

THE BIG FREEZE

The UK's coldest and snowiest winter in a generation led to a national obsession with grit and the perfect preparation for the Winter Olympics.

THE UK GROUND TO A HALT in December after the worst snowstorms in 30 years blanketed the country from tip to toe. It should have come as no surprise to anyone that local authorities are not well-prepared for once-in-a-generation freak weather, but that would have meant passing up the opportunity for once-in-a-generation grumbling.

True to form, Britain set about blaming everyone and anyone for the wintry chaos. The Daily Mail led the charge. Its columnists

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blamed, among many others, idle teenagers for not getting out and clearing snow from the pavements; the government for creating a ridiculous safety culture that led to unnecessary school closures and cancellation of football matches; the media, ironically, for over-playing the story; and, of course, local councils for not storing enough grit to keep the roads clear. There were even suggestions that it was Al Gore's fault.

Three-quarters of Britons said they were affected by the snow, according to research conducted by YouGov, while just 48% said they felt "under pressure to get to work and maintain business as usual" – and this work-shy attitude took its toll on the economy as public transport services struggled to maintain their schedules and minor roads throughout the country froze over thanks to salt shortages.

While grown men and women were out making snow angels and sledging their way into future episodes of *You've Been Framed*, thousands of companies were forced to shut up shop. According to the Forum of Private Businesses, the snowfall cost Britain £230 million a day in lost productivity and some put the figure even higher. Insurance company Royal & Sun Alliance (which has re-branded itself as RSA) reckons that more than 20% of the workforce were absent during the worst of the snow. If you consider that Britain's daily economic output is roughly £5 billion, the costs soon add up.

Some businesses, however, tried to turn the snow to their advantage. Nemo, a personal finance company, came up with a rather ingenious sales tactic: "Those who have been stuck at home as a result of snowy or icy conditions could consider embarking upon some home improvements, such as touching up scuffed paintwork or giving carpets a thorough steam clean," it suggested on its website. "Homeowners who would then like to take these



