorded such events in 1601 -2. In 1584, a gale blew embers from a fire which set half of a Shropshire village alight.

The paths of these depressions are steered by the 'jet stream' in the upper atmosphere and also pass around slow moving areas of high pressure. Since such 'blocking highs' linger in one place for some time, they can control the location and duration of particular weather types for days or weeks on end.

For instance, such high-pressure in the North Atlantic will steer winds in a clockwise manner towards us from the North, which bring lower temperatures and blustery showers, especially in April. If the high actually moves over us, we experience calm conditions and clear skies allowing bright warming sunshine, but also chilly nights as some of that warmth escapes into space. Gardeners must then worry about frost damage to their young plants encouraged to grow by the warm days. A high further east, however, draws in mild tropical air from the mid-Atlantic, raising temperatures irrespective of local sunshine and introducing a real feeling of summer, whatever the date.

It high-pressure moves even further east, settling down on the cold waters of the the Baltic, it can direct dry cold Siberian air towards our eastern shores. Fortunately, Bicton is sufficiently west to avoid the worst of this cold blast, which reaches us after picking up some moisture and warmth from the North Sea to give dull overcast skies.

Such weather patterns often occur in March, when the continent is still cold and here provide dry conditions which are ideal for sowing barley or rye. An old saying claimed 'a speck of dust in March was worth a King's Ransom', such was the national importance of a successful grain sowing season. The alternative could cause problems, as recorded by our local Chronicle in 1585.

This year and almost all of the month of March was wet which caused corn to be a great price".

The spring of 1590 was similar, when sodden ground prevented sewing before April. Low temperatures could be just as bad:

'This year (1572) the winter and spring was so long, cold and dry that it was very far into the month of May before any leaf or blossom appeared upon any tree'.

All this reminds us of our own experience in 1964, and illustrates how the relative proportion and duration of each weather type can give an individual character to each year's Spring.

Records of rain and wind and temperature certainly confirm this, as do records of emerging plant life responding to them. For over 20 years June Hughes has been observing such growth in Bicton, which, when plotted as a graph reveals a regular rhythmic sequence of 'early' and 'late' springs. By running this pattern forward one might even guess what might happen in the future. Shall we take bets on late springs in 2015 or 16?

The controlling factors of such growth patterns are clearly a mixture of soil temperature and moisture, as well as fluctuating air temperatures and increasing day length. Some late frosts in an otherwise mild spring appeared to have delayed the damson blossom in 2008. Anyway, it is often cool about blossom time giving the old country term 'plum winter', when just one night frost can wreck that year's fruit crop.

It is still possible to see a snow shower in early May if the wind comes from the North. Nevertheless, the old saying 'don't cast a clout till May is out' refers more to May or thorn blossom, rather than this month.

Some aspects of the 2012 spring have been remarkable in breaking some records, but looking back we can still recognise many familiar elements. We are still dependent upon our changeable weather patterns as we were in the 16th century, but fortunately they are less of a 'life or death' matter today.