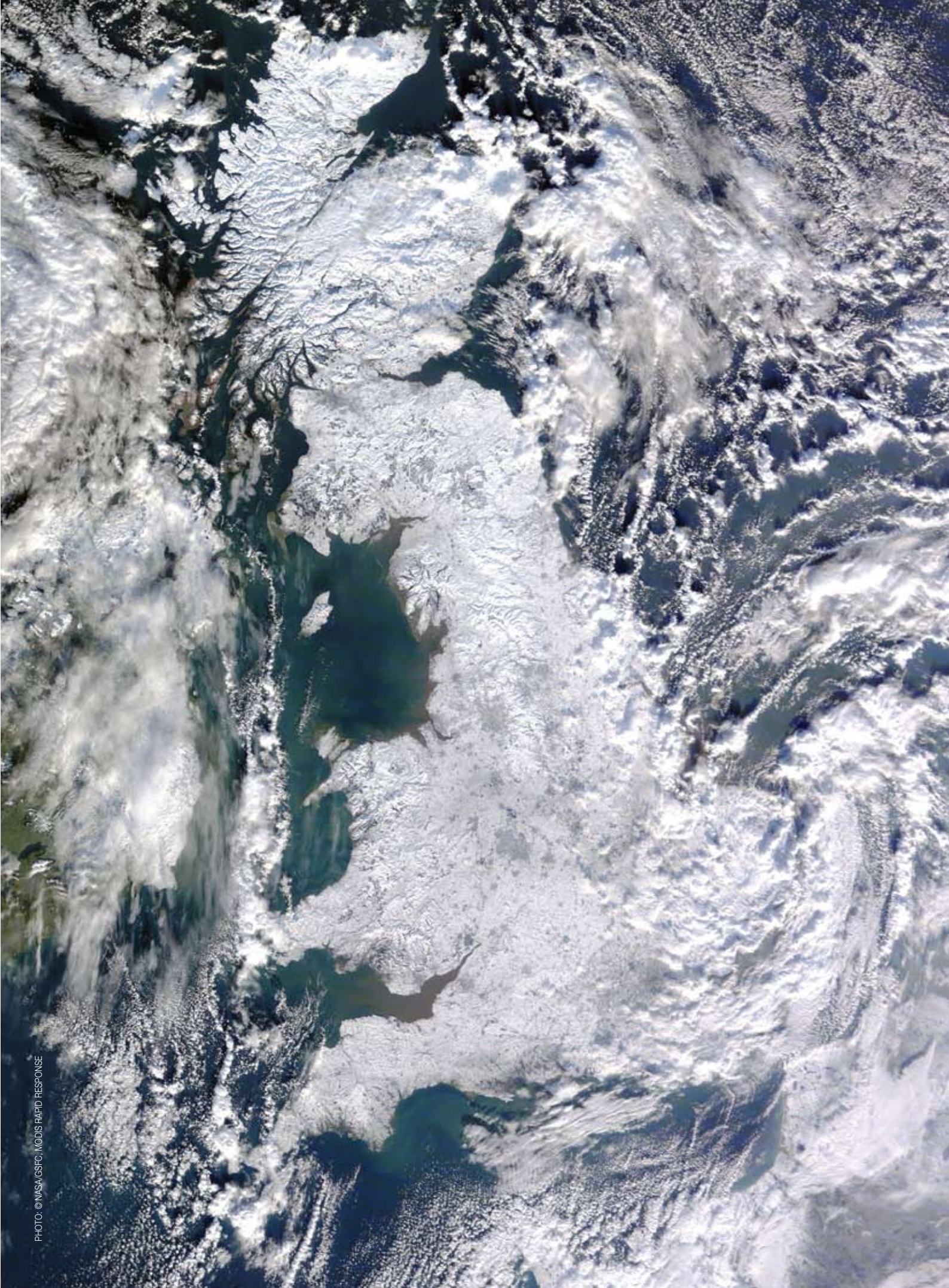


PHOTO: © NASA/GSFC, MODIS RAPID RESPONSE



projects a step further once temperatures have returned to normal could consider taking out a secured loan to fund some larger projects.”

Even power supplies were affected by the extreme conditions. In early January the National Grid had to issue only its second-ever warning to power suppliers after fears that demand for gas could outstrip supply

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as people cranked up the thermostats to warm their homes. That meant gas-fired power stations had to be throttled back to allow coal-fired stations to provide the bulk of Britain's power. Some big corporate customers had their gas cut off.

The Tories' energy secretary said that the supply interruptions damaged Britain Inc's image abroad, as if the whole world was tuning in to Sky News to monitor the progress of the British winter.

However, the biggest complaint by far was the dwindling grit supplies, which

made it difficult for local councils to clear snow and ice from smaller roads and country lanes. Opposition politicians and reactionary columnists were outraged by the shortages, particularly after a similar problem during last year's winter, but the Local Government Association had a brilliant excuse ready, claiming that the Met Office “originally predicted that there

was only a one-in-seven chance of a cold winter in 2009-10”. It went on to argue, in defiance of reality: “Councils learnt the lessons from the bad weather last February and started planning as far back as the summer to ensure they had sufficient supplies of salt in stock.”

Before long, every man, woman and child in the country knew more about rock salt than the average geologist. Halite, as it is less commonly known, is found in places where salty marshes evaporated millions of years ago, leaving salt beds that can be

hundreds of metres thick. There are only three such places in the UK: Cheshire, which produces half the country's supplies of grit; Boulby Mine in North Yorkshire; and Kilroot, near Carrickfergus, in Northern Ireland.

All in all, it was a record-breaking winter. The average temperature in January was 1.1C, which was the coldest since 1987 and ninth-coldest during the past 100 years. In parts of Scotland and the north-east, the snow was two feet deep and the lowest temperature recorded was -22.3C in Altnaharra in the Scottish Highlands on January 7.

And it's not over yet. At the time of writing, Britain was still suffering snow and icy conditions in areas as far apart as northern Scotland and south-west England.

But don't take the freezing conditions as evidence against global warming. The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in Lancaster reported in February that Britain's spring is getting earlier due to climate change. After studying 25,000 records of springtime trends for 726 species of plants and animals across land, sea and freshwater habitats, researchers showed that more than 80% of trends between 1976 and 2005 indicated earlier seasonal events.

BRITAIN'S WORST WINTERS



1978-79

The Winter of Discontent wasn't just a political slogan; it was actually bloody freezing with an average temperature in January of -0.4C. In the north-east there were reports of 15-foot snow drifts.

1962-63

Snowfall was recorded in the south-west of England as early as November and heavy snowfall started on Boxing Day. By mid-January the Thames had frozen from bank to bank in London for the first time since 1814.

1946-47

This was one of the snowiest winters for more than a century, with continuous cover over much of the country from late January to mid-March. February was the coldest on record and put a huge strain on the country's already depleted post-war coal supplies, leading many power stations to shut down. The government minister responsible received numerous death threats and had to put under police protection.

1939-40

Dubbed the Blizzard of the Decade when snow covered most of England and Scotland in late January, and the coldest winter of the century to that point. The harbours in Southampton and Folkestone were frozen and the Grand Union Canal froze between Birmingham and London.

1836-37

An astonishing winter, with snow depths reaching 15 feet and drifts of up to 50 feet reported. Even in October, snow was reported at depths of 5-6 inches, which is very unusual.

1811-20

The Thames froze over in 1811, starting a decade of severely cold winters that were the coldest since the 17th century. The winter of 1812 saw Napoleon's invasion of Russia beaten back by “General Snow”. This period of cold winters is attributed to the eruption of an unidentified volcano in 1809 and Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1815. It was also the first decade of Charles Dickens's life, which perhaps provided the inspiration for his snowy passages in A Christmas Carol and Oliver Twist.

15-1700s

The so-called Little Ice Age lasted from roughly the 16th century to the 18th century, during which time the Thames routinely froze over and frost fairs on the ice became a common winter treat. The first was held in 1608. During the Great Frost of 1683-84, the Thames was completely frozen for two months, with ice almost a foot thick in London. The North Sea was frozen for miles off the English coast.